(Re)-defining *Chitrangada- The Queer Journey* from Tagore to Rituparno Ghosh

By Ayanita Banerjee

University of Engineering and Management

Introduction- The third gender identity, in India, has always been disparaged by the heterosexuals. The survival of "third gender" can be traced in the rudimentary Vedic literatures of India, where, as per prakriti or nature, gender has been clearly divided into pums-prakriti or male, stri-prakriti or female, and tritiya-prakriti or the third sex. The third sex is considered as an intrinsic union of the male and female natures so intensely that they cannot be marked as male or female in the collective sense. The interaction of "gender" and "sex" creates a problem as both are frequently considered the same. The word "sex" denotes biological sex and "gender" as psychological behaviour and identity. The term prakriti or nature conversely implies both facets in concert as one intricately entwined and cohesive unit. Hence the "heterosexual matrix" — an ideal order between sex, gender, and sexuality generated during the modern era (Butler 1990), not only categorized gender borderlines, but promoted the gender order as being implicitly heterosexual.

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Introduction

The third gender identity, in India, has always been disparaged by the heterosexuals. The survival of "third gender" can be traced in the rudimentary Vedic literatures of India, where, as per prakriti or nature, gender has been clearly divided into pums-prakriti or male, stri-prakriti or female, and tritiya-prakriti or the third sex. The third sex is considered as an intrinsic union of the male and female natures so intensely that they cannot be marked as male or female in the collective sense. The interaction of "gender" and "sex" creates a problem as both are frequently considered the same. The word "sex" denotes biological sex and "gender" as psychological behaviour and identity. The term prakriti or nature conversely implies both facets in concert as one intricately entwined and cohesive unit. Hence the "heterosexual matrix" — an ideal order between sex, gender, and sexuality generated during the modern era (Butler 1990), not only categorized gender borderlines, but promoted the gender order as being implicitly heterosexual. The gender dichotomy sexualized masculinity and femininity as natural halves conjoined together to make a whole. However, male chauvinism placed the feminine in a relationship of subordination to be desired by the masculine. Sexual expression became functional to reproduction. In other words, man became equated with both masculine and sexually desiring the feminine, while the feminine became equated with being female.

Gayle Rubin (1984) in her "charmed circle" versus "outer limits" delineating the diagram of sexual hierarchy, illustrated that sexual oppression became maintained by an imaginary line between good and bad sex. The natural sexual value system represented by the binary hierarchy where "good," "normal," and "natural" sexuality remains defined as heterosexual, marital, monogamous and reproductive within the same generation and even within the private realms. This kind of sexual ideology "granted virtue to the dominant

Author: (Ph.D). Fellow of Social Science Research Council, USA. Professor-University of Engineering and Management. New-Town, Kolkata. e-mail: abayanita8@gmail.com

groups, and relegated vice to the underprivileged" perceiving identity as fluid, arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary. Queer theorists offer a post-structural critique of the discourse of binary oppositions such as gay/straight, hetero/homo, breaking down the normative pairing of masculine as male and feminine as female and problematizing movements based on a fixed identity (Gamson and Moon 2004). Thus, theorising the queer theory viewpoint, a dominant modern gender order was created compartmentalising the existence of the two genders — man and woman — each with a corresponding set of behavioural tendencies called masculinity and femininity. However, a core assumption postulated the fact about gender being of what is performed and fluid bereft of core and stable gender identity. Therefore, "gender" remained defined in terms of actually being a performance — performing masculinity or femininity. However, analyzing the stories of persons born intersexed (i.e., born with ambiguous genitals), Butler proposed "sex" as being not only the gender's biological foundation, but one of its most neutral referents of gendered identity" (Corber and Valocchi 2003:8).

Substantiating the queer theory's perspective of sexuality being fluid disrupts the entire notion of an identity based on a fixed sexual orientation or sexual desire. Rather than setting up categories such as 'lesbian' as the basis of political identities, the Queer's sought to destabilize the binary oppositions between men and women and straight and gay. Such identities were not seen as authentic properties of individual subjects, but as fluid and shifting, to be adopted and discarded, played with and subverted, strategically deployed in differing contexts (Jackson and Sue Scott 1996:15). The Queer theorists challenging the heteronormativity denied the differences upon which such modern identities have been categorized and founded. Literary critic and ground-breaking queer scholar Eve Sedgwick (1990:1) arguing in *Epistemology of the Closet* stated that "the virtual understanding of any aspect of modern Western culture must be not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition." Furthermore, the queer theorists locating within heterosexuality the social regulation of sexual identity suggests that the battle against heteronormativity ceases to be a "part of a broader

battle against the tyranny of the normal" (Jackson and Sue Scott 1996:135)

The contemporary research utilizing queer theory concepts is challenging "the definition of what constitutes a social movement and what 'counts' as social change" (Gamson and Moon 2004:59). A valuable cutting-edge investigation is the qualitative study "to articulate political ideas that challenge conventional understandings of male and female, gay and straight, to create new collective identities, and to disrupt existing collective identity boundaries" (Rupp and Taylor 2003:212-213). This paper can be seen as a case study or empirical example of larger social phenomena that arguably may represent new social movements and even forms of social change. The study focuses on elements of sexuality, i.e actively constructing and reconstructing gender and sexual identities within a particular community for challenging hetero-patriarchal repression of gender identity to represent emotions.

Tagore in his dance drama makes it clear from the beginning that Chitrangada, the girl child, was not her father's natural or first choice. The child was born defying Lord Shiva's boon which had promised "sons only" in the kingdom. Chitrangada continues to be beguiled by her male identity till the time she falls enchanted by the love of Arjuna (from Mahabharata). The brave Arjuna during his period of exile under the pretext of celibacy abnegates the untarnished heart of Chitrangada. As a consequence, repulsed Chitrangada crushed, wounded and affronted apprehends the worth of "womanly beauty". Falling in love with Arjuna compelled her to retreat back to her actual womanly identity. This ensues a flaming conflict within herself confronting between the two wishes, wish of a father and wish of a daughter. She tells Madana that even as a "child", she had been besotted with him and it is in the guise of a boy that she wished her earnest claim for an armed struggle with him. She further expresses her desire to be near Arjuna portraying herself be-fitting into multifarious characters namingly as a charioteer in the battlefield, to a companion on a hunting expedition, as a watchman standing alert at night by his bedside, to an eternal devotee worshipping him, from an entrusted slave serving him, to his „sakha" who would be his perpetual companion and soul-mate in meting out the self-effacing duties of a Kshatriya. (Rabindra Rachanabali 217) Masculinity and femininity, for Chitrangada, seem to be external qualifiers, not internalized notions. The fierce feeling of "love" compels her to stoop seeking the blessings of Madana, to endow her with "beauty" for one year with which she can win Arjuna. The earnest wish of the lady gets bestowed as Arjuna avowed by the awe and grandeur of Chitrangada, breaks his vow of celibacy. However, with the passage of time the two selves of Chitrangada start conflicting with each other. She feels burdened with the load of borrowed beauty. On the other, both Chitrangada and Arjuna have realized the union where the true emotions should be anchored. It may be valuable to point out that Tagore, in his „Preface" to the long poem „Chitra", written in 1941 at the age of eighty, states that through „Chitra" he has acquired an epiphany "of an altogether different register", that of the duality of the „self" within him. The "self", he writes, is "androgynous" in Bengali is ardhanarishwar. (Rabindra Rachanabali 131)

Rituparno Ghosh's film is the adaptation of Tagore's dance drama under the same name. The film Chitrangada opens with an incantation to Tagore- "Tagore's Chitrangada is an Amazon warrior on a quest to discover her gender identity." (00:01:00) The film is a celebration of androgyny as Rudra, the protagonist is synonymous of Lord Shiva, the 'Ardhanarishvara' or androgynous deity composed of Shiva and his consort Shakti, representing the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies - synonymous to constructive and generative power. Ghosh reworking this myth extended his theatrical interpretation of Chitrangada's transformation revolving around this identity crisis. Rudra, the main character in the film though born as a boy shows the basic traits of being a gay. Realisation dawns upon him when spending time with many of his male partners stimulates his innate feminine traits within him. Unable to draw a coalesce between the masculine identity and feminine effeminacy he finally decides to consent for gender affirmation surgery to confirm his feminine identity. The name "Partho" or "Parth" matched up to Arjuna of *The Mahabharata* draws an analogy to the concrete cause for Chitrangada's physical transformation and the same followed by Partho for Rudra. It is the acute emotional call of Rudra for Partho that takes the decision to change her from a "male to-female-trans-person." (Nicholas, 10) The Chitrangada in Rudra identifies Arjuna in Partho and suffers with multiple conflicts. As after transformation, Chitrangada was banished for a year by her father, Rudra is exiled to a distant secluded life by himself with a span of time when he decides to change from "MTF." (Nicholas, 10) In the film, Ghosh has focused on the search of the root of the androgynous self. He seeks a fundamental, unnamed identity, the wish of that anonymous "self". So, Rudra's experience is a "torturous journey of social and metaphysical self-questioning" for the accomplishment of his true self. (Datta, et al., 2015).

In fact the transgenders are the victims of cultural, ideological, legal, parental levels along with all the probable peripheral forces working upon an individual. The oppressive instruments such as power and authority in cultures of hegemony and domination leave no space or less space for the transgendered for self-expression. Even after being one of the active forms of self-realization and expression, speech fails to

express the anxieties of the 'othered' in dominant societies. The silencing of the 'othered' becomes a tool for the "dominator culture" to monopolize the permeation of thought and ideologies which promotes the interests of the ruling class. Thus, for an individual within the oppressed group, "coming to voice" is an act of resistance. Speaking remains a way to engage in active self- transformation towards being a subject from being an object. From the position of subject alone can one speak for oneself or for the community. The voice of the person transforms to be the voice of the community and from the individual realms the voice moves to the collective realm. The desire to find the voice of the silenced wherever it finds an expression pertains to a deliberate search to recapture the multiplicity of voices in the contemporary world. According to James Scott, the subordinated individuals remain not mere passive subjects, but rather possess a measure of agency to engage in resistance (qtd.in Sivaramakrishnan, 348). Articulating the experiences and anxieties of domination empowers the dominated and helps them to rediscover the lost identity in a meaningful manner. Hence the writers and activists who stand with the "othered" people have a creative role to play in the realization of their oppression and retrieval of the hidden transcript to the public sphere. Chitrangada, thus talks about the ardent wish for identifying one's gender. The protagonist Rudra successfully choreographing the production of Tagore's Chitrangada gets sparkled to the new realization of finding his true love and thereby realising the inner essence of being the 'story of a wish'- the wish to change one's gender. In Chitrangada, Ghosh not only challenges the stereotyping and shaming of 'others', but problematizes it even further by celebrating the fluidity of the body and sexuality, by dissociating biological gender from sexuality, and most importantly from the periphery of its existential crisis. Constantly emphasizing on the mutability of the body, notwithstanding its biological gender, Ghosh makes a very strong statement of liberating the body from the coded performances of gender. Chitrangada thus epitomized to him powerfully the hidden desire of feminine effeminacy as he himself had the hidden desire, which he could fulfil only superficially by wearing jewellery and applying kohl. It remained even strange that though Ghosh connects with the character of Chitrangada while staging the play, it is after it was over that he BECOMES her.

Like Chitrangada of Tagore's dance drama, Rudra of Rituparno wants to relocate his gender identity. For Rituparno Ghosh "the film is about acceptance of a person's identity... It isn't just about sexuality or one's image with which he is identified". With such an intense thought Ghosh sets a benchmark for all the film makers, critics and viewers who would definitely feel the need of a changed outlook to understand the world of those who do not fall under the set pattern of society. In other words, the film posits to be a narratology not only on sexuality, but also on the remarkable possibilities for re-inscribing bodies with new meanings, extricating them from the compulsory performance of masculinity or femininity following normative gender registers. Rudra, naturally a male, opts for being a dancer and that too classical. This dance form is specifically characterized by its grace, gestures and delicate moves. The society denies the acceptance of the fact of a male dancing on the rhythm of classical music. For Rudra, it's not just the society but also the father opposes him in this case. He even mentions: "He doesn't like me dancing on stage." The father discouraging his son to dance and suggests him to focus on his direction instead. The father fails to understand that dance is Rudra's quest for identity. The father is never interested to watch his show. This has always hurt Rudra but in the course of life, he has realised what his father dislikes in him and even confess: "In fact I have stopped missing you baba (father)." It is because of the society that even the father cannot accept that. Chitrangada, thus defined in terms of the performance arts tries to locate within the radical questions about sexualities and sexual behaviours. (Mandeep, Raina 64). The grace and elegance of Rudra coupled with all the feminine elements like makeup, dressing up and the whole countenance is in itself, the mute reinforcement of re-defining Chitrangada's queer journey to re-assert her Identity at stake. Chitrangadas go beyond surface level explorations of the dilemma of which gender to use to address a man in the process of being a woman. They question, as it were, the futility of seeking permanence. However, Rudra's journey ends with a transcendental realization of the true identity of "I", it is not the body but the "sacred soul" which resides in the brittle building called "body." He replies Shubho resolutely when he was asked, if Cupid appeared to grant him a wish, what he would ask for, "I'd want to go back as the vivacious, energetic, eccentric, creative artist and not as "the beautiful, transformed Chitrangada." (02:04:58-02:05:01).

Chitrangada is an autobiographical film, the sexual politics of Rituparno Ghosh and his life projected in his movies are further scope of study in this area. Ghosh challenges the idea of identity through socially constructed paradigms. He uses brilliant techniques in representation of emotions. The relation between Rudra and Partho in Chitrangada speaks one of them. From their very first meeting Rudra and Partho have created an emotional bond between themselves; rather, they both become the object of desire for one another. Rudra has boyfriends and multiple transitory bonds prior to the affinity with Partho but no relationship begets so intense as to make him a final shift towards womanhood. It is only Partho for whom he makes himself ready to go against all norms and storms whether personal, psychological, familial or societal. Partho was in favour of a child adoption but he never desired Rudra to vary

his sexual compass as he said: "I love you the way you are." (01:09:00) The renovation method tainted their life perpetually. The irony of the situation focussed when Rudra starts with the operations; further he/she gets nearer to have feminine essence, the farther Partho shifts away. For Partho, at last, the love shrinks and fades away. Partho cannot accept the transition of Rudra from the "Natural Man" to "Technical Woman" or the concept of "Gender Reassignment Surgery". "Transitioning socially is often the most difficult part of the journey" (Nicholas, 45) and it is the cause of the whole alteration of a "self", change in everything- body, mind, emotions, cognitions even identity. Standing fix in between half man and half woman, with synthetic body, Rudra is left with nonentity because "…because no transition is ever complete. The bond between the two is doubtable and still two cultures are individually parallel or alternate. It's "an ongoing process." (02:06:19)

The duo relationship between Rudra and Patho ironically speaks of their ill-fate as the main streamed people fail to comprehend the psyche of the third gender always haunting for the state of permanence but always beguiled by transience. "Permanence" and "Transience" are the two conflicting poles of a mortal relationship and they can change too. Rudra had accepted the grim truth that "change is the only constant" even in human relationships. He says to his mother "What's permanent Ma? Tell me what's permanent? This body? Is it permanent?" (01:13:30-01:13:38). "Now see that our bodies which we regarded as the most permanent truth is the least permanent. Rudra wanted someone in his life to calm him down, someone to be with him ever. But the wrecked craving finds its peace in Shubho, though hallucination. Shubho makes him understand that the trail of troubles and conflicts are actually lesions for Rudra, nothing more than that. Rudra too understands that he has to proceed. Memory may be permanent but not life. Thus, when he stops the operation for final sex reassignment, he requests the doctor to remove breast implants. He says, "There will be a scar on my chest after the removal of the breast implants? … Never mind. It's just a scar." (02:09:04-02:09:12) …My parents have done up my room. Mother has put new curtains. I'm going back home." (02:03:40-02:03:50). Thus, to sum up the paper poignantly confirms to the fact that gender is a social construct, whereas identity is a self-construct. It is the contented identity which remains accountable for human persona. No sooner the "hetero" and the "homo" have this final realization, the life of transgender will be free from suffocation; the wish to be a male or female will be faded away.

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