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# The ‘us’ and ‘them’ binarisation in *Chitrangada*, *The Crowning Wish*

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“I will carry on making films my own way and feel I am yet to deliver my best”, says our very own Ritu Da, Rituparno Ghosh, one of the greatest independent filmmakers that Bengal or India has ever produced. This excerpt is from an interview given to NDTV movies and most unfortunately this was to be his last, as he breathed his last on 30th May, 2013 only at the age of 49. Born in a middle class family in Kolkata, Ghosh had a tremendous courage to charter out new territories in Bengali cinema- both in form and content- and established himself as one of the most respected filmmakers in the country, even though he showed no appetite for overt experimental sensationalism in his narratives. Brought up seeing the films of maestros like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, Ghosh had a very good lineage to look up to, but he made tradition his own and infused commerce in the so called ‘art movies’ with fluid dexterity. Ghosh’s *Chitrangada* is the last released film in his own lifetime, as he had completed the shooting of *Satyanwesi* but did not live to see its release. *Chitrangada* is a film that is a reworking of a dance drama of Rabindranath Tagore by the same name, and one must remember that the story of *Chitrangada*, the princess has its origin in the classical epic of Mahabharata. In that way, Ghosh’s film becomes a text of “second order signified”, but Rituparno Ghosh is far more inclined to use Tagore’s dance drama as the sub-text than going to the myth of Mahabharata, involving Arjuna and the princess of Manipur, *Chitrangada*. According to Rudra, the main protagonist in the film

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(played by Rituparno Ghosh himself), *Chitrangada* is a story of “wish fulfilment” since Godhead Shiva had given the ‘blessing’ that no female would be born in the royal family, but despite that Chitrangada is born. She however is brought up like a ‘man’, expert in the field of warfare but grows weak the moment she meets the charming Arjuna, then roaming in the forests as Pandavas were exiled by Duryodhana, the head prince of the Kauravas. The gendered dialectics of the inside/outside, male/female, domestic/political can be deciphered from the entire account as Chitrangada is forced to hide her identity, her gender and ‘become’ someone else in order to fulfil the masculine lust for a male heir. This becomes a parallel motif in the story of Rudra, the dancer who wants to resist the masculine construct of ‘maleness’ because he is a gay and falls in love with Partha. Rudra’s romance with Partha is not only a narrative of sexual resistance, but is replete with social protest as well since Partha is a drug addict but Rudra feels a deep attraction for Partha, perhaps identifying himself with Partha’s pain of marginalisation and society’s de-identification of the gay community.

Rituparno Ghosh’s film is experimentation in the realm of time and space and the director, in his signature style frequently moves back and forth in narrative chronology in order to construct a postmodern dissemination of time. The film represents basically three spaces- the mythical space of Chitrangada (which for Ghosh is more the text of Tagore than *Mahabharat*), the present time frame of Rudra who is going through a gender reorientation programme in a hospital, and the ‘past’ of Rudra and his affair with Partha. What is therefore worth mentioning is that time itself becomes a frame by which the third gender has been represented by the director. In talking about the “mythical time”, Isidore Okpewho writes:

“It is therefore important to establish that when the narrator

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counterbalances the ‘pastness’ of his tale by giving it a contemporary stamp, he is not merely dragging it from one extreme to the other but seeking a balance which frees the tale from any kind of commitment to determinable time... But the ideal of the mythmaking effort remains one in which the narrator manages not to overstrain our sense either of the pastness or of the presentness of the tale” (Okpewho, 1983:105).

Myth, by its very inception, problematises time since time becomes a functionality by which the context of the tale is established. Ghosh uses the text of Tagore as the first order signified in order to signify a time-space continuum, where the third gender can be looked at from a different perspective- not one of repression, but of acceptance. The ‘hegemony’ of the ‘normal’ is a restrictive socio-political order that marginalises the members of the LGBT community, and Ghosh’s protest is against such ‘de-humanisation’ of the gay community and that of the transgenders. So the myth of Chitrangada creates a circular format in the construction of the text of the cinema, the narrative repeatedly goes back to the myth as a reference to a ‘point of origin’, an origin of the history of repression. The body of Rudra becomes a political site of negation of ‘identity’ that is imposed by the heteronormative structure of the society. Heteronormativity will have its own repressive policies, but what Ghosh essentially wants to represent is the trauma that such marginalised people go through while negotiating their space within a homophobic society. In fact the opening title says that “Tagore’s Chitrangada is an Amazon warrior on a quest to discover her gender identity” and then it adds “From this work of Tagore comes a very personal interpretation”. Ghosh mentions also that in the “original” text of Mahabharata, Chitrangada is mentioned just as a princess who was “besotted to Arjun” (*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd.). once again, the concept of time becomes crucial in constructing

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the politics of negation, as the text of Mahabharata negates the fact that a 'woman' was brought up as a 'man', and Tagore gave it some gender reading to transform a 'woman' to a 'warrior', which is traditionally a space for the Kshatriya 'male'. The film opens with a double gaze- the gaze of Rudra on his 'past' when he was considered as the 'male' and the gaze of the audience interpreting the tale of Rudra in reference to Tagore's dance drama. The background music is typically that of a war clarion, something that Ghosh uses as a text from the popular culture to denote the space of the 'male', as the "queer" Rudra/Chitrangada intrudes that space of gender stereotyping to create the subversion. It is also interesting that Arjun meets Chitrangada in Manipur when he is in the midst of practicing twelve years of celibacy, but he is tempted to Chitrangada when she takes the form of a "feminine woman", which is itself an act of gender and sexual subversion.

Body is one of the problematic sites of cultural signifiers, since stereotyping starts with such "bodily discourses" that hinder the naturalisation of the 'normal'. The question really is what is normal? Deconstructing the body as a problematic text, can be, as Bryan Turner argues, "a fleshy discourse within which the power relations in society can be both in-terpreted and sustained" (1996: 27).

Therefore the very hegemony of the 'normal' is a power discourse that practices the marginalisation of the third gender as diabolical. While debating the issue, Rudra's mother observes that she and her husband had all throughout known about the "*sotti*", the "truth", which they have constantly negated in order to engage with the heteronormative narrative of the society. In fact she considers their insistence on a boy should "become" like a "boy" as abnormal since "normality" is defined by "nature". The nature/nurture dialectics is as old as human civilisation perhaps, and the struggle against such societal repression is also a narrative of counter struggle that is

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eternal. Words like “boy”, “girl”, “man”, “woman” are all embodiments of power relation constructed by patriarchy, but classical feminism has approached such binaries as a pre-determined truth, which negates the possibility of existence of the LGBT community. The struggle of the “female” against the “male” presupposes a heterosexual culture where the bodily existence of the people like Rudra becomes an absent motif, an epistemological blank that make the marginalisation almost “apolitical” since it does not even “exist”. Rudra’s struggle is as much with society, as with his own self, since the film is also about the architectonics of identity formation. Identity formation in *Chitrangada* is not a simple thesis of coming to terms with the self, but is rooted also in the politics of how body is treated as a site of political discourse by heteronormative patriarchy. As Susan Bordo argues in her essay *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*:

“The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control” (Bordo, web)

Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* critiques the panoptic structure of prisons as the microcosmic representation of the State’s gaze which constantly keeps a vigilance over the movement of the citizens in order to castrate the citizens to near submission to the power of the State.<sup>1</sup> Rudra is not only an object of scrutiny by the society, but also of his own self since gender reversion not only engages the body with biological changes, but also with cultural and psychic transformations in the form of shifting identities. An interesting narrative interjection is introduced through the character of Subho, the psychotherapist who helps Rudra to come to terms with the shifting identities and floating personas as he goes through the whole

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process of gender reorientation. However it later turns out that Subho is an ‘absent motif’, who does not exist in the empirical consciousness, but he is more of a hallucinatory principle. As Stinson puts it, hallucinations are “internal mental events, such as cognitions, which are perceived by the individual to be of a nonselforigin” (Stinson et. al, 2009). Subho is the “nonself origin” to whom Rudra confesses his self, investing all the anxieties that he carries within himself. Rudra’s body becomes the site of societal, gender as well as emotional struggle, as he tries to become a “woman” technically in order to adopt a child with Partha. In this film, the idea of “family” itself has been critiqued as a gender stereotyping, since the parents must belong to the binaries of “male” and “female” in order to become the “father” and the “mother” respectively. The very cult of parenthood is based on the premise of gender heteronormativity, and this is what Rudra points out, when he says that “*amra Elton John er deshe thakina*” (we don’t live in the land of Elton John) hinting at the relative gender sensitisation in the West. However, it also seems that Rudra is quite a traditional person when it comes to the existence of man as a subject within the discourse of a family. When a friend comes to meet Rudra, she clearly hints at the maverick nature of Partha and whether he at all will be able to provide Rudra with a “family”. Family, as is constructed by social praxis, is a unit of moral codifications, the primary of which is sexual. It presupposes the idea that the partners would live with each other forever, the implication being that the concerned partners (essentially of heterosexual leaning) would exercise sexual celibacy outside. What problematises Rudra’s narrative is his challenge at the heterosexual normativity of “family”, and at the other hand, his acceptance of sexual morality that is “required” to construct a family. The friend of Rudra casts aspersions as to whether Partha would at all live with him “forever”, since “*songsar*” (family) is not that easy to build up, especially when

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it involves homosexual partners. The IPC 377 of the Indian State criminalises any sexual activity that goes “against the order of nature” (IPC, web) and this was a colonial rule that came into existence in 1860. Without going into the narrative of colonial politics and the postcolonial resistance against it, it can be observed that this law has been used to maintain, what many would say, the “cultural fabric” of India, without understanding the history of sexual politics in India and how homophobia is indeed a by-product of Victorian middle class morality, which was transported to India through colonial narratives. “Nature” is perhaps the most abused word in the history of ideas, every narrator discerning his own idea of “nature” and imposing that as “natural”. Rudra’s mother quotes the Bengali word “*swabhab*”, to delineate the condition of society and its repressive policies. This word can be roughly translated as “nature” and she makes a valid point that “*jar jaswabhab, setai toh swabhabik*”, that is, the nature of every person should be considered as natural. In a way, this narrative also seems normative in the sense that every person is then essentialised as an object of “nature”, which opens up newer possibilities of gender stereotyping, but is better than the present model of relegating everything into the binary of “natural” and “unnatural”.

Through technical mastery, Ghosh uses the various forms of visual and auditory representations to form texts at different planes to discern the sexual marginalisation of Rudra. Perhaps Rudra does not like the cultural/social essentialisation that goes with the tag “LGBT” community. Gender is what we are and since gender in the postmodern times is no longer a noun but a verb, representation of gender is equally a dynamic text that constructs the various facets of gender in non-binary or non essentialised formats. Judith Butler observes:

“The domains of political and linguistic ‘representation’ set out in

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advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended” (Butler, 1990: 2).

Representational politics therefore is in the field of the construction of a subject, this subject is the non-binary loci of social functionalism. The fundamental approach to a text maybe constructed from the perspective of a loci of commitment, that is, textuality that comes back to the question of subject itself as a commitment to the function of the text. The function of the “text” of *Chitrangada* is to repeatedly come back to the position of the subject, Rudra, who is the central loci in the functionality of the text. By ‘central loci’, we mean that Rudra is the subject that causes the text to happen, and in a way, he is the identity that problematises the binarisation of ‘men’ and ‘women’, not as a third gender, but as a legal subject of the State who has to go through the pains of a gender reorientation programme, because his country does not accept the presence of any citizen who can adopt children by being in a homosexual relationship. To come back to the representational politics of Ghosh, what he does masterfully is to use even music as a text of social resistance. When Rudra proposes to Partha that he should “change” his “sex” in order to facilitate the adoption, the audience can hear the background music of *shantai* or *shehnai*, which is a traditional music that is associated with Indian marriages. Since the institution of marriage itself is strictly heteronormative, every other symbols or visual/auditory representations presuppose the monolith that it is “natural” that a “man” “marries” a “woman”. In Rudra’s space, gender is subverted and the *shehnai* in the background is a political statement against the homophobia of society, but it also aesthetically creates the mood of pathos since the audience can relate

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to the emotional trauma that Rudra goes through as a result of social marginalisation. As we have seen already, the sub-text of Tagore constantly interpellates the main text of the film, and the trauma of Rudra is co-related with the marginalisation that Chitrangada, the princess might have gone through. Rudra throws a question to his dance troupe, and in a meta-theatrical way perhaps to the audience- what would have been the reaction of the court (symbol of patriarchal aristocracy) and the king (who had ordered that his daughter should be brought up as a 'male') when the princess, who was conceived as a 'prince', walked in as a 'woman' after her transformation. It is to be remembered that in Tagore's text, Chitrangada is transformed from *Kuroopa* (a bad looking woman, hence almost 'ungendered' from the male gaze perspective) to *Suroopa* (good looking woman, hence the implicative binary of *Kuroopa*) by the blessings of Kamdev, the God of sensuality and bodily pleasures. Same question perhaps haunts Rudra's mind- what will be the reaction of society when he changes his sex. His father hesitates to call Rudra *chele* or male, and the nurse in his cabin calls him "Sir" which makes it more difficult for Rudra to come to terms with the reorientation of his gender. He asks the latter to call him just Rudra. This is where Ghosh triumphs as an artist- an artist no matter how political he is, is always tempered by the Other, the alternative questions that are often forgotten in political activism. Subho, the hypnotic Other self of Rudra asks why is he negating the identity of a woman by asking everyone to call him Rudra, since he is becoming a "woman" technically, even if he refuses to wear salwarkameez or sarees, the dress representation of a "woman". Is he not so sure about his mental preparation about his gender change? Is he really comfortable with his 'self'- or does he negate the presence of either a "man" or a "woman" in his self? Or is he simply scared of facing a society that is so homophobic and completely averse to ideas of sex change? Ghosh's triumph as a filmmaker is exactly here- he

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goes much beyond the jargons of political activism and makes his films as a projection of human drama where the characters are protesting against certain social normativity, but they have their own psychic insecurities and fears that are a part of any human subject. Hence when Ghosh establishes the validity of the human subject through its vulnerability, the textual representation also increases their ambit to discern the human subject in all its psychic debilitations.

The denouement is reached with a further problematisation of the identity crisis that Rudra has been suffering from all throughout. Partha leaves Rudra for Kasturi, a “female” in the dance troupe of Rudra, evidently therefore pointing out that Partha is bisexually inclined. Partha becomes insensitive to the trauma of Rudra, denouncing him as a “plastic woman” and announcing his preference for a “real woman”. Partha’s betrayal causes more loneliness and psychological complications for Rudra since he does not know how exactly his self should be defined after he is left alone to suffer the gender isolation. Partha’s sudden exit from his life causes Rudra to go into a state of schizophrenic delusions; he often gets ‘sms’ in his cell phone which he considers as coming from an “unknown number” but is later discovered, they were all from Partha. Rudra perhaps enters into a problematic relation between the signifier, his self, and the signified, his gender identity, which does not seem to be working on the same plane. The same man who was so energetic in the process of cultural production of Tagore now seems deluded and in a state of psychic trauma. Rudra had invested his self onto Partha, and once he is no longer a part of his existence, that self suffers from tremendous isolation and loneliness. Rudra is the archetypal victim of the consuming social praxes that consumes the ‘market’ of homophobia in order to justify the representation of straight men as the acceptable lot. The body of Rudra goes through a series of

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biological changes that involve hormonal, skin and sexual changes but the question that comes out though the movie is what is the reaction of all these changes in the identity of the person who is challenging social codifications and yet is falling prey to the heteronormative binaries. Becoming a “woman” from a “man” is moving from one binarised discourse to the other, and Rudra discovers through his gender reorientation that what he need is not this but to become an identity by “itself” “which” does not take part in the narrative of the “he” or the “she”. In a capitalist economy of consumption, even LGBT gender identity is consumed as the Other which does not pay much heed to the politics of marginalisation that is ingrained in such social activism. The mother of Rudra claims copyright over her “son’s” body, since she is the creator of that body and hence she claims to have the right to know everything before that body is changed to something else. What she fails to understand however is that it is not the “body” which is undergoing the change, but the “subject” which is being modified. Social violence need not always be ‘violent’, strict binaries are enough to create a ban on the integration of a “subject” to the social mainstream. So the film ends as a statement against such social violence that is always keen to construct binaries in the name of identity formation. Rudra decides to stop the gender reorientation programme and requests the doctor to take back his body to where it was. The “subject” demands that it should not be changed, it will stay as it is as a statement of social/ideological resistance. The struggle is not to change the “subject” but to make people accept it as it is. The film ends in a note of the second order signified by going back to Tagore’s dance drama where Suroopa goes back to become Kuroopa once again after Arjuna leave Manipur, since the “subject” order needs to stay where it was. The music of Tagore is used as a text of replenishment, as the background score sounds “*Nutan praan dao pranosokha*” (Grant me

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a new life, oh Lord). The scene that takes place on the beach is a supreme aesthetic and visionary take on Rudra's final assertion of his "subject", in a moment of surrealism, Rudra's hospital cabin is transported beside the sea at dawn. Subho (here his other self that merges with the text of the 'subject') helps him to come to terms with his self that is much beyond the dichotomies of gender, social repression and jibes at his "feminine" body language. As the dawn breaks, the audience also participates in the liberation of Rudra's self into the space of individuality, reconciliation and transcendence. The doctor calls Partha (Rudra remembers the number but fails to connect it objectively with Partha) and the latter says that Rudra should do what he wants to, since it his "wish". Rudra had asked his troupe members to interpret Tagore's dance drama as "a story of wish fulfilment", a wish of a patriarch to 'male' hi daughter and the wish of that 'male' to become a 'woman' after falling in love with the warrior prince in exile. Rudra's own life now becomes a narrative of wish fulfilment, his "crowning wish" to not to tamper with his "subject" that is not repressed by the heteronormative binaries. As the stage curtain opens to discern the rollback of Rudra, the audience appreciates the aesthetic statement that Rituparno Ghosh makes regarding the body of Rudra that refuses to alter its signifying capacity to sustain and satisfy the hegemony of heteronormativity.

#### **Notes**

1 For Further reference of Foucault's Discipline and Punish, see <http://www.foucault.info/documents/disciplineandpunish/foucault.disciplineandpunish.panopticism.html>. 07-10-13. 12:50. Web

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