

**Literature into Film:
Questioning Sexual Myths in Rituparno Ghosh's Adaptation of
Tagore's *Chitrangada***

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Rituparno Ghosh (1963-2013)
Courtesy: www.Currentbooks.com

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's literary creations are always appealing to readers and thus these literary sources often provide interesting plot for filmmakers too. Rituparno Ghosh, a Bengali filmmaker from West Bengal, is often considered to be a fan of Tagore, as time and again he has chosen Tagore's literary masterpieces for his films. *Chitrangada* is his last cinematic adaptation, which is again an adaptation of Tagore's Dance drama with the same name. In the adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada*, he has cinematized the possibility of human desires entrapped in the confinement of body. In this adaptation, Ghosh has thoroughly dealt with the necessity of rethinking the already identified and accepted norms of the society. Through his crafted

cinematic venture in *Chitrangada*, Ghosh has questioned and explored sexual myths that are still prevailing in our society to relook into the cornered existence of those who live against heterosexuality. Homosexuality which is often considered to be a Taboo in our society is being negated by him in this film while redefining the meaning of body and then of Self. Thus “What is called into question here is the distinction between the naturally given, normative self of heterosexuality and the rejected other of homosexuality.” (Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, p-139).

Key Words: Aesthetics, Heterosexuality, Homosexuals, Taboo, Adaptation.

Adaptation

Ronald Perrier writes, “The study of literature casts light on the meanings in the film, and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature.” *From Fiction to Film*

Adaptation can be understood as transformation or conversion. In the process of adaptation, this transformation may occur between two ends -one which is the source and the other where the ideas from the source is transmuted. Here it should be said that literary adaptations can be traced in many other genre – from videogames to films. In this context, adaptations appear to be mainly of two types – one where simply the story line is maintained and the other where we can see the replica of the original text. In both of these cases of adaptation the question of fidelity to the original source remains. Specifically in the adaptation of literary texts into films, the film in which the literary text is adapted is often considered to be inferior compared to the literary text. In another perspective, it is argued that film itself is a separate art form where an artist, an auteur takes up his liberty to paint his own canvass with his desired colour. In doing so the auteur takes help of two separate tools one is of *mise-en Scene* – where the filmmaker will work on the development in space and the other is Montage which guarantees modification in time while putting one scene after the other.

Interestingly these specific aspects of filmmaking process and that of adaptation is handled by Rituparno Ghosh in his tribute to Tagore in a documentary called *Jiban Smriti*. Justifying his position as an auteur in the adaptation process, he opts to begin *Jiban Smriti* with

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the following line from Tagore’s autobiography “ who paints these pictures on the canvas of our memories? But whoever it is , it is pictures that he paints . He doesn’t wait brush in hand to record every exact detail. He is selective , dropping some changing others, moving backward and forwards in time with ease. In fact he is an artist not a historian”. (Subtitle, Jiban Smriti-selective memories)

Through the following table adaptation can simply be explained-

ADAPTED	ADDED	EXCLUDED
Events and details from the book which are changed for the movie.	Events and details projected in the film that are not in the book	Events and details from the book which are not included in the movie.

Rituparno Ghosh

Rituparno Ghosh is an eminent filmmaker from Bengal. His career as a filmmaker began with *Hirer Angthi*, an adaptation of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyaya’s novel. His creative talent came to the forefront with the release of his most acclaimed film *Unishe April*. With this film he came up with his brilliant understanding of the facade of human relationship and women’s position within a structured and accepted norm of the society. In most of his films he is seen to be propagating a feminine perspective. His understanding of the world of women and his portrayal of his female protagonists justify each other. In most of his films he has dealt with gender issues. He has handled gender issues with such ease that he got easily accepted in an industry, which had directors like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak . The strong ground on which Rituparno Ghosh is celebrated is in his capacity to understand human feelings, suffering, and loneliness.

His ability to understand human emotion and dilemma of human identity is somehow the result of his conscious effort to understand his own self which is trapped inside his body. It is the feminine self hidden within his body which helped him to understand the world in which women in Indian society live. His inability to draw a link between his ‘body’ and his ‘self’ provided him

the opportunity to reconstruct his ideas on every layer of life”. Going against the norm, the myth of heterosexuality influenced him to effeminate and to stamp himself as a Third Gender. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in her essay in *Queer Performativity: Henry James’s The Art Of The Novel* “I want to say that at least for certain, (“queer”) people , shame is simply the first , and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity : one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.”

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish



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Breaking the boundary of such shame Rituparno Ghosh comes up with the most challenging project *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, a semi-autobiographical film.

In the case of Rituparno Ghosh's adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada*, to develop his own points in the film, he has beautifully amalgamated Tagore's dance drama with that of his own visualized narrative. In this adaptation *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, the auteur hankers after the possibility of acknowledging the feminine self inside the body of a man. He has problematised many issues of sex and gender placing himself in the third category - "Third Gender". Rituparno Ghosh, in this ambitious project "Chitrangada" has cinematized the dilemma of homosexuals living in a society which often cannot understand the self – body dichotomy. Through this semiautobiographical film he has envisaged the need of a transformation in our outlook to understand an individuated identity of homosexuals beyond sexual myths. Rituparno Ghosh's approach can be equated with that of Adrienne Rich who opposed "compulsory heterosexuality" while asking for a space for "lesbian existence". Like Rich many creative minds oppose the traditionally sanctioned space of heterosexuality to create a totally new space for homosexuals.



Rituparno Ghosh's film like that of Tagore's novel is a story of wish and definitely of change. Tagore in his dance drama had chosen an episode from the Hindu epic Mahabharata where Chitrangada is the wife of Arjuna . Chitrangada who is brought up like a soldier and as a

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man by his father, the ruler of Manipur, a mystic kingdom, has lost her feminine self. At one point of time Chitrangada meets Arjuna in the jungle of Manipur known for its natural beauty. It is only after meeting Arjuna, Chitrangada starts searching for the lost self inside her Body. After meeting Arjuna she meets her original self and transforms her identity as a woman. Shading her image of a man. In the later part of the story Chitrangada gives birth to Babrubahan, the sole heir of Manipur. Arjuna leaves both Chitrangada and Babrubahan in Manipur accepting the norm of a matrilineal kingdom. Based on this story from Mahabharata, Tagore has elaborated the character of Chitrangada and has given it a new dimension. After him Rituporno Ghosh has dealt with the same story with a new perspective. Using film as a medium of presentation he has asked too many questions to his viewers regarding the never ending effort of those who live against the sexual myth “heterosexuality”.

Rudra and Chitrangada

Chitrangada, the crowning wish is a film about one choreographer Rudra who is willing to stage Tagore's dance drama Chitrangada. Rudra being in an intense relationship with the percussionist of his theatre group tries to shed his image of a gay for adopting a baby just like Chitrangada who also changed her manly image after meeting Arjuna. Here it is visible that both the characters of Rudra and Chitrangada are trying to go against the set pattern of nature and society but they fail in their effort. Here Arjuna is the catalytic agent for Chitrangada who forced her to rethink about her hidden desire of a woman and for Rudra it is Partho. With this parallel presentation of the character of Rudra and that of Chitrangada, Ghosh has effortlessly presented the suffering of an encaptured self within an unwanted body. Using techniques like play within a play Ghosh has elaborated the struggle of Rudra, a gay, in getting a desired identity which can relate his body with that of his self. Living in a society where people are already prejudiced with sexual myths, it is not easy for Rudra to lead a life with self dignity, despite of being a creative genius. Rudra's aesthetic qualities are often overshadowed by his identity as a homosexual, even Rudra's father fails to understand his son and his activities, just like the king of Manipur who failed to understand the need of his daughter Chitrangada. Here self and body comes in a warzone as self negates the body and this creates problem in the society where heterosexuality is an essential criteria of living.

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Understanding a Gay Man's Psyche

Rituparno through this film comes up with the understanding of a gay man's psyche which clearly portrays the dilemma of Rudra's life where he consoles himself to go under the knife of a surgeon in a critical process of sex change to adopt a baby and to reach out to the person of his love. This film also talks about the questions of a mother who is also a part of the society which teaches her about the validity of heterosexual relations. Rudra's mother's expressions negate the feminine self of Rudra within the body of a man. Affirming her authority on Rudra's body she says "I gave birth to this body, which is yours... I have a right to know, whatever goes on in this body. I have a right to know, if it is changing, transforming...". This change and transformation of Rudra's body is beyond the understanding of his mother as she can never feel the suffering of a gay who faces rejection and humiliation when he wants to be in a relation or wants to have children. As a female she is only educated about the feminine sensibilities of a female body and masculinity of a man. Rudra's dilemma asks for a new, educated and learned understanding in his mother.

Crushed Identity

There is a need to understand life in terms of reality not of myth. The identity which is always crushed or invalidated in our society depending on sexual difference often leave behind them unfulfilled wish and desire. So there is a need to understand the reason behind such crushed identity, behind all those invalidated dreams and desires. Rituparno Ghosh's film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* asks lot many questions on such issues revealing the truth that self and body dichotomy still prevails in our society holding the thread of the sexual myth "compulsory heterosexuality". Rituparno dreams for the transformation in our outlook which can break this myth.

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,". It is for sure that Ghosh has set a benchmark for all. The parallel existence of reality and myth in our society will be better understood with concentrated look on both these terms 'reality' and that of 'myth'. All in all it

may be said that Rituparno Ghosh's adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada* is worth appreciating as it has enabled us to think about a different way to see life and people who are a part of it.

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