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Sexual myths and self-body consciousness: In Rituporno Ghosh's adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada*.

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Abstract

The traditionally sanctioned space of heterosexuality is being increasingly challenged in art and aesthetics today. Homosexuality as a taboo and part of a transgressive space is being negated on basis of both western feminist interventions as much as a neo-liberalist reterritorialization of body and sexuality as a subversive symbol against commoditification of the body as an intrusion into identity of the body, hence of self.

*Noted film-maker Rituporno Ghosh appropriates Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitrangada* with a telling effect, cinematizing on the dilemma of homosexuals embedded in a society which can't define desire and pleasure beyond the body- negating other identitarian possibilities for which the body is a metaphor. In his film, Ghosh has thoroughly dealt with the issue of homosexuals and aesthetized a vision for a transformation in our outlook. This aesthetised vision can be achieved with the realization that the body can never be considered as the epitome of an individuated identity. Here, in *Rituporno Ghosh's adaptation of Tagore's Chitrangada* literature has come to life through the lense of his camera putting a strong statement against a mythicised truth.. Ghosh has affirmed that there is a need to understand the society and its inhabitants beyond the myth "compulsory heterosexuality."*

Keywords: Reterritorialization; Transgressive; compulsorheterosexuality; commoditification.



Rituporno Ghosh (1963-2013)

Courtesy: www.Currentbooks.com

“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.”

– Ronald Perrier, From Fiction to Film

Literary adaptations can be explained as the adaptation of a literary source to a different genre, that may vary from films to videogames. Adaptations usually raise the question of fidelity to the source. It is believed that literary original is superior than the film version of it. Apart from this cinematic adaptation asks questions about the relationship between art and text. From a long time critics and scholars of film studies are contributing their opinions on these issues. But it is a difficult task to judge an adaptation simply depending on theories and views of critics. Adaptation is an art where an artist can paint his canvas with his own selected colours. Therefore every time with every new adaptation there appears a new story of its creative process. Adaptation while accompanied with vital issues of human society –it becomes a statement on its own. Rituporno Ghosh’s adaptation of Tagore’s *Chitrangada* is that kind of a statement where it is more than translating a novel into a screen play by pulling dialogues from the pages of a book.

Rituporno Ghosh an Indian Bengali film director is one of those visual artists who has worked a lot on literature and Specifically on Tagore. His journey began with *Hirer Anghi* an adaptation of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyaya’s novel. After *Hirer Anghi* he took projects on many other adaptations – which includes *Noukadubi*(2010), *Raincoat*(2005), *Chokherbali*(2003), *Chitrangada*(2012). While *Noukadubi*, *Chokherbali*, *Chitrangada* are films on Tagore’s literary creations *Raincoat* is based on O’ Henry’s *Gift of the Magi*. Along with these adaptations many of his films bagged national and international awards giving him international recognition. This Satyajit Ray fan tried his level best to resettle the range of narrative in Indian film industry. He is specially praised for his brave attempt in his presentation of alternative sexuality as an actor in *Arekti Premer Golpo*, and *Memories in March*, and as director-actor in *Chitrangada*. In his lifetime he established himself as an artist who could think beyond his limits and could challenge the set norms of the society. His understanding of the term ‘Gender’ helped him to portray his characters from a much critical point of view which ultimately positioned them more as human than mere replica of it.

In the adaptation of Tagore’s *Chitrangada* Rituporno Ghosh has deliberately chosen his colours to paint his imagination wrapped in feelings. In the work of this visual artist the relationship between art and text can be understood clearly. His aim is to integrate the two, the text and the visual presentation. Reading a film based on a text is a task which needs a detailed concentration on different aspects and while dealing with a film like *Chitrangada* and a director like Rituporno Ghosh it becomes more difficult to watch the film simply on its superficial level as viewers are dragged in to carry a new meaning of the text which is visually presented. Here it is an effort on the part of the director to look into the world of those individuals who are the part of a neglected segment of the society where people are forced to live under the vigil of prejudiced eyes.

Homosexuality as a taboo is being negated on the basis of western feminist interventions and liberalistic approach of creative minds of every sphere. When Adrienne Rich opposes “compulsory heterosexuality” she asks 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. Rituporno Ghosh, a noted film maker in his most ambitious project “*Chitrangada*” has cinematized the dilemma of homosexuals living in a society which often cannot understand the self – body dichotomy. Through this semi-autobiographical film he has envisaged the need of a transformation in our outlook to understand an individuated identity of homosexuals beyond sexual myths. His dream and his desire is reflected in different shades of Rudra’s (the protagonist in Ghosh’s *Chitrangada – the Crowning wish*) life and its truth – “homosexuality”.

After Rabindranath Tagore Rituporno Ghosh has tried to see the story of Chitrangada as a story of desire and of change. Even Ghosh has confirmed his intention in the title of the film which adds up the line 'the crowning wish'. In the Indian epic Mahabharata Chitrangada is the wife of Arjuna. Arjuna encounters with Chitrangada in the jungle of Manipur, a naturally beautiful matrilineal kingdom. In the later part of the story it appears that Chitrangada gives birth to Babrubahan and Arjuna has to leave them in Manipura as Babrubahan is the sole heir of Manipur. In Rabindranath Tagore's hand this story of Chitrangada turned into a beautiful and magnificent dance drama. In his dance drama Tagore has concentrated on the character of Chitrangada and this is the reason why Tagore's chitrangda can be seen from a different perspective. After him Rituporno Ghosh has given a whole new dimension to the same story. As film is his medium of presentation, with cinematic expressions he has asked tons of questions to his viewers regarding the never ending effort of those who live against the sexual myth "heterosexuality". Portraying different layers of human emotions Rituporno Ghosh has succeeded in adding up those hidden feelings which lay dormant under the burden of heterosexual belief. Here his creativity has pulled his philosophy to create a unified whole. Within this unified whole viewers get an opportunity to watch that reality which creates magic in their psyche.

Rituporno's Chitrangada, The crowning wish is a story of Rudra – a talented director and choreographer who is enthusiastic enough to stage Tagore's dance drama Chitrangada. Rudra's intense relationship with the drug eddict percussionist of his theatre group –pushed him towards shading his image of a gay for adopting a baby –just like chitrangada who was indulged in getting her femininity back after meeting Arjuna. Both these characters of Rudra and Chitrangada are projected in such a situation where they are driven against the set pattern of society and that of nature. In Rituporno's film Partho plays the role of a catelist –who instigated Rudra for rethinking about the other self in his body where for chitrangada it is Arjuna. With this parallel presentation of the character of Rudra and Chitrangada Ghosh has effortlessly shown the dilemma of a trapped soul inside an unwanted body. In a society where people are prejudiced with sexual myths Rudra struggles to get a desired body which can match with his soul. It is pathetic to see that Rudra's creative talent is overshadowed by his identity as a homosexual. In this society where heterosexuality is an essential criteria of living Rudra lives in a warzone where self-negates the body while creating problem in its acceptance.

Rituporno 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 her child, 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 which can challenge the traditionally sanctioned space of heterosexuality. Playing the role of Rudra Ghosh has relieved his life and its truth leaving an everlasting effect in the psyche of its viewers.

There is a need to understand and assert homosexuality or "lesbian existence". Woman's choice of woman or man's choice of man as passionate comrades, life partners, lovers is always crushed or

invalidated. So we need to search for the reason of this total neglect. Rituporno Ghosh's attempt through his cinematic venture reveals that our society still believes in a sexual myth "compulsory heterosexuality". When he appropriates Rabindranath's 'Chitrangada' in his last cinematic presentation, he has longed for a transformation in our outlook which can break this myth. His moving images are raising a voice which confirms that the truth of yesterday is the myth of tomorrow.

For Rituporno 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 has set a benchmark for all film makers, critics and viewers who will definitely feel the need of a changed outlook to understand the world of those who do not fall under the set pattern of society . After this we can say that Rituporno Ghosh's effort to work on Tagore's Chitrangada is worth appreciable as it has enabled us to think about a different way to see life and people who are a part of it. He has succeeded in a truthful presentation of human feelings in moving pictures living upto the words of Andre Bazin as he commented "the photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore, photograph actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it."

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