

CHITRANGADA: THE CROWNING WISH – REPRESENTATION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH CLASSICAL DANCE

Reshma Merlin Joseph
2 year M.A in English Literature with Communication Studies Student
Department of English
Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore, India

Abstract

Rhituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada :The Crowning Wish*, is an alternative cinema based on Tagore's dance drama under the same name. This is Ghosh's much autobiographical film. Ghosh's adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada* to tell the story of Rudra's desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery is remarkably aided by Tagore's own adaptation of an episode in the Mahabharata. As the study of adaptation of Tagore's *Chitrangada* by Rhituparno Ghosh is already discussed, this paper focuses on representation of emotions using dance as a tool. Through the application of gender studies the representation of a serious issue like gender identity crisis is discussed. The use of dance in the film is observed and how dance is used to represent the emotions of the character in the film. The film *Chitrangada* by Rhituparno Gosh uses classical dance as a tool for representing gender identity crisis of the main Character Rudra and dance plays a very important part in expressing his emotions. The selection of particular Bhavas and Mudras are also explored. The representation of a very sensitive issue through a conventional art form such as classical dance in the film *Chitrangada* by Rhituparno Gosh is discussed in this paper. The research tries to answer the question how dance used as a cultural vehicle in the film for challenging hetero-patriarchal repression of gender identity and to represent emotions?

Key words: *Chitrangada*, Rhituparno Gosh, Representation, Dance, Gender identity

Rhituparno Ghosh is considered as a cultural icon and not just a film maker. He experimented with styles and techniques. His style and aesthetics are very much predominant in his films. Ghosh followed the style of realistic films. The 2012 film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* is Ghosh's autobiographical movie. The film is based on the story of *Chitrangada*, an ambisexual figure in Indian classical literature. This film is an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama under the same name.

The identity crisis of the main character is represented through dance in this movie. Dance is a powerful tool which Rhituparno Ghosh experimented with. *Chitrangada* is about acceptance of a person's identity. The film is not just about sexuality or one's own identity but the story of a choreographer. The pain and struggle of a choreographer with the gender identity crisis, undergoing a sex realignment surgery etc are very well expressed through classical dance.

Dance is a powerful medium to express emotions. The Bhavas, Rasa and the Mudras convey emotions. Dance provided a gender fluid space for Ghosh to discuss a serious theme such as gender identity. In this film dance is used as a tool to challenge the hetero-patriarchal repression of sexual and gender fluidity.

The film *Chitrangada* by Rhituparno Ghosh uses classical dance as a tool for representing gender identity crisis of the main Character Rudra and dance plays a very important part in expressing his emotions. Objective of the paper is to study the use of representation of a very sensitive issue through a conventional art form such as classical dance in the film *Chitrangada* by Rhituparno Ghosh. The liberty art attributes to artists as regards to transcending their gender role-playing is very well evident in the film.

Through the application of gender studies the representation of a serious issue like gender identity crisis is discussed. The use of dance in the film is observed and how dance is used to represent the emotions of the character in the film.

In cinematic representations particular to the Indian context, topics which deal about the LGBT community are considered taboos, as subjects that must be excluded, whose mention means that the general norms are being flouted. The very mention about any such topics brings to the mind, vague images that the mind cannot readily digest. If the very mention of this theme has such drastic implications then the actual problems of sexual identity falls far outside the periphery of acceptance. This paper studies how topics dealing with the problems of LGBTQ community are addressed in the film using classical dance as a tool. The research is a study to learn how is dance used as a cultural vehicle in the film for challenging hetero-patriarchal repression of gender identity and to represent emotions?

Chitrangada is blend of art and commercial element. Rhituparno Ghosh (1962-2013) was a film maker, writer and lyricist. Ghosh arrived into Bengali films when Bengali cinema was going through a particularly difficult phase. With a very different style of storytelling Gosh made his own space in Bengali Cinema. He merged art and commercial cinema and brought a new revival in his films. In most films, Gosh chose to work within strict realistic mode. In *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* he even experimented with form and style. *Chitrangada* was a tribute to Tagore in his 150th birth year.

In cinematic representations particular to the Indian context, topics which deal about the LGBT community are considered taboos, as subjects that must be excluded, whose mention means that the general norms are being flouted. The very mention about any such topics brings to the mind, vague images that the mind cannot readily digest. If the very mention of this theme has such drastic implications then the actual problems of sexual identity falls far outside the periphery of acceptance. Ghosh courageously talks about these serious issues.

By exposing middleclass society to narratives about parallel sexualities Ghosh made a positive contribution in changing the perspective and knowledge about the sexual minorities. *Chitrangada* created awareness among the public of India about same-sex desire. Gosh had indeed taken an enormous risk in deciding to go to public about his sexuality and making films on same-sex desire, as he told Kaustav Bakshi in an interview:

I have indeed estranged a section of my audience...the middleclass audience, we were talking about... I am aware of the loss. A lot of them are wary of my cross-dressing in public! In fact, the respect I used to command has been seriously affected by my decision to proclaim my sexuality.” (Bhakshi 11)

The film is the adaptation of Tagore’s dance drama under the same name. Tagore’s *Chitrangada* is an Amazon warrior on a quest to discover her gender identity. Tagore’s dance drama is deploying the space of theatre in intriguing ways in this film. *Chitrangada* was the daughter of a king of Manipur, the king being blessed by Lord Shiva that he will have a son, but the birth of *Chitrangada* was an opposite case. So, the king decided to raise the daughter as a son. She continued to be that way until she was enchanted by the love of Arjun (from Mahabharata). Falling in love made her revert back to her feminine original self. Thus the conflict arose which became a clash of the wishes, the wishes of the father and that of his daughter. Gosh reworked this myth to extend more fluid possibilities of gender and alternate sexual identity. His theatrical interpretation of *Chitrangada*’s transformation revitalised the stage presentation of this drama. This theme lies as the undercurrent of the movie in discussion. The whole movie revolves around this identity crisis. Ghosh was very much influenced by the works of Tagore.

Throughout the film Ghosh is drawing parallels with Tagore’s *Chitrangada* and *Rudra*. *Chitrangada*’s lines from Tagor’s text are narrated in voice overs in the film which becomes the representation of identity.

The word emotion is derived from the Latin word: “emovere” meaning to move, move out or move through. Deep emotions are the essence of dance. The purpose of dance is to express emotions. It allows the deep feeling inside a person to move through the body. Emotions are not just in mind. It is incorporated to the body. Indian classical dance forms use different elements of body language like mudras, bhavas, for non verbal communication as well as to express physical, emotional, social status and conditions. The emotions and feeling of a character can be depicted through them. In the film *Chitrangada*, *Rudra* uses his body as an instrument through the dance he performs to express the feeling and emotions which are engraved within himself.

Dance is a powerful element used to represent the emotions of *Rudra* in this film. Elements of dance forms such as Karanas (Transitional movements or postural alterations, Hastas (Hand gestures), Adavus (Series of movements or expressions) and Bhedas (Eye contact, different gazes and neck-head movements are used to express the feelings or to tell a story.

The dance form used in the film is Odissi. It often begins with graceful, slow and lyrical moments of the eyes, neck, and torso and feet and slowly builds in swell to climax in a fast tempo at the end. And the next part of the dance involves expressive graceful, sensual dance and drama to communicate a story through hands gestures, body movements, and expressions.

The film brilliantly uses these techniques to present the story of Chitrangada, the warrior princess. The inner conflict within her to identify herself as a woman or man is expressed through the dance. At beginning Chitrangada is presented with masculine attributes and later in the dance drama when she fell in love with Arjuna her body language and expressions changes to more feminine.

Chitrangada talks about the ardent wish for identifying once gender. The protagonist Rudra, a successful choreographer had recently staged a successful production of Tagore's *Chitrangada*. In the new percussionist of his troupe, he had found a lover; and in the drama, a new meaning – that 'it is the story of a wish', the wish to change one's gender. It spoke to him powerfully as he himself had that hidden desire, which he could fulfil only superficially by wearing jewellery and applying kohl. It is strange that though he connects with the character of Chitrangada while staging the play, it is after it was over that he BECOMES her. Here the dance drama *Chitrangada* itself become the outlet of his desire. He identifies himself as the princess Chitrangada of Manipur who was raised as a son.

In *Chitrangada*, Ghosh not only challenges the stereotyping and shaming of men who dance, 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 performance arts. Constantly emphasizing on the mutability of the body, notwithstanding its biological gender, Ghosh makes a very strong statement on dancing as well as acting – as liberating the body from coded performances of gender.

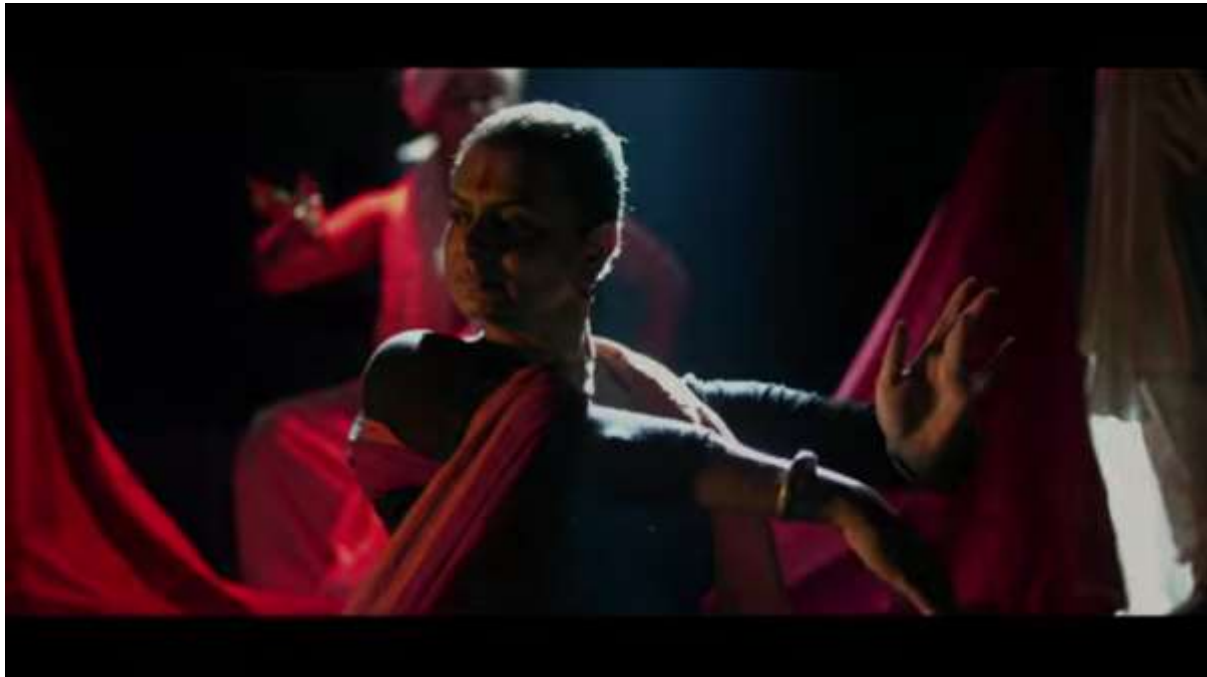


Fig 1, Rudra dancing

“Dance is not just dance for Rudra, it is a partial solution for Rudra's quest for identity (Fig 1). Partho tells Rudra that once his sex change operations done; his dance will be affected, to which Rudra replies:

Partho: What about your dance? Your body is the instrument, tamper with it.....

Rudra: Shut up. I don't dance with my body Partho. It comes from within. Fortunately, my dance is not limited to my gender Partho. And neither is my identity.” (01:0:39-01:07:18) (Mandeep, Raina 64)

In other words, the film is a commentary not only on sexuality, but also on the performance arts which carry remarkable possibilities for re-inscribing bodies with new meanings, extricating them from the compulsory performance of masculinity or femininity following normative gender registers.



Fig 2, Rudra practicing at the hospital

The classical dance form, Odissi is experimented in the film. The dance drama is miniaturist and minimalist in style. The costumes are in Oriental style. The stage is black and the hospital (where Rudra is admitted after the breakdown) will be a clinical grey (Fig 2). The stage will be used as a language. For instance, we will use the spotlight. The stage is an emotional space here. The two spaces where dance is placed (the stage and the hospital room) uses dance as a tool to express the emotions of Rudra. The emotions of Rudra are also portrayed through the mudras. The gestures speak in the movie. As the counsellor remarks that Rudra has the ability to speak with hands, hand gestures plays a very important role in expressing the emotions.



Fig 3: Rudra getting upset with Kasturi

While staging the first scene of the dance drama within the film, Rudra gets terribly upset by the fact that Kasturi's (playing the masculine kurupa Chitrangada) hand gestures appear too 'feminine' and shouts at her: "Chitrangada is *conditioned* to be a man! That is how she is brought up!"- the idea of *conditioning* clearly shows gender as a construct. Gender is socially constructed, disseminated and internalised. Rudra knows very well what it means by conditioned to be a man so he wants Kasturi to express it through the dance. Here also dance is very much related to the life of Rudra. (Bakshi 215) (Fig 3)

In another scene (Rudra's alter ego) questions whether the audience would recognise Rudra's Chitrangada as Tagore's. This provides Rudra with the opportunity of explaining him of what he realizes to be the crux of Tagore's Chitrangada. To Rudra, the thematic import of the play is that of the fulfilment of a dream. The dance itself is the achievement of Rudra being able to express his gender identity.

In *Chitrangada*, Ghosh not only challenges the stereotyping and shaming of men who dance, but problematize it even further by celebrating the fluidity of the body and sexuality, by dissociating biological gender from sexuality, and most importantly from the performance arts. Constantly emphasizing on the mutability of the body, notwithstanding its biological gender, Ghosh makes a very strong statement on dancing as well as acting— as liberating the body from coded performances of gender.

In another scene, with a spectacular of Tagore's dance drama in the backdrop, post hir (instead of his/her is used to show the gender neutrality of the character. The character is in a crisis of identifying the gender) breast implants, gazes at hir own reflection in a large bowl of water, as Chitrangada's lines from Tagore's text are narrated in a voice-over by Ghosh himself. The beauty of the scene is with the dance movement of Rudra gazing at hir own reflection. At a metaphorical level, Ghosh inserts his own subjectivity within Tagore's text and the dance and thereby claims it as his own. The exploration of sexuality is portrayed through Rudra seeing the reflection and dancing around the large bowl of water. (Bakshi 215)

It is important to note that in the dance drama, within the film, Rudra himself plays the role of Madan, the divine engineer of Chitrangada's transfiguration. The suggestion seems to be that here Ghosh is literarily acting out the role of the engineer auteur, which effectuates the sexual transfiguration and is simultaneously the object of it. The character Madan itself has the autobiographical touch of Rudra.

In other words, the film is a commentary not only on sexuality, but also on the performance arts which carry 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 cannot readily grasp the fact that a male is 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 discourages 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 turn to the performance arts, and locate within the radical questions about sexualities and sexual behaviours. (Mandeep, Raina 64)

Like Chitrangada of Tagore's dance drama Rudra 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 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

The grace and elegance of that characterizes the protagonists dance and all the feminine elements like makeup, dressing up and the whole countenance is in itself, the mute reinforcement of being applicable to a fixed gender called a 'female'. The Dance form itself is considered to suit a being according to the gender. When the character says dance is not limited to my gender, the question of reinforcement of feminine attributes to the form itself becomes problematic.

But as Rudra himself says that dance is not bond to neither gender nor his identity we can say that dance deconstruct the idea of gender and it's a space of gender fluidity.

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. Lot of his movies gives glimpses of the life of Rituparno Ghosh through the characters in his movie. Rudra in *Chitrangada* is one among them.

Ghosh challenges the idea of identity through socially constructed paradigms. He uses brilliant techniques in representation of emotions. The selection of beautiful Rabindrasangeet in his films makes unforgettable visual experiences. His films were lauded as being in line with Satyajith Ray's legacy, he was, at the same time, censured for his non-normative sexual and gendered persona. Gender is a construct that is ingrained in our lives from childhood; Ghosh deconstructs these techniques and present it before his audience with charm. As Rhituparno Ghosh's body politics is very much prevalent in this movie it can be seen as a further scope for study. The identity crisis of Rudra is only discussed in this paper but how Rudra himself be the representation of Ghosh can be studied.

References

- Bakshi Kaustav and Sen Parjanya. "A room of hir own: The queer aesthetics of Rituparno Ghosh." <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320415950,2015,pp-204-223>.
- Bhattacharjee, Jhimli. "Third Gender in Indian Films with a Special Reflection on Chitrangada". International Journal of Scientific and Research Publication, no.44, 2014.
- Bhattacharyya, Saurabh. "A Man in woman: The figure of Chitrangda in Mahabharata, Tagore and Rhituparno Ghosh". The Appollonian, volume 2, issue 2, 2015, pp.22-28.
- Jonjau. Mehak. "Critiquing Riruparna Ghosh: Gender sensitivity and identity in films." National Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development, Vol.2/No.3, 2017, pp. 15-17.
- Kaustav, Bakshi "Rituparno Ghosh, performance arts and a queer legacy: an abiding stardom, South Asian History and Culture". 8:2, 284-299, DOI: 10.1080/19472498.2017.1304085
- Mandeep and Raina, Anshu. "Rudra's Quest for Identity in Chitrangada': Technical Woman or Natural Man." IQSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science, volume 20, no.2, 2015.pp 60-68.
- Sangeete Datta, Kaustav Bakshi and Dasgupta K Rohit. "The world of Rhituparno Ghosh: texts, contexts and transgression". Lough borough University Institutional Repository, volume 6, no.2, 2015, pp 223-237.