

## Chapter 13

# “As Though She Were a Man”: *Chitrangada* and Contemporary Queer Appropriations of Tagore

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**Abstract** What encourages a blogger to connect photographs of pairs of same-sex lovers from the late nineteenth century with texts from entirely different contexts such as poetry, fiction, letters, and lyrics to narrate what, according to the blogger, the couples might be saying, doing, and feeling? What makes a queer film director–actor use Tagore’s apparently innocuous dance drama *Chitrangada* as a major prop for his film to reinterpret the play in terms of gender identity, as a means of understanding his own self as well as the character he is playing? This chapter attempts to examine how irrespective of the original intentions of Tagore, latter-day gay spectators and readers misread, sometimes deliberately, Tagore’s texts. In the chapter, the author uses the idea of the “fantasmatic spectator” (as enunciated by Brett Farmer) for discussing the queer reception of a few Tagore texts, mostly focusing on Rituparno Ghosh’s reinterpretation and resituating of *Chitrangada*.

**Keywords** Queer theory • Gender studies • Film studies • Fantasmatic spectator • Theater • Literary theory • *Chitrangada*

Some years ago, I attended a queer conference at Bangkok where, due to fund restrictions, a fellow academic (a young male) and I had to share a room for the duration of the event. Apart from 3 or 4 of us, the rest of the 100-odd cast of characters drawn from all over the world fitted the description “queer” by virtue of beings gays, lesbians, transvestites, transgender, *hijra*, and so on. A few hours into the conference and the two of us began to be showcased as practitioners of some Indian version of pederasty, a university professor and his young gay partner-disciple from a predominantly homophobic India! Needless to say, during the day we would pretend that we were, and bask in the looks of admiration from all and sundry, and would laugh on return to our room where we seldom found any time or inclination to be friendly, let alone being “gay.” Each of us found time to go to the notorious haunts of heterosexual pleasure finding

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little use for the packets of condom that our seminar bags contained, among other things, such as addresses for gay or lesbian sex shows, massage parlors. What was I, a happily married family person, doing at an event like that? Why have I been engaged in scholarship and research in an area where my subject position demands no academic activism? Unlike in the West, in India, happily, this is more often the case, that a straight or an upper caste Brahmin can be unquestioningly accepted as a queer or dalit scholar. Yet, I have willingly embraced the category, a “straight ally” coined by Colleen Lamos.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not the point I was trying to make while recounting the anecdote above, which rather is that homoerotically inclined subjects can and do “misread” signs pertaining to the heteronormative world around them in order to derive pleasures and seek out a larger body of affective community; also, in so doing, creative artists and critics extend the range of aesthetic possibilities. This may be because they are forced to spectate an overabundance of dominant cultural productions that are “different” from their own sexual proclivities. After all, until recently, the range of choices the queer subjects have had for entertainment on the popular electronic and print media and cinema, etc., has been extremely limited, and they have had to dip into the underground for queer art, that is not always of unquestionable merit, for succor. In the sphere of literature, similarly, it has been only a couple of decades since discussions of queer elements in established and celebrated authors such as Shakespeare, Whitman, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Auden, and so on has gained ground, but these are mostly writers from the West. For Indians with a queer orientation or for queer people with an orientalist bias, India does not afford many gay or lesbian icons or iconic texts: One reason why dissident critics in India are often seen as overinterpreting traditional texts either by critics and reviewers with a right-wing bias or simply by straight critics.

In this context, it might be salutary to look at the gay reception of India’s preeminent poet, Rabindranath Tagore. Though Indian admirers of Tagore are generally homophobic, queer interpretations of the man and his work are not entirely unknown. I have no intentions whatsoever of adding to the meager corpus of the queer Tagore; rather, in what follows, I shall examine, especially citing the instance of his *Chitrangada*, how irrespective of the original intentions of Tagore, latter-day gay readers and spectators have attempted to appropriate and read his poetry and plays in ways that the mainstream audience might find offensive.

### 13.1 I

To begin with, I accidentally came across one such gay appropriation on a blog (where else?) maintained by an American blogger, Kenneth Hill who juxtaposes sepia photographs of pairs of same-sex lovers from the late nineteenth century with literary texts from entirely different contexts to narrate what, according to him, the couples might be saying, doing, and feeling, with the note: “Photographer, sitters, unknown” (Hill 2013). These pieces are from confirmed gay or gay-friendly, lesbian writers/poets/artists such as C.P. Cavafy and Pushkin as well as from non-homoerotic writers and poets such as Dickens. Hill justifies his enterprise with the following note: “Assembling these Imagined Histories creates a gay ancestry of sorts that I have

<sup>1</sup> Lamos uses the term in “The Ethics of Queer Theory” (1999: 141–150).

always longed to know—even if I have had to make it up myself. This is the lineage I wish had been passed down to me like so much treasure, like other cultures do to honor a common identity” (ibid: my emphasis). I did not find anything surprising about his exhibits except when I encountered there one of Tagore’s poems, “Unending Love” in William Radice’s translation, excerpts from which I quote below:

I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times  
 In life after life, in age after age, forever.  
 My spellbound heart has made and remade the necklace of songs,  
 That you take as a gift, wear round your neck in your many forms,  
 In life after life, in age after age, forever.  
 .... (ibid.)

Taken somewhat aback by this exhibit, I quickly tried to guess what may have encouraged Hill to “read” these lines as expression of homoerotic love is the incidence of gender-neutral pronouns such as “you” and “I.” Also, references to “universal love” echoing Auden’s valorization of the vision and feast of Agape, and the deployment of Whitmanesque rhetoric about “[t]he love of all man’s days both past and forever” as well as of phrases like “numberless forms” make it easy for the blogger to relocate the lines in a homoerotic ambience. If they had been given a different context, such as the sepia photograph of a man and woman in a similar posture, the same lines would have been read as part of the tradition of the heterosexual love lyric. Obviously, visual repositioning of a written/printed text involves a certain degree of semiotic figuration and reconfiguration.

But, to anyone familiar with Tagore’s intellectual growth, the lines would appear not as poetic assertions of any queer identity; rather, they would be perceived as belonging to the intertwining traditions stretching back to the Upanishadic teachings through the medieval Bhakti<sup>2</sup> to the rural folk traditions of

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<sup>2</sup> Bhakti is a medieval movement in Indian culture. A.K. Ramanujan discusses the Kannada movement of Bhakti. Here, for example, is the Vachana poet, Dasimayya:

If they see  
 breasts and long hair coming  
 they call it woman,  
 if beard and whiskers  
 they call it man:  
 but, look, the self that hovers  
 in between  
 is neither man  
 nor woman  
 O Rimanitha!  
 (Ramanujan 1978: 27) And, here is Vasavanna:  
 Look here, dear fellow:  
 I wear these men’s clothes  
 only for you.  
 Sometimes I am man.  
 Sometimes I am woman.  
 O lord of the meeting rivers  
 I’ll make wars for you  
 but I’ll be your devotees’ bride.  
 (ibid. 29)

It is a peculiar irony that the advent of colonial modernity made Indian readers and believers homophobic denying fluidity of gender identity in the face of traditions such as Bhakti and Vachana poets.

the Baul<sup>3</sup> that Tagore knew only too well including Kabir's dohas<sup>4</sup> which he had co-translated with the American mystic poet, Evelyn Underhill. For example, Tagore's debt to the Maithili poet, Vidyapati,<sup>5</sup> is well known. One of Vidyapati's verses is well worth quoting here:

All my inhibition left me in a flash,  
 When he robbed me of my clothes,  
 But his body became my new dress.  
 Like a bee hovering on a lotus leaf  
 He was there in my night, on me!  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vidyapati>

Here, Vidyapati's graphic description notwithstanding, the traditional semiotic would insist that the poet's bhaktic persona assumes the garb of Radha and imagines being embraced by Krishna. But Vidyapati's is not the only instance: In his *The Religion of Man*, Tagore quotes several other poet-saints of medieval India who help in our understanding and placing Tagore's views on the subject. Tagore may have been aware of the then newly emergent sexological discourses engaging in conflicting views about "inversion," "third sex"; but instead of invoking these, he chooses to highlight and work within the indigenous traditions.

Recently, J. Edgar Bauer has put these traditional instances to slightly different use. Offering readings that were totally secular, he says in his article that their "ecstatic homoeroticism can hardly be overlooked" (Bauer 2010: 456). Further, referring to Tagore's quotation from one of them, he comments how one of the bhaktic poet-saints exclaims without subterfuge: "Thou seest me, O Divine Man (*narahari*), and I see thee, and our love becomes mutual." (ibid). This queer critic refers to another of Tagore's quotation from a Baul: "Man seeks the man in me and I lose myself and run out." (ibid). Soon Bauer takes over and goes on to pile quotation upon quotation from more of the poet saints including Kabir:

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<sup>3</sup> Baul is a mystical, Vaishnava tradition that combines with it the Muslim Sufi tradition of devotion. It is also a musical tradition of a particular kind. Tagore was deeply influenced by this tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Kabir was a fifteenth century saint poet of North India, largely known for his oral poetry, where he criticized the evil practices prevalent in both contemporary Hinduism and Islam. His oral poetry, which had an overt reformist message, was produced as *doha*, which is the couplet form in verse, in the written composition. Doha is a type of couplet composed in verse, which rhyme together. A poet like Kabir whose poetry is often associated with this form, being unaware of alphabet, never wrote anything in his lifetime. This form was chosen by his followers when they decided to commit his oral poetry into written form.

<sup>5</sup> Maithili is a language with its own rich literary tradition which dates back to fourteenth century and has its own script known as Mithilakshar, spoken in Mithila, the northeastern region of Bihar and some parts of Nepal. It is often misunderstood as a dialect of Hindi. Vidyapati Thakkura was a fifteenth century poet of Mithila, who composed in both Sanskrit and in Maithili, but is popularly known for his Maithili love songs about Radha and Krishna. Grierson was the first colonial administrator to collect and publish some of the popular songs of Vidyapati in late nineteenth century.

Kabir utters his unconditional surrender as *wife* to the exalted male Beloved: “I meet my husband, and leave at His feet the offering of my body and my mind.” More importantly, Kabir reasserts his rapturous sex-crossing when acknowledging the shortcomings of “her” bridal love: “When people say I am Thy bride, I am ashamed; for I have not touched Thy heart with my heart” (ibid. 457).

Bauer, it seems, gets carried away by his “discovery,” and wonders why Tagore does not do enough to articulate what appears to be obvious to the modern reader. Obviously, apart from his propensity to secularize Indian mysticism, Bauer is looking for evidence in English translation of all these lines in order to be able to isolate strands of homoeroticism, without realizing that in their original context and language register the semantic structures are different. For example, in the first quote given above from the Baul mystic, man is generic rather than a gendered subject. But in English translation, it sounds conveniently homoerotic.

Similarly, even in his own time, Tagore’s views and Whitmanesque deportment had prompted certain Western intellectuals to see similarities between Tagore’s views and their own on human sexuality as was then emergent. For instance, Magnus Hirschfeld [(1868–1935), a well-known sexologist, who had met and recorded his conversations with Tagore], read in Tagore’s public persona certain “feminine” features; and gleefully reproduces observations by a teacher (who may have himself imbibed Western values) at Santiniketan to the effect that Tagore resembled a *prima donna*. Here again, Bauer deals with the views of Hirschfeld at some length and is surprised how Tagore does not extend some of his own ideas regarding the continuum of creation to the sphere of human sexual binary (Bauer 2010: 455–456). This puzzlement on the part of Bauer may have been caused by his inability to grasp the indigenous tradition within which Tagore was meditating both in his discursive, philosophical prose as well as his poetry and plays. What Bauer seems to be missing out on is the pervasive evidence in Tagore of the immaterial, mystical self, the inner–outer binary, the inner essence, and outer garment of gender identity entrenched in Hindu mysticism. Finding Tagore’s mysticism too elusive, Bauer, the queer critic, tries to construct and “imagine a history” where he would have liked to place Tagore, very much like Hill does.

It is in the performative aspect of Tagore’s art, however, that one is faced with more complex issues. For, from reading a printed text to spectating a performative one, the process of cultural translation might interfere with questions of intersubjectivity. Though in his poetry Tagore successfully elides issues related to the materiality of the body, whether male or female, and shrouds his lines in impenetrable mysticism, in his dramatic art, because of its very performative nature, he meets with serious challenge. His play, *Chitrangada* (1935), is a case in point: when the *dance* drama is performed on stage, the body’s materiality cannot be elided even though Tagore deploys metaphors for external, bodily endowment as clothing, as also through the semiotic of costume and body language, even though such symbols and imageries are not as pervasive as those in his *poetic* drama. Thus, any sensitive and intelligent choreographer who attempts to stage Tagore’s dance drama will have to contend with several questions about costume, choice of actors with certain kinds of bodily features and their body

language arising out of the contradictions between the visual-semantic and the thematic-epistemologic. It is not only necessary for us to see how Tagore has interpreted the apparently innocuous Chitrangada episode from the Indian epic in revolutionary ways, but it might also prove to be a revelation in the context of the point I am trying to make, if we examine how his own representations of human sexuality and gender have inseminated fertile minds and helped proliferate even more radical representations.

That the Chitrangada episode from the Sanskrit epic held much significance for Tagore there is no doubt, since he returned to it again and again: Having first composed a poetic play *Chitrangada* (1892), he supervised its translation (if he did not translate it himself) into English as *Chitra* for the English stage with elaborate stage instructions. Then he got it published as *Chitra* (1914) without the stage directions, finally reworking it into a dance drama in 1935. Why is Tagore interested, almost obsessed with the episode so as to inflect it to almost an unacceptable level of irreverence? What does he do with it that prompts a queer film maker like Rituparno Ghosh, more than a hundred years later, to reprise Tagore's play through his film, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, and in such a way as to give it a major queer twist and nearly unacceptable to an average Tagore fan? A large part of my paper is preoccupied with these and similar questions.

As an aside, one might note that such adventurous reinvention on Tagore's part was made possible partly because the Chitrangada episode is embedded in the scriptural text of the *Mahabharata* and may be said to have been imbued in "cult value."<sup>6</sup> When Tagore reinvents it on the modern stage, it is as yet unaided by technology, and its cult value ought to be intact. This enables Tagore to exploit, and subtly modernize the narrative. But, in the process, Arjuna and Chitrangada's father no longer remain the focal point but are retrenched to the background diminishing the cult value. There is a parallel between Hill's effort to the cult of remembrance by using nineteenth century photographs and excerpts from canonical literary pieces, that even when secularization of cult is in process, through technology, an attempt is being made to retain the cult value.

Just as Tagore was poised in the cusp of modernity, Ghosh's context is that of the globalized, postmodern epistemic moment. Ghosh lives at a time when Indian cinema has already fought its first battles with its homophobic audience from *Fire* and *Girlfriend* onward. Though neither of the two films is free from essentialism and sexual stereotypes, they pave the way for a more open discussion of queer identity the representation of which continues to grow in mainstream Hindi cinema. Thus, when Ghosh falls back on the cult value of the episode, he can afford to dispense with the cushion of the *Mahabharata*, and go straight to Tagore's dance drama, *Chitrangada*. In spite of this denial of sacrality to Ghosh's text, the cult value derives by way of Tagore's own iconic status, even as it (cult value) relocates itself from the sacral to the secular context.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin (1968) offers a detailed analysis of this phenomenon in his cult classic, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

## 13.2 II

Vyasa’s narrative runs thus: In the Arjuna-*vanavasa* section of *Adiparva*, Arjuna crosses the country of Kalinga and goes to Manipura, where he meets Chitrangada, the daughter of Chitravahana, the ruler of Manipura. He desires to possess her and requests the king for her hand. After satisfying himself about Arjuna’s lineage, he gives the background to her birth and his future plans for her. He says, “there was in our race a king of the name of Prabhanjana, who was childless....[after he performed severe penance, Mahadeva] granted him the boon that each successive descendant of his race should have one child only. In consequence of that boon ... [a]ll my ancestors ... had each a male child. I, however, have only a daughter to perpetuate my race.” (Ganguli 1998: 421) Then, follow the crucial lines:

*Ekacha mama kanyeyamkuloshyutpadinibhrusam  
Putromamayemiti mebhavanapurusharshava  
Putrikahetubidhinasangitabharatarshva  
tatmadekahsutojshyamjayatebharatashyoya*

The passage has been paraphrased by Ganguly as follows: Chitravahana says: “But, o bull amongst men, I ever look upon this daughter of mine as my son. O bull of Bharata’s race, I have duly made her a *Putrika*.” In another edition (Gita Press 1989), the annotations are somewhat different, though here too the cryptic Chitrangada section (ch. 214 verses 14–27) is silent about her upbringing. Far from being “manly” in any way, she is portrayed as a beautiful woman right from when (and as) first seen by Arjuna. The two adjectives used to describe her are: “*charudarshana*” (14) and “*bararoha*” (15), good-looking, and curvaceous, i.e., well-proportioned, in particular with beautiful waist and hips. She is just taken to be (not even treated like) a son by Chitravahana; she does not look in any way like a son. As the king puts it, it is his “*bhavana*,” i.e., fancy, that she is his “*putra*.” The “*putrika*” line, which is held up by many as a gender-neutral term for a child, follows immediately after and runs as follows: “*putrikahetubidhina-samjita bharatarsava*” i.e., O Arjuna, she is named/called by me *putrika* by *hetuvidhi*. “*Hetuvidhi*” which Professor Harish Trivedi explains in a personal e-mail to the present author as “may be a technical term; literally, it means ‘for a reason.’ This reason, explained parenthetically in the Gita Press ed., is ‘(i.e., for the reason that her first son will be regarded/recognized as my own son)’—in terms of succession to the throne.” Chitravahana eventually agrees to give away his daughter to Arjuna with the proviso that after the son is born to him, he would leave both his wife and son behind and leave Manipura. Arjuna duly agrees and fulfills his promise subsequently.

Thus, the manly aspect and the boon that transforms Chitrangada into a lovely ultra-feminine beauty seem to be entirely the creation of Tagore. Whereas in the *Mahabharata*, the boon from Shiva was for a sole child (“*pradadekyekamprasa-beykule*,” i.e., progenetate one each, with gender-neutral overtones) for each of the descendants, and a son was born to successive kings, Tagore changes the plot significantly and consciously so that “Lord Shiva promised to [her] royal grandsires an

unbroken line of male descent.” (*Chitra*: 2) but even this divine word “proved powerless to change the spark of life in [her] mother’s womb—so invincible was my nature, woman though I be.” (ibid. 2–3) Tagore, after giving deft touches of signifiers for musculinity at crucial junctures, turns to the traditional Hindu view of *maya*: reality as illusion. “Alas, that this frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the deathless spirit!” (ibid. 18). Arjuna realizes this much later, almost at the end of the one year of feminine beauty granted to Chitra: “Illusion is the first appearance of Truth.” Then she advances towards her lover in disguise. But a time comes when she throws off her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity.” “I grope for that ultimate you, that bare simplicity of truth.” (ibid. 52) In a way, Tagore here seems to be influenced by the following lines from the Gita:

*vasamsijirmaniyathavihaya*  
*navanigrhnatinaro 'parani*  
*tathasarivanivhayajimany*  
*anyanisamyatinavanidehi*  
 (Chap. 2)

(As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, similarly, the soul accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.)

To my mind, Tagore simply exploits the aporetic moment in the original episode, and he (or his as yet unknown source)<sup>7</sup> interprets the terms *Santana* and *putrika* (used instead of *putra* along with the difficult, *hetubidhina*) as male child to suit his need and provides for a potential queer reading of the transformation. The only known account of the play’s genesis is Tagore’s own. In 1940, Tagore recalls his experience of a train journey of many years ago from Santiniketan to Kolkata when certain thoughts occurred to him and it was then that he remembered and recalled the Chitrangada episode: “the episode, having taken different forms (he uses the term *rupantar*), had been playing in my mind.” He clearly states that his intention was to pit “strength of character against external beauty,” human value against natural value “*Suchana*” (*Rabindra Rachanabali* 1940). But, of course, in his rendering, he does more than that as he delves deep into questions of masculinity and femininity often blurring the boundaries between the two, and insists on the essential core of humanness, the generic man or human rather than the manly man. My point, however, is that this strategic recasting by Tagore of the characters generates a kind of sexual polyvalence in the text that subsequent queer readers and spectators seem to have felt tempted to exploit befitting their disposition.

Within the radical recasting of the tropes, however, in all his versions, Tagore portrays the original and metamorphosed Chitrangada most stereotypically: She is first manly and, therefore, *kurupa* (or ugly). She is brought up as a “man” of the warrior

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<sup>7</sup> I have checked versions of the *Mahabharata*, including the Bengali version by Kashi Das, for this episode, and there seems to be no precedent to the innovations we notice in Tagore. It is impossible to ascertain whether there had been newer versions in folk yatrās or Baul songs that Tagore knew.



caste. She is also shown as failing to court Arjuna because of her manly features, even when she puts on women’s garb. In fact, when she later recounts her encounter with Arjuna, she describes herself as having behaved shamelessly “as though she were a man” (*Chitra* 56-5); for a woman with *lajja*, a *bhadramahila* (De 2011: 142), would not make the first overture to a man (which could be Tagore’s half wink to his contemporary audience). *Chitrangada* is further represented in terms of the then existing stereotype of a beautiful woman when she is metamorphosed by Madana into a “feminine”—and therefore exquisitely beautiful—woman. There is hardly any difference between the first version of 1892 and the 1935 version in Tagore’s emphasis on the masculine–feminine binary, and suggesting some sort of androgyny as an ideal. In the first, the stereotype of the woman as *abala* (bereft of strength) or the weaker sex appears again and again: “I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow...” (Tagore 1914: 3). After being ignored by Arjuna, she lays aside her “man’s clothing...the unaccustomed dress clung about my shrinking shame...” (ibid. 6). In the dance drama version too Tagore brings it up: in both, the attempt continues to be the valorization of the inner, essential self and the neglect of the outer cover of illusion of the body. “Alas, I have failed the woman in me/thus far in my life/shame to the bow and arrow/shame to my strong arms” (my translation).

In the original version as depicted in the *Mahabharata*, the coercive transaction over *Chitrangada*’s body is between two dominant males: the father and the would-be husband, completely denying any agency to the woman. Tagore turns this on its head, and accords marginal agency to Arjuna and none to her father, who is not even a character in any of the versions. She desires Arjuna; it is she who arouses Arjuna’s desire for her, and it is on her terms and conditions and not her father’s that she agrees to accept him. Noteworthy are the series of imperative verbs that *Chitrangada* uses in her dialogues with Arjuna.

### 13.3 III

Generations of theater directors have given various interpretations of the earlier and later *Chitrangada* by gendering her vis-à-vis Arjuna and her *sakhis*. These interpretations are iterated and visibilized through costume, or as in the case of Arjuna, through a muscular body with or without facial hair, mustache, etc.; and, accordingly, they have asked their actors to use appropriate body language and dance forms. Whereas, in most productions, then and even now, the heterosexual audience’s titillatory expectations are kept alive, in minimalist sartorial makeup of the female actor as the manly *Chitrangada*, by merely adorning her with a man’s headgear and, her prominent body language is used to iterate female sexuality through a kind of *faux* simulacra.

While, in a heterosexual environment such violation of theatrical *auchitya* or propriety is accepted without protest, a queer, phantasmatic spectator might respond differently. One can see an example of this when a queer auteur like Rituparno Ghosh critiques such performative malappropriation in the dance drama within his film, *Chitrangada*. Ghosh’s reprisal of *Chitrangada* by way of

contemporanising it with a sharp dose of intertextuality sees a queer twist in the tale he receives from his idol, Tagore. Even more significantly, Ghosh, who is himself a cross-dressing male in real life, plays the role of Rudra, the choreographer in the film. While rehearsing the opening scene (within the frame narrative) where Chitrangada and her friends are shown capturing Arjuna, the bare-chested actor playing Arjuna is revealed as a young man with long hair and a six-pack body, and the actor playing the role of Chitrangada (Kasturi) as the “manly” princess. The hyperreal Ghosh/Rudra so deeply identifies with the character of Tagore’s heroine that he is upset with the actor playing Chitrangada, because she acts too dainty to be mistaken for a man by Arjuna or even the spectators. First, he yells at the actor, “not so dainty.” Failing to drive home the point, in a moment of black humor, he then accuses Kasturi of expressing the body language of a Radha playing Holi instead of behaving like a manly princess: as if in answer to D.L. Roy’s attack (1916) on Tagore’s depiction of the princess as “a prostitute-like profligate woman self-indulging with her lover Arjun and therewith desecrating the virtuous chastity of daughter and wife depicted by the original epic” (quoted by De: 139).

Ghosh/Rudra goes on to explain Tagore’s purpose by saying that Chitrangada was conditioned to be a man by her father, and so her body language needed to be shown to be that of a man. “It was only when she saw Arjuna that she wished to be a woman.” Ghosh/Rudra goes on to declaim that the story of Chitrangada is about desire: “*aur baabar icche versus aur icche*” (i.e., “her wish versus her father’s wish”) “*Chitrangada ekta iccher golpo*,” (“Chitrangada is the story of a wish”) that “you can choose your gender.” For Ghosh/Rudra, this is *the* queer moment in Tagore that he sets out to unpack in his film. For us, this is *the* queer spectatorial phantasma that Ghosh/Rudra’s queer subjectivity gazes and seizes upon. Self-reflexive to the hilt, the film even introduces a scene where a laudatory review of the dance drama speaks of the novelty in the production. Later, of course, Rudra’s own experiences in life convince him that he had failed to do justice to Tagore’s Chitrangada, leading him to admit to Subho that he had not understood the character fully and, by implication, is critical of the ending of Tagore’s dance drama.

## 13.4 IV

So far in our discussion, we notice the imbrication of issues of performativity and spectatorship. I shall now deploy Brett Farmer’s formulation of the “fantasmatic spectator;”<sup>8</sup> by which he tries to

...demonstrate how gay spectators can engage in queer fantasmatic negotiations of mainstream film. [He] suggest[s] that, in their readings of the Hollywood musical, gay spectators latch on to those points of rupture or excess to which the musical is so spectacularly prone and mobilize them to construct patently queer forms of fantasmatic desire.

(Farmer 2000: 17)

<sup>8</sup> I borrow this from Brett Farmer’s *Spectacular Passions* (2000).

While analyzing a few of the early movies to illustrate his point, he takes up a few plays which were turned into screenplays in the 1940s such as *The Pirate*, originally clearly fitting into the heteronormative format of early cinema. Originally written as a play, it was turned into a screenplay for the musical, which is how it becomes famous, especially among the gay spectators; and, as discussed by Farmer, Judy Garland becomes a gay icon. The gay blogger Kenneth Hill too talks about how his “reading a biography of Judy Garland in 1974 at the age of twelve” outed him (Hill 2009). Looking at the reasons why the movie and its heroine become gay icons, Farmer cites certain features of the movie such as its opulence (a characteristic feature of the director), the real-life image of the main character Judy Garland, and the then prevailing homophobia-enforced public-private existence of gays.

Like *The Pirate* and other contemporary musicals, Tagore’s dance drama too can be seen as a theatrical “musical” in the sense that the story is put to music with the characters acting out their parts through dance. It also enables a kind of visualization on stage, but with the difference that the spectator’s perceptions are not aided by the technology of the movie camera. The naked eye is all that he/she uses. But traditionally, the play is enacted through various forms of dance such as Manipuri and Odissi where the *mudras* of the hand and eyes constitute the principal elements of body language which add to the textual language of the original author. This semiotic of the stage enables the director of the play to read and interpret it in certain ways that is not available to the reader of the printed text. What is true of films applies no less to the visualizing of printed texts.

Recently, in answer to a question by Shohini Ghosh, Rituparno Ghosh says that he identifies with Binodini of Tagore’s *Chokher Bali*, which he had directed. The film ostensibly has nothing to do with the question of homosexuality, but even here the principle of phantasmatic spectator is equally applicable.<sup>9</sup> For Ghosh says,

I identify with parts of all my films, but if I had to choose a character that was closest to my heart, it would be Binodini, played by Aishwarya Rai in *Chokher Bali*, because she stands on the threshold of transformation. Binodini becomes a widow when widow remarriage has been legislated (by the British) but has yet to find social acceptance. There is tragic isolation in being caught in the half-light of legitimacy. I feel a strong sense of identification with that.

(R. Ghosh 2012c)

Rituparno Ghosh did not have to try hard to identify with *Chitrangada*. When his film, *Chitrangada* begins, with a heavily drugged Rudra half way through his gender correction surgery, he tells the story of *Chitrangada* to Subho, a product of his hallucinated imagination. Soon, Rudra’s hallucinatory interlocutor questions Rudra’s production of Tagore’s play by asking him “Will it not be too autobiographical?” To this, Rudra/Ghosh replies: “It is because you know me.” Yet, a few

<sup>9</sup> Shohini Ghosh, a queer critic herself, looks at another text by Tagore, *Streer Patra* (*The Wife’s Letter*) especially, the film version by Purnendu Patra (1976) in the same way (S. Ghosh 2012).

scenes later, Subho is so taken aback by Rudra's radical reprisal of the play within the film that he asks him, "*Eita je Tagorer Chitrangada seta ki bojha jabe?*" (Will it be possible to recognize this as Tagore's *Chitrangada*?). Rudra/Ghosh's identification with *Chitrangada* was easy because, no matter what were Tagore's stated or implicit intentions, certain dialogues and the form of *Chitrangada* seem overdetermined by elements of sexual dissidence. These elements in Tagore's play start appearing in quick succession as Arjuna becomes increasingly curious about the identity of *Chitrangada* upon hearing details from the villagers: "In affection," he was told, "she is mother, in armed might she is king"; and "in bravery she is manly/. . . on throne she is a lion-rider."<sup>10</sup> The best examples of the queer potentiality of the Tagore text can be culled from the scenes where the *sakhis* are surprised by the "unnatural" longing of Arjuna for the manly *Chitrangada*. They ask Arjuna pointedly whether he was already weary of womanly temptations and has now started indulging in absurd longing, looking for "a man in woman?" (Tagore 2013: 108–109).

However, unlike *Chitrangada*, Rudra is born male. Unlike *Chitrangada* who is raised as a woman, and assumes manly features, Rudra's parents want him to go for counseling to cure his effeminacy and save them social embarrassment. The major invention, however, is that of Rudra's love interest for the male percussionist in his drama group, heroin addict, Partho—another name for Arjuna, and happily, a common Bengali name; the allegorization and contemporization of the *Chitrangada* episode could hardly be more obvious. To drive home the allegory, Ghosh weaves scenes and lines from the play into the fabric of the screenplay. After having aroused the female passion in Rudra, and holding out hope for companionship, the relationship goes awry. When Subho asks him later why he should be in love with Partho, a heroin addict, he says that it is precisely because of that reason. After all, Partho is also ostracized by the society. Thus, very much like Judy Garland's escapades providing the gay spectators of *The Pirate* with an image of their own dissidence, Rudra sees in Partho's drug addiction, images of his own ostracization within the heteronormative regime.

However, Subho's misgivings notwithstanding, the allegorical resonances are never a far cry, in terms of exact parallels or major discrepancies. For, the two fathers, *Chitrangada's* and Rudra's, wanted their child to fulfill their wish for inheritance. Though both in the epic and Tagore's play the mother of *Chitrangada* is invisible, in Rituparno Ghosh, Rudra's mother plays a crucial and sympathetic role and helps her gay son "come out." The transformation of *Chitrangada* in Tagore's play takes recourse to Ovidian narrative techniques,<sup>11</sup> so that the supernatural Kamadev brings about the metamorphoses; but in Ghosh's film, the plastic surgeon is responsible for Rudra's bodily transformations. Thus, *Chitrangada's*

<sup>10</sup> An allusion to Goddess Durga, the annihilator of the evil demon, Mahisasura.

<sup>11</sup> Though physical transformation through supernatural intervention is not unknown in Indian mythology and folk narratives, I call such transformation in the context of Tagore "Ovidian" because such metamorphosis is central to all of Ovid's tales as is the case with Tagore's text.

ambisexual body in Tagore becomes a palimpsest where Ghosh overwrites a completely unambiguous queer text.

The allegorical plot in the screenplay takes an entirely different course from the original plot of Tagore’s *Chitrangada* when Partho deserts Rudra because the latter cannot give him a child. Rudra receives a rude shock with the discovery of the materiality of his body, and yet at another level its immateriality. He almost expresses a Tagorean interpretation of the body, that of the illusion of the bodily reality. When he is asked by his father to sign bank papers saying that he has no claims to the property by virtue of not being a son, Rudra says, “Have I now ceased to be the person who was your child. Have I disappeared just because I have undergone surgery?” The imagery of clothing and ornamentation is pervasive whenever *Chitrangada* talks about bedecking herself or, and even more so, when Rituparno Ghosh focuses on Rudra’s bodily changes for Ghosh too interprets Tagore’s *Chitrangada* in terms of bodily deceit and the triumph of the “plain truth.”

The cultural conditioning of the dance form as “feminine” too helps Ghosh in his interpretation as Rudra frequently expresses his emotions through the dance moves and hand–body language. Rudra’s parents, especially the father, are aghast that their son has opted for the feminine career as a dancer. But it is to Partho that he explains this: “My art is not gender bound. Neither is my identity.” In an interview, Ghosh says, “That’s where Anjan asks me how I would like to be remembered—as an artist or as *surupa*. At that moment, I realize that I don’t need a woman’s body to realize my feminine desires. Because the body is not about physical boundaries, it is about the relationship between me and the person perceiving it.” (R. Ghosh 2012b)

In the climax of the play, *Chitrangada* pleads with Arjun to ignore the bodily beauty and accept her for her essential, true self as the spell of Madana for one year comes to an end. Rudra has similarly undergone bodily transformation at the hands of the plastic surgeon in order not to become more beautiful, but technically a woman so that he and Partho could adopt a child. In contrast to *Chitrangada*, he undergoes tremendous amount of psychological trauma, trying to cope with the change (from identifying himself as a man to accepting herself as a woman), as if to bring out the lack of psychological depth and psychological realism in the portrayal of *Chitrangada* from being coerced into imagining herself as a man first, and then realizing the reality of her female desire. Thus, though within the film, Rudra’s theatrical interpretation is lauded by the press, he is himself deeply dissatisfied with his handling of the theme. He is able to realize this only through his personal situation in relation to his homophobic father, the culture in which he lives, and finally through Partho saying, “if I am to marry why not marry a real woman, why marry this strange halfway creature?” It is at this juncture that Rudra gives up his desperate attempt to become, “technically” a woman, and thereby returning to his original condition. Though this is exactly similar to *Chitrangada*’s return to her original self, Rudra instead of being united to Partho, is united to his family. He stands vindicated when his parents, especially his father accepts him and takes him home, thus reconciling himself to Rudra’s desire to be what he is. The most gay-affirmative, and heart-rending scenes are those when he is with

his mother, and finally with both the parents. In fact, the profoundest moments of love and tragedy are in the context of Rudra's relationship with his parents, climaxed by some sort of a rapprochement between father and son. Thus, the ending is queer-affirmative through the agency of the queer subject just as Tagore's *Chitrangada* is feminist through the agency of the woman subject.

Ghosh succeeds in a thorough contemporization of *Chitrangada*, with the obvious message that queer existence is realizable within the framework of the family, and not by rejecting it. Whether this is a conservative resolution to the contemporary Indian context or not, Ghosh certainly has chosen his options clearly. As he says in his interview, he loves to have the freedom to do what he likes with his body in terms of looks, dress, and so on. He has to be accepted on his own terms and not through any bodily disguise. In sharp contrast to the fun and frolic and the happy resolution, all through Tagore's play, when the audience is barely, if ever, given any occasion to pity *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's film invites the audience to empathize with Rudra's abjection.<sup>12</sup>

In an interview, he gave in 2010 to the *Telegraph*, Ghosh has said,

...I consider myself privileged because of my gender fluidity, the fact that I am in between. I don't consider myself a woman and I don't want to become a woman. I can wear kurtapyjama and can also wear kajal and jewellery and attend a social do.... The concept of unisex has been monopolised by women. Women can wear men's clothes. The problem arises when men wear women's clothes. Whatever I wear has always been worn by men. Wearing things like earrings and necklaces has always been a part of our sartorial history and tradition. ... My point is why shouldn't I celebrate my sexuality?

(R. Ghosh 2010)

In this interview given long before he did *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's personal predilections are clearly stated. This interview reveals how two kinds of personal circumstances remind two artists of one character in vastly different ways: Tagore's "train" of thought from a railway carriage upon spectating a natural scene, and Rudra/Ghosh's train of thought from spectating Tagore's *Chitrangada*. But finally, my own amusement at being observed differently by queer spectators, how I become the other, reminds me of my reading of Tagore and experience of Ghosh's film enables me to understand my experience better.

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<sup>12</sup> I borrow this term from Kristeva. See her *Powers of Horror* (1982).

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