

# Body, Desire and Identity: A Textual Analysis of the Film Chitrangada-The Crowning Wish

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## Abstract

What determines one's gender? How are subjects formed? These questions are predicated on ontology or one's knowledge of self. With regard to Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* the paper reappraises these questions in order to analyse their significance for queer aesthetics: how do people navigate the most intimate spaces-their body, desire and identity? How does an artist explore his/her medium, (here film) to examine and reflect upon his/her self? The paper also aims to examine how film as a genre opens up new possibilities for cinematic autobiography, especially queer autobiography, an area that is relatively unexplored and under theorized.

## Keywords

Autobiography, Body, Film, Identity, Queer, Sexuality

## Introduction

There is a corpus of literature and scholarships in the academia that challenge the centrality and the working principle of normative sexuality. Normative sexuality prescribes the functions and movements of the body and desire, and those who internalize the prescriptions are accustomed to these conditioned and restricted functions and movements. It views the body, identity, and desire from a deterministic standpoint which in turn ignores the possibilities one has in terms of one's identity, body and desire. The queer theory evolved through the works of scholars like Judith Butler (1988, 1990, 1993), David Halperin (1990, 1995), Teresa (1992), Anna Mary Jagose (1996) to name a few provide understandings on how normative sexuality operates and how it is being legitimized by the collective common sense of the society. In her discussion of gender performativity Butler says, "gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond" (1993, p. 231-32). This points to a determined position with respect to gender negating chances for fluidity. Queer as a term dismantles this determined position and celebrates fluidity. According to Halperin, "queer is by definition *whatever* is

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at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1995, p. 62). The advocates of queer theory also analysed how the dominant understanding of sexuality troubles the lives of those who disrupt the regularising principles of sexuality. The disruption of the operative principle of heteronormativity involves different possibilities in terms of our body, desire and identity. This paper argues that these different possibilities call for a different aesthetics and it can be called as queer aesthetics. This paper aims to understand how the film *Chitrangada: The crowning wish* produces an understanding with respect to queer aesthetics. In the light of the film, the paper explores the different modes through which people navigate the most intimate spaces-their body, desire and identity. Also, the paper looks at how an artist uses his/her medium, (here film) to examine and understand his/ her self.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first part ‘queer aesthetics’ explores the first question (to take cognizance of one’s identity, body, and desire) drawing upon the major postulates of queer theory. The second section aims to explore how film as a genre brings up new possibilities for cinematic autobiography, especially queer autobiography, an area that is relatively unexplored and under-theorized. In this section, the paper looks at subjectivity, temporality and narrative through the close reading of the cinematic codes in *Chitrangada- The Crowning Wish*. The end part of this section looks at how the narrative of the film has become an inescapable form of understanding one’s self.

### **Queer Aesthetics**

Rituparno Ghosh’s Bengali language film *Chitrangada-The Crowning Wish* (2012) takes the prominent litterateur Rabindranath Tagore’s dance drama *Chitrangada* as a pretext to portray the conflicts as well as the struggles of a choreographer in terms of ‘his’ [(?) *the pronoun ‘he’ (or his) does not justify the gender identity of the choreographer Rudra. This ambiguity is expressed by the question mark, which the author will not use again for reasons of avoiding repetition*] gender identity. Chitrangada is a mythical character in Mahabharata. She is portrayed as one of the wives of Arjuna. While Arjuna was roaming around Manipura he met and fell in love with Chitrangada, the only daughter of Chitravahana, the king of Manipura. Arjuna longed to marry her. As per the tradition of Manipura, Chitrangada’s children were successors to the king. Chitrangada’s father Chitravahana agreed to Arjuna’s wish; but on one condition that Chitrangada’s children would rule Manipura. When adapted for dance drama, Rabindranath Tagore revisited the story. In Tagore’s *Chitrangada*, the king of Manipura needed a son as his next successor. When Chitrangada, the girl child was born, the king decided to raise her as a man. She dressed like a man. In her youthful years, she met Arjuna who was hunting

in the forest of Manipura. Chitrangada was lured by the valour of Arjuna and she wished to be with him forever. This is where Rituparno's film starts. The central character in the film Rudra is a choreographer of a dance drama titled 'Chitrangada.' As the film begins Rudra is seen excitedly involved with the dance drama team.

In the initial scenes of the film *Chitrangada*, Rudra Chatterjee (portrayed by Rituparno Ghosh), a choreographer by profession, is shown wearing ear-rings and, 'kajal' in his eyes. His eyebrows are neatly threaded. Rudra is reluctant to wear *sari*, a so-called feminine dress. He also registers his protest in adhering to the dress code pre-determined for a man. When he meets the doctor to discuss the possibilities of 'gender -reassignment -surgery' Rudra openly declares; "I am not going to wear *sari*" after surgery. He says that he would opt something in-between. We see that the body, mannerism and appearance of Rudra transgress the boundary imposed by normative sexuality. The depiction of Rudra is seen as a critique of the normal and the dominant sexuality- a critique which is generally addressed using the term 'queer.'

Rudra's actions and artistic expressions are never confined to the social and cultural expectation of either masculinity or femininity. In a scene Rudra tells Partho (essayed by Jishnu Sengupta) who is a new percussionist in the former's dance group: "Most of us are unhappy with what nature gives us. Or guys wouldn't want a macho six pack to become a man; girls wouldn't wax or primp to become woman." His statement invokes the question of what is natural and normal and it also refutes the established notion of masculine and feminine, and resists the idealization of gender norms. Through scenes like this the film seems to problematize the instrumentalized nature of heterosexuality that classifies people into two neatly demarcated binaries-man or woman.

The film maps the desire of Rudra for Partho and the scenes which feature their intimacy are characterised by the overt exhibition of homo erotic bond. In one of the sequences, we see Partho coming to Rudra to present him a new anklet in place of the older one that he picked up and flushed out in an earlier scene. Partho tries to tie the anklet on Rudra's legs. This moment becomes the beginning of their relationship. Partho declares that he won't call Rudra 'sir', instead he likes to call him 'Rudi' and he whispers the word in an erotic tone. While helping Rudra to wear the anklet, Partho touches Rudra's legs and caresses them. The moment he touches Rudra's legs, Rudra seems to be aroused and it is as if he has been waiting for it for a long time. The camera focuses on Rudra's face. His eyes are seen filled with tears. Rudra's heart beats and his entire body shivers as if in a shock. Partho takes Rudra's cheeks in his arms, caressing and massaging it. The sound of the anklet seems to intensify

their intimacy. Suddenly, the scene is transformed to a dance performance in which their body movements are shown celebrating their budding romance and physical affection. Though Rudra is hell bent against Partho's heroin addiction, he is in love with him intensely. This scene is a riveting illustration of transgressive desires.

In another scene, where Rudra makes himself up for the dance show, Partho who has been caught high on with heroin and subsequently banned by Rudra from performing comes to the makeup room. Partho apologises and asks Rudra to search him for heroin. Rudra, while searching his pockets, finds out the bracelet that Partho stole when both were strangers. Partho strugglingly gets back the bracelet and begs Rudra to take it as a token of his love for Rudra. It moves Rudra deeply and the subsequent shots picture the intimacy, affection and love between them. Rudra asks how much he struggled to get it back. Partho's reply is "do you know how pain becomes pleasure?" Rudra asks him to teach it. They seem to forget everything around them and engage in the act of pleasure. Their desire floods with volcanic fervour. As the lines in the backdrop sing, "the melody flows through their body."

The erotically charged body and its desire occupy a key position in the plot. The body has become a location of pleasure as well as a site of critique of and resistance to the category of 'man.' His body and desire take a 'flight' from anything that attest to a particular gender. It becomes sites of signification that goes beyond the marks of dominant heterosexuality. Rejecting one of the overriding assumptions that there is one apt way to do one's body and desire Rudra accentuates the idea that individuals can do their body according to their wish.

We have seen that the film begins with the projection of the subversive potential of Rudra in terms of his body and desire. However, though it also plays with the illusory nature of gender performativity, it misses its path when the issue of procreation/reproduction comes in. The relationship between Rudra and Partho develops to reach a point where they decide to live together. Rudra discovers Partho's fondness for children when his friend Mala visits them with her children. The fact that Rudra would never be capable to bear children and make Partho happy inflicts pain on his mind. Rudra needs a feminine appearance of the body to work out their plans and this crisis is explained by the way the concept of heterosexuality operates in our society and it articulates that the institution of heterosexuality needs to ask the question of reproduction and procreation to regulate 'non-natural' sexuality and desires. This conflict exposes the tortuous and convoluted network of power that restrains some forms of sexuality. And from here onwards the film showcases the conflicts a person experiences with his/her gender identity.

Rudra's desire to live with Partho leads to his decision to undergo gender -reassignment -surgery. Partho seems to be totally against this decision. The debate between them becomes one of the specific queer moments in the film. Partho says that he loves the way Rudra is. Rudra, due to the fear of losing Partho decides to stand by his own decision. While lying in the bed after surgery (breast implants), Rudra narrates his past to his counsellor Shubho (Anjan Dutt who at the end of the film is revealed as a product of Rudra's illusion). Rudra retells the story of Tagore's *Chitrangada* to Shubho. Now Rudra is seen as if in the first transformative stage of *Chitrangada* who pleads Madan, the god of love to make her a beautiful woman to win the heart of Arjuna. But after the breast implants, when Rudra uncovers his bruised body to Partho, the latter seems to be uncomfortable with the former's new appearance. Rudra could not win the heart of Partho who says, "if I long to have a kid, I will have my child, my own blood." Partho adds, "the man I loved is not this half thing, not this synthetic one." After this conversation, Rudra happens to see the intimacy between Partho and Kasturi (Raima Sen) who is a member of Rudra's dance group. He seems to be engulfed in grief. The following lines capture his pain:

"You cover the dying flames with ashes

What game are you in?

O lord of desire!

How long must I be in pain?"

In a succeeding scene when Shubho, the counsellor, visits him, Rudra was seen confused about the final surgery-vaginal transplant. He is reluctant to blame Partho for his sufferings even though in one of the former scenes he lashed out at Partho blaming him for the agony he endures. Rudra makes up his mind to adopt a child alone and seeks out its possibilities. The conversation between Shubho and Rudra exemplifies his state of mind and confusion.

Rudra: I don't know *Chitrangada* well, but do I know Partho well enough? Do I know my parents well, the youngsters in my group?

Shubho; Look at the positive. You got to know yourself.

Rudra: I doubt.

We can see that Rudra is slowly coming to realize that he was perfectly happy the way he once was (as a person who is swinging in between). He is not really pleased with the new appearance he got with breast implants and hormonal

treatments. In this state he is reluctant to see his former lover who comes back to India now. Shubho asks whether he has any problem accepting himself. Rudra replies: “At this stage, probably. But I may overcome.” Shubho tenaciously asks: “What about the child you want to adopt? If you cannot accept yourself, how can the child accept you? You may get over it, but what about the child?” Rudra starts weeping. The repetitive use of mirrors in these scenes is emblematic of the reflection of his confused mind. While gazing at his own reflection in a water tub he gets perplexed and is seen singing lines from Tagore’s text which is accompanied by cupid performance. The metaphoric use of cupid performance, mirrors and the lines from Tagore’s text expose the dilemma he is going through.

The day before the final surgery Shubho and Rudra take an imaginary walk towards the seaside. The scene is set just before the sunrise alluding to the rise of Rudra to a new life.

Shubho: If cupid came to bestow on you a wish, what would you ask for?

Rudra: My wish is to be remembered as an energetic, eccentric, creative dancer.

Shubho: Or the beautifully transformed (*surupa*) Chitrangada?

Rudra: Even that is not permanent, not immortal.

At this moment Rudra receives an anonymous message- the third in succession from the same person. The messenger asks: ‘Why is a building called a building even after it is complete?’ The answer he gets is ‘no transformation is ever complete.’ This becomes the decisive moment of the film. Rudra asks the doctor to call off the surgery and to remove the breast implants. When the implants are being removed, we could see the cupid performance which links us with Tagore’s *Chitrangada*. Chitrangada, after realizing the shallowness of her physical transformation, requests Madan to take away her beautifully transformed body and restore her to the state she was in. Rudra also decides to return to the way he once was. It is symbolically shown with the god of love performing on him. The song says:

“Give me new life, my beloved

This blessed morning

Banish all ills in this new celebration

Clear debris of night in the new dawn...”

Rudra's realization takes us back to the beginning of the film where he interprets the mythical story of Chitrangada as a story of wish- that you are free to select your gender. Rudra's decision to decline the necessity of a feminine appearance to fulfil his desires and to accept his state of in-betweenness troubles the determinate notion of gender identity and, celebrates the fluidity of sexuality. This realization demystifies the fallacy of a stable and finite gender. Rudra's final decision after receiving the message eloquently pronounces the idea that one's identity is always in the process of 'becoming' and it cannot be categorized and labelled. We can see that the film takes great caution not to name Rudra a man, female or gay and it explores the contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality. The film seems to throw the binary homosexuality/ heterosexuality into a crisis. Demonstrating the assumed congruence between biological body and its acts/wishes is a myth the film dismantles the predominant idea around sexuality, desire and gender.

### **Autobiographical Tendencies in the Film (Enquiry into the Self)**

The film interlocks personal sentiments into a form of myth and fantasy. The director of the film Rituparno Ghosh has said in an interview that the 'film is a retrospective trip to his life' (ibnlive.in.com, 2012). Rituparno depends on fiction and fantasy in the process of self-reflection. His self has become the best subject for Rituparno to work on. Even though the film cannot claim to have the features of classic autobiography, elements of the genre can be traced. The following part will summarize discourses on classic autobiography versus cinematic autobiography and the possibilities for fiction in autobiography.

Cinematic autobiography has not emerged as a distinct film genre in its own right. Scholars like Elizabeth Bruss (1980), Philippe Lejeune (1989), and de Man (1979) have engaged in a discussion on the possibility of cinematic autobiography. The main questions addressed are how a collective work of art can be recognized as the autobiographical work of an individual and whether fiction and imagination play any role in autobiography. Elizabeth Bruss (1980, p. 301) demonstrates that in film the three parameters of canonical autobiography are upset; namely the truth value, act value and identity value. She calls for a redefinition of not only autobiography but also the construction of selfhood, considering the possibilities of various modes of expression such as film and video.

Paul John Eakin (1985) asks whether we should insist that autobiographical discourse be pure, untainted by the fictional other which it already inhabits? His answer is no. His argument is based on the proposition that fiction and fiction making process are central constituents of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life. Arguments like these emphasize

the role played by imagination and fiction in truth telling process which leads to self-invention. William Hope (2005, p.27-52) classified cinematic autobiography into two- explicit and implicit. In the explicit autobiography, directors play themselves using their own names, situating the film in their own city, whereas implicit autobiography does not announce itself as the filmmaker's autobiography, but autobiographical elements can be traced in it. The proof of its autobiographical nature is embedded in the extra cinematic elements. Hope (2005) says that there is no clear boundary between the two as they often overlap with each other. The film *Chitrangada: The crowning wish* displays autobiographical propensities and fits into the category of implicit even though some of the features of explicit autobiographical elements can be seen. The actor and the filmmaker are one and the same. The director Rituparno Ghosh himself played as the main character Rudra Chatterjee. The film is located in Rituparno's hometown Kolkata and is largely based on a part of his own life. This paper attempts to show how the filmmaker expresses himself through the medium of film and inserts his own subjectivity into it. Rituparno uses the title of Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* and he adds the supplementary 'the crowning wish' to it, as an appropriate for his own wish.

Rituparno Ghosh is a person who comes out of the closet and overtly discloses his sexuality often. Rituparno uses kajal, wears ear rings and jewels. His off-screen appearance is identical to Rudra's on-screen presence. Neither of his appearances- off-screen or on-screen carries the signs of masculinity or femininity. In the film Rudra's character says to the doctor that he is not going to wear *sari* post-surgery. When the nurse addresses him as 'sir', Rudra tells her about the purpose for which he endures the surgical procedure and when she corrects herself by calling Rudra 'ma'am', Rudra insists her to call him simply 'Rudra.'

Ghosh's close friends often have said about the ostracism he faced in terms of the gender identity as well as the sexual orientation he possesses and how he ignored it. In the film Rudra's words to Shubho at the end part of the film reflects the pain he suffered due to his effeminate character. But in some stages of his life Rituparno experienced a kind of conflict in terms of his gender. 'Filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh was adamant on changing his sex', says Prosenjit Chatterjee, one of his close friends, even though Rituparno Ghosh was reluctant to be clear on this matter (newseastwest.com, 2013). After the death of Ghosh, newspapers reported quoting his doctor that Rituparno had undergone surgeries like abdominal plasty and breast augmentation before the shooting of *Arekti Premer Golpo* (a 2010 Bengali film directed by Kaushik Ganguly in which Rituparno Ghosh plays the role of a gay filmmaker.) The film *Chitrangada* maps the conflicts and struggles of a person who at some



stage of his life decides to consider the option of gender-reassignment-surgery. When the film starts Rudra's breast implantation and hormonal treatments are already finished.

The film utilizes the possibilities of fiction and cinematic drama to portray the lived experience of Rituparno. It is illustrative of how one can engage with one's self through the medium of cinema. As Susanna Eagan (1984, p.20) pointed out, such explorations through cinema can be considered as a "manipulation of lived experience by giving it a beginning, middle and an end." The director belongs to a group of marginalized section. He makes a film based on his conflict and it opens up a new avenue for queer autobiography in film. The film takes conflict, as what Paul Ricoeur conceptualized, as the 'function of man's most primordial constitution: this is a conflict within man between his self and his others, his character and his personality, his thinking and his feeling, etc.' (Karl Simms, 2003, p.33). Through the fictional text *Chitrangada*, the filmmaker experiences and brings into effect the possibility of self-invention.

At this point, it seems to be productive to understand more about how the film narrative has become an inescapable form of understanding of the self. Rudra's character is presented as a transforming self which undergoes changes and shifts and is seen as a lonely traveller taking a journey for self-retrospection. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* the paper tries to argue that narrating one's story constitutes an integral part of understanding one's self and identity. For Ricoeur (1984, p.3) "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience." This idea of narrative stresses how significant our memory and imagination are in the narratives that we produce about our lives and experiences. The following part will show the ways through which the film/filmmaker makes an engagement with his self.

The narrative strategy of the film often relies on the conversation between Rudra and Shubho, a figment of his hallucinatory imagination- a character the director created to narrate his story. As Shubho is the product of his hallucination, the film can be seen in the form of a monologue narrated by the actor to tell the story. It can be seen as Rituparno (who is effeminate) speaking to his masculine self. This narration leads him to realize the nature of human existence, his identity and his real wish. Rudra narrates his memory to Shubho. The opening scene of the film shows Rudra lying on a hospital bed post-surgery, waiting for the final vaginal transplantation. The hospital bed has become a site to reflect upon him. In *Chitrangada*, the narrative takes back and forth movements between past and present, real and imaginary. In the film

when Shubho who visits Rudra at the hospital asks him about Partho, Rudra recalls Partho's entry into the dance group as a new member. The hospital scene is cut to the dance rehearsal camp where Partho comes when Rudra trains his dancer Kasturi. The moment Rudra sees Partho his memory goes back to another incident when Partho stole his bracelet once. To bring the idea home to us, the filmmaker often employs the technique of a 'flashback within a flashback'. Many times, Rudra and Shubho take imaginary journeys to the places where Partho and Rudra spent their time in the past. When Rudra remembers how he enjoyed time with Partho near seaside, we can see Shubho and Rudra walking along the seaside watching the meeting of Rudra and Partho. Rudra occupies many places at the same time.

We see that the film depicts Rudra's present as framed by his memory of the past and horizon of expectation. Memory and expectations are the processes taking place in the present. That is the nature of the three-fold present explained by Augustine and later developed by Ricoeur. Ricoeur (1991, p.31) writes:

Augustine, in this famous treatise on time, sees time as born out of the incessant dissociation between the three aspects of the present-expectation, which he calls the present of the future, memory which he calls the present of the past, and attention which is the present of the present (1991, p.31).

In the film, though not depicted explicitly, Rudra's expectations of the future are vivid from his words to Shubho. At the beginning of the film, he is hopeful of the surgery and dreams a life with Partho. When the unexpected turn of events shatters his dream, he hopes to adopt the child alone. Even when suffering with pain after surgery, we can see Rudra practicing dance movements in the hospital room. He works out to maintain his body that is essential for him to continue his dance.

We can see that narrating or remembering the past plays an important role in his existence in the present. Narrating his story to Shubho helps Rudra to realize that only he is responsible for his actions and there is no point in blaming Partho for his sufferings. The conversation between Shubho and Rudra plays a crucial role in the development of the events. It helps him to take a kind of self- introspection that leads him to realize the impermanence of things and also to the exploration of the nature of human self. The mythical element is also utilized greatly to give meaning to the story. The filmmaker symbolically uses the story of Tagore's *Chitrangada* to reflect upon the changes, transformation and realization happened to Rudro. The metaphorical staging of cupid performance in the background whenever he undergoes

surgery highlights the transformation, he has like the mythical Chitrangada. The filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh explores the possibilities of the medium of film to look back and to understand his self.

At the end of the film Rudra chooses to remain the same by abandoning his desire to become feminine. This conflict seems to be philosophical as it brings forth the nature of the self. This conflict can be understood in the backdrop of Paul Ricoeur's (1992) idea of the nature of the human self. From the character development in a narrative Ricoeur derives the theory of the internal dialectic of the human self. In the narrative there are two kinds of selves: a self that remains stable and consistent, which he calls 'idem' or 'sameness' and a self that subjects to constant change and transformation which he calls 'ipse' or 'selfhood' or 'ipseity' (Hengel, 1994, p. 458-80). These two selves are in constant interaction and 'the human self is constituted precisely in this dialectic of 'sameness' and 'ipseity' (ibid.). 'Idem' underscores the truthfulness and honesty to oneself in spite of all the changes and transformations which mark the course of life.

It means, individuals are subject to constant physical and psychological changes and are led to transform in the course of life history. Continuous changes and transformations are inescapable part of one's identity. This fact is echoed in the film many times-the metaphorical use of building alludes to a notion that transformations never complete-it is an ongoing process. But at the same time, one has an urge to attain some degree of sameness or stability over time. As Rudra's words to Shubho at the end of the film reflect, he wishes to be the same energetic, creative dancer that is the core of his personality. That is Rudra's crowning wish. He can move on with his 'non-natural' desires and wishes without getting a feminine appearance. One can be true to oneself even when transformations happen. The journey to Rudra's realization underlines this tension between what changes and what remains the same over time.

In the film the interplay between 'ipse' and 'idem', between stability and instability defines Rudra's existence. Without these two kinds of identities there is no self. So, the character's confrontation between 'ipse' and 'idem' constitutes the philosophy of the film. And it is the philosophy of human existence as well.

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