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PERFORMING 'GENDER': THE DRAMATIST'S PROPOSITION IN *CHITRA* AND THE DIRECTOR'S REJOINDER IN *CHITRANGADA*

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Abstract

The paper focuses primarily on the problematic gender-fixity and tries to show how the two texts—one literary and another cinematic—highlights, almost in a similar manner like Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, the gender fluidity or rather the notion of ''becoming'' over ''being''. In the act of performing the conventions of reality, we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary. By enacting conventions, we do make them "real" to some extent (after all, our ideologies have "real" consequences for people) but that does not make them any less artificial. This paper is an attempt to study Tagore's notion of performing the motivated gender through the medley of a corresponding body, while taking into consideration Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic adoption, Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish. Rabindranath Tagore wrote a Bangla one act verse-play titled, Chitrangada but while translating that, he entitled the one-act English play as Chitra. Henceforth, Chitra and Chitrangada would denote Tagore's and Rituparno's work respectively.

Bound up within parental fantasies long before the child is ever born, the child's body is divided along lines of special meaning or significance, independent of biology. The body is lived in accordance with an individual's and a culture's concepts of biology.

---- Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*

There are different modes of being genderqueer, and it is an evolving concept. Some believe they are a little of both or feel they have no gender at all. Others believe that gender is a social construct, and choose not to adhere to that construct. Some genderqueers do fit into the stereotypical gender roles expected of their sex, but still reject gender as a social construct. Still other people identify as genderqueer since, though they are cisgendered [a neologism meaning 'not transgender'], they do not fit many of society's expectations for the gender in which they identify.

- J. Nestle, C. Howell and R. Wilchins, *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*

Introduction

The Poststructural / Postcolonial theories have argued that the body is a cultural construct rather than a natural entity. This argument is based on the assumption that there is no unalloyed body with singular signification, but there are bodies on which a multiplicity of meanings is inscribed and enforced. The responsibility of this 'inscription' lies in the agencies that hold power in a culture, and the infused meanings will consequently facilitate the ideologies of such agencies. In other words, the bodies of a certain culture are the 'embodiment' of the ideas of those who hold power in that culture. The corporality of the body, in this sense, is a cultural site, in which the subtle ideologies are deftly imposed, and accordingly the 'correct'/ 'sanctioned' desire is expected to germinate, as a signifier of the aspired 'gender'. Hence, gender becomes performance. Judith Butler goes far as to argue that gender, as an objective natural thing, does not exist: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 278). By endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact the reality; in the performative act of speaking, we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our bodies, but that "reality" nonetheless remains a social construction (at one step removed from what Lacan distinguishes from reality by the term, "the Real"). In the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying those fictions in our actions, we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary. By enacting conventions, we do make them "real" to some extent (after all, our ideologies have "real" consequences for people) but that does not make them any less artificial. Judith Butler, while concerning with those "gender acts" that similarly lead to material changes in one's existence and even in one's bodily self, has stated: "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well". ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 272). This paper is an attempt to study Tagore's notion of performing the motivated gender through the medley of a corresponding body, while taking into consideration Rituparno Ghosh's cinematic adoption, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. Rabindranath Tagore wrote a Bangla one act verse-play titled, *Chitrangada* but while translating that, he entitled the one-act English play as *Chitra*. Henceforth, *Chitra* and *Chitrangada* would denote Tagore's and Rituparno's work respectively.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra*: Performing the ''Conditioned'' Gender

The preface to Chitra declares the plot's association with a story of Mahabharata. Prabhanjana, one of the Manipuri kings happened to be childless and he went for severe penances for obtaining an heir. Pleased with austerities, Lord Shiva promised him, along with his successors, to have a single child to perpetuate the race. As the play opens, Chitra reiterates this before the two gods, Madana (Eros) and Vasanta (Lycoris):

> I am Chitra, the daughter of the kingly house of Manipur. With godlike grace Lord Shiva promised to my royal grandsire an unbroken line of male descent. Nevertheless, the divine

> word proved powerless to change the spark of life in my mother's womb—so invincible was my nature, woman though I be. (*Chitra*, 6)

Madana replies,

> I know, that is why thy father brings thee up as his son. He has taught thee the use of the bow and all the duties of a king. (*Chitra*, 6)

Chitra asserts at length:

> Yes, that is why I am dressed in man's attire and have left the seclusion of a woman's chamber. I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but I have never learnt Cupid's archery, the play of eyes. (*Chitra*, 7)

The beginning of the play shows how Chitra has been 'conditioned' to be masculine. Her very birth as opposed to the wish of god (a surrogate father symbolically) as well as her biological father-king, on one hand shows the victory of *Prakriti* (the feminine principle behind all creation) over *Purush*, yet on the other hand, her conditioned upbringing as a 'son' shows how the patriarchal(hegemonic) desire gets forcefully manifested by imposing Chitra with the cultural markers cum ambience of a 'male', right from her infancy, when she can hardly voice her own inclination regarding this entire assignment of 'becoming' a 'man'. Tagore's notion of gender, as reflected through this 'conditioned' upbringing of Chitra, acts like a prologue to Butler's formulation of gender to be "*a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 272). That style has no relation to essential "truths" about the body but is strictly ideological. It has a history that exists beyond the subject who enacts those conventions:

> The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 272)

Chitra meets Arjuna, who in the course of his wanderings, in fulfilment of a vow of penance, has reached Manipur. The noble ambition in her, fed with youthful fantasies, to meet the greatest hero of the five Pandava brothers and to "break a lance with him, to challenge him in disguise to a single combat and prove her skill in arms against him" (*Chitra*, 7) is the true outcome of her early social engineering; but the woman in her, irresistible at the meeting of "the fervent gaze that almost grasps you like the clutching hands of the hungry spirit within," (*Chitra*, 9) responds to the instinctive call of love and next day Chitra comes in search of Arjuna with an altered 'womanly' attire:

> Next morning I laid aside my man's clothing. I donned bracelets, anklets, waist-chain, and a gown of purple red silk. The unaccustomed dress clung about my shrinking shame! (*Chitra*, 7)

The shame gets mixed with determination when Arjuna declines her plainly: "I am not fit to be thy husband!" (*Chitra*, 7). She pleases gods with her 'penance and mortification' and claims:

> For a single day make me superbly beautiful, even as beautiful as was the sudden blooming of love in my heart. Give me but one brief day of perfect beauty, and I will answer for the days that follow. (*Chitra*, 8)

Vasanta, however, granted her a year-long blessing of feminine-charisma:

> Not for the short span of a day, but for one whole year the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs. (*Chitra*, 8)

Chitra appears before Arjuna, and with little effort mesmerises him with sweet blossoming of her youth and the tender bloom and blush of her skin. Giving up his previous vow of celibacy for twelve years, he continues to woo her till they attain an impeccable unification where "Heaven and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life merged together in an unbearable ecstasy."(*Chitra*, 12). Chitra, far from being gratified, displays despair and dejection. She has never been at ease with her feminine role. Conditioned to be raised as a male, she has internalized the notion of femininity as the 'other' of whatever is masculine, for even while asking the feminine-charm from gods, she portrays 'female' in typical patriarchal deteriorative terms:

> I am not the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence, feeding it with nightly tears and covering it with the daily patient smile, a widow from her birth. (*Chitra*, 8)

Even after the moment of her magical transformation which compels Arjuna to beg for her compassion, she fails to relish her own external charms, for despite her performing of her 'birth' role of the female, she is more habituated, through internalization, to play better, the 'conditioned' masculine role—inwardly she is masculine:

> Oh, shame upon you! What have you seen in me that makes you false to yourself? Whom do you seek in these dark eyes, in these milk-white arms, if you are ready to pay for her the price of your probity? Not my true self, I know. (*Chitra*, 11)

The newly-scripted body has always been unreal for Chitra—it's a dream, an illusion, a product of/for *maya*. Immediately after being united with Arjuna, she realizes the futility of the love-making, for Arjuna is all for her performing of the 'feminine' which, in a sexist mode, she always condemns: "I looked about me and saw the same old earth. I remembered what I used to be, and ran and ran like a deer afraid of her own shadow, through the forest path strewn with shephali flowers. I found a lonely nook, and sitting down covered my face with both hands, and tried to weep and cry." (*Chitra*, 12). She can hardly cope herself up with this newly self-assigned role: "Heaven came so close to my hand that I forgot for a moment that it had not reached me. But when I woke in the morning from my dream I found that my body had become my own rival. It is my hateful task to deck her every day, to send her to my beloved and see her caressed by him. O god, take back thy boon!" (*Chitra*, 12). Several feminist theories including Liberal, Cultural and Radical have been influential in articulating the various ways that traditional gender role socialization supports sexism and limits a person's potential. For example, Liberal feminism postulates that the cause of sexism is a result of rigid gender role socialization and irrational prejudices about the inferiority of women in relation to men, Cultural feminism posits that sexism stems from devaluation of feminine characteristics and relational qualities, and Radical feminism postulates that the cause of sexism is male domination, patriarchy, male control over women's bodies, and the

systemic devaluation of women (Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998). Although these various feminist theories differ in their conceptualizations of gender based oppression, they all point to the need to transform traditional gender role socialization practices that restrict the range of traits and behaviours that are culturally acceptable and that maintain sexism (Worell & Remer, 2003). Consistent with feminist theory and empirical studies on gender role conflict, Chitra through her crisis reveals how, the gender role conflict is related to self-esteem, and that self-esteem is directly and indirectly (through avoidant coping) related to psychological distress. This relationship suggests that O'Neil's (1981) notion of "a learned fear of femininity" is important not only to men's lives but also to those who are nurtured to internalize the patriarchal hegemonic norms. Chitra has been taught to learn this 'fear of femininity' through her conditioning of a 'boy' which she can hardly overcome, even though she a girl by birth; her internalization of patriarchal (hyper)masculinity forbids her to enjoy the performing of the 'feminine' that she has opted for, voluntarily. Hence, Chitra's restoring of her 'masculine' 'veer' role exposes the victory of the patriarchal desire—both of Shiva and her father, and Arjuna eventually learns to value that more than 'sringara': "I seem to see her, in my mind's eye, riding on a white horse, proudly holding the reins in her left hand, and in her right a bow, and like the Goddess of Victory dispensing glad hope all round her. Like a watchful lioness she protects the litter at her dugs with a fierce love." (*Chitra*, 18). Though a sort of 'androgyny' has been tried to be proposed by Rabindranath towards the end of the play, with Chitra uttering the following lines:

> My lord, I am that woman. She was my disguise. Then by the boon of gods I obtained for a year the most radiant form that a mortal ever wore, and wearied my hero's heart with the burden of that deceit. Most surely I am not that woman....I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self. (*Chitra*, 19)

yet her very 'otherizing' of the 'feminine'—"shake myself free from this voluptuous softness, this timid bloom of beauty shrinking from the rude and healthy touch of the world, and fling it from my body like borrowed clothes" (*Chitra*, 18)—ultimately projects the patriarchy as a successful regulatory in Chitra's 'conditioned' performing of gender.

Rituparno's *Chitrangada*: Performing 'Gender' as a Preference

Chitrangada, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, is the account of a son's wish (Rudra, played by the director himself) as opposed to that of his father's need. Rudra is busy in directing the dance-drama of Tagore when suddenly he comes across Partha (played by Jishu Sengupta), and there begins just another love story. Initially it might appear that Rudra's wish to become a 'woman' is abrupt for it lacks the portrayal of gradual evolution. However, the film has ample subtle indications of Rudra being a transgender. Being a cross-dresser, he is always seen with round hanging ear-rings, deep brown lipstick, kajal as well as eye-shadow even

during his usual dinner with his parents at home. Judith Long Laws and Pepper Schwartz in their work titled *Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Female Sexuality* has talked of sexual categorization as 'sexual scripts'. This script theory determines identity as an activity/performance rather than emerging through some activities along with revealing the nature of 'scripting' as they emerge through socio-political-cultural encounters. This study of the constructed binary division of character-structuring is important in the sense that *historically*, it investigates how the 'scripts' have generated due to various cultural intersections; *socially*, it ponders how people have come to use the 'sexual scripting' for social ends, chiefly for social subjugation and repression; and moreover, *personally*, this 'script theory' investigates the psychic pattern of the individual either in his/her confirming to or reaction against the manufacturing of stereotypes. Rudra's mother confesses that as parents, they never allowed Rudra to be himself; they always wanted him to be someone they would have liked to see. In Rituparno's film, the son's insistence to take up the conventionally 'feminine' role of a dancing figure on stage by forsaking his career of an engineer, along with his gender-blended make-up, shows how Rudra has been engaged inwardly with his investigation of his psychic pattern along with the scripting of his future-positioning. Commenting on Simone de Beauvoir's statement that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, Judith Butler says,

> There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female. (*Gender Trouble*, 12)

Rudra therefore, has already engaged himself with the process of becoming a woman just as any female becomes a woman: by taking on the cultural markers of womanhood.

Confessing to his counselor, Rudra accepts that the common trait of being 'excluded' has played the major role in connecting him with Partha: "I have suffered ostracism myself for being effeminate; people made fun of me. I thought if I could help him a bit". The effeminate-male gets 'otherized' by the mainstream for their visible violation of the hypermasculine norm, prescribed by the patriarchy. As Michael Kimmel has noted:

> The masculinity that defines middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting. (*Theorizing masculinities*, 124)

Rudra's desire of undertaking a gender reassignment surgery gets prominent with his discovery that Partha is extremely fond of children—being himself physiologically 'boy' Rudra cannot provide Partha with an offspring; moreover as same-sex couples, they cannot adopt a child legally. Despite his father's resistance, Rudra goes in for breast implant. *Chitra's* Madana becomes the cosmetic surgeon under Ghosh's bio-medical treatment of the body. On one hand, this bio-medical discourse seems to reinforce the fixity of gender/sex stereotypes, yet on the other hand, it assists in one's tangible playing of his/her preferred gender. Most remarkable, however, is when Rudra's mother, after his breast-implantation, says: "I gave birth to this body, which is yours… I have a right to know, whatever goes on in this body. I have a right to know, if it is changing, transforming…". This opening up of the patriarchal agency, as opposed to the conventional appearance of the non-heterosexual

individual out of the 'closet', marks the victory of Rudra's individual preference of performing-gender. The restrains, however are not fully washed out, for the father informs of the curtains that need to be installed with the apparent motif of embellishing Rudra's room, while the factual objective is to hide his post-operated son from public gaze. Rudra's post-operated body, which is yet not fully transformed, becomes the intersexual signifier of scripted-gender as opposed to the pre-given notion of biological-sex.

The implication of Butler's (brief, but significant) discussion of intersexuality is that norms prescribing sexual duality are illegitimate because they truncate, stultify, and compress the inherent diversity and internal multiplicity of corporeal forces, forces whose growth and vitality are to be desired. This critical implication becomes apparent in *Gender Trouble*'s 1999 preface, in which Butler advocates a politics that seeks to

> transcend the simple categories of identity ... [and] that will counter and dissipate the violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms (*Gender Trouble*, xxvi).

Partha visits Rudra, only to feel repealed by the latter's intersexuality, for he is comfortable only with those body-identities that remain within the limits of the customary binary. Partha can make love with either a male-body or a female-body. Rudra is shattered and condemns Partha for his inconsiderateness, although later, to Shubho his counsellor, he admits that he could not blame Partha for the honest claim of his preferences. Relating the audience with a huge gamut of desires, the film concludes in an open ended manner by declaring the sudden change in Rudra's decision on the day of the final surgery. The mysterious text message that interrogates 'Why do you call a Building, a building, even when it is complete?' serves as the only clue. Perhaps Rudra, after the assertion of his preferred body and performing of the desired gender, realises that the body as a mortal being, is in a permanent state of flux and moreover, to give it the perfect shape of a 'woman' is to enter into the domain of compulsive heteronormativity. Whatever must have been the reason, Rudra's experiments with his body, initiated by his subjective choice and preferences of performing the gender-blender, gets highlighted in Rituparno's *Chitrangada* unlike Tagore's rendering of a 'conditioned' gender performing in *Chitra*. In the post-surgery scene, when Rudra goes to washroom basin, and in a mode of stream of consciousness, readily reaches on the stage to play "Chitrangada", and looks at his reflection on a large bowl of water, the Narcissus myth immediately comes to our mind. The film thus becomes the metaphorical tale of the director/actor's fixation and conquering of his subjective issues related to sex/gender performativity. For Judith Butler, gender is an endless process of 'becoming' which has neither origin, nor end, for it is something that we 'do' rather than 'are—gender is ultimately a question of continuous choice. ("Variations on Sex and Gender", 129). Rudra in *Chitrangada* 'does' his gender as per his subjective wishes—'gender' is for him a nomadic activity marked by fixity-resistant flux, ever flitting amongst the marked and labelled patriarchal sites of gender on the regulatory and fictive map—and thereby demonstrates gender, as performing the preference.

Conclusion

Guided by our commonsense, we may start believing that our subjectivity is the source of our actions; but Butler contends that our sense of independent, self-willed subjectivity is really a retroactive construction that comes about only through the enactment of social conventions:

> Gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 279)

True to Butler's observation, both Chitra in Tagore's play and Rudra in Ghosh's film demonstrate the heteronormative hold of the society even on the celebrated rebels. Despite the characters' endeavour to 'do' the sex/gender constructions differently, the desire of alternative performance in both the cases germinate out of a deep-rooted heterosexual matrix: both Chitra and Rudra want to change, primarily out of a reproductive drive. In Tagore's *Chitra*, the pursuit of a son provokes the protagonist to continue with her superfluous effeminacy and finally her anguish gets rewarded. Moreover, it is the promise of a macho son, well trained by the mannish mother that must have added to Arjuna's easy acceptance of a manly Chitra. In Rituparno's *Chitrangada*, Rudra's desire to provide Partha with kids, triggers off the decision to undertake a sex reassignment surgery; the plan ultimately proves to be failure, which in turn symbolically reveals how impossible it is for same-sex couples to continue in a sheer hostile setting. Even while talking of gender-performativity, Bulter has cautioned us by revealing that gender is not just a performing-process, but it is a particular type of process, "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame". (Gender *Trouble*, 33). The script is always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of costumes from which s/he has to make a constrained choice of gender style. Nevertheless, the merit of the individual, according to Butler, lies in the 'parody' of the discursive determinants: it must be possible to 'act' that gender in ways which will draw attention to the constructedness of binary identities that may have a vested interest in presenting themselves as 'essential' and 'natural', so that it would be true to say that all gender is a form of parody, but the greater the parody, the better are the performances of gender. (*Gender Trouble*, 137-38). Following Butler's logic, despite the regulatory gender-performances of Chitra and Rudra within the 'reproductive' matrix of heteronormative discourse, yet unlike Chitra who incorporates the patriarchal hypermasculine anxiety and thereby detests the feminine role-play, Rudra provides a greater resistance to and a better parodic performance of gender performativity, rendering it ultimately, to be a comfortable fluid one.

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