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Research Article

From Chitrāngadā to চিত্রাঙ্গদা to Chitrangada: Gender Performativity and Bodily Transformation in South Asian Literature and Cinema

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Abstract: This paper explores the myth of Chitrāngadā as reimagined across South Asian literary and cinematic landscapes – from the Mahabharata to Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama *চিত্রাঙ্গদা* (1905) and Rituparno Ghosh's film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) – to examine the performative politics of gender identity. Using Judith Butler's framework of performativity and transformativity, the paper investigates how gender ambiguity and bodily transformation challenge heteronormative structures. Chitrāngadā's depiction shifts from the epic's gender-role transgression through Tagore's theatrical exploration of transformation to Ghosh's cinematic engagement with gender reassignment surgery. Central to this discussion is whether bodily transformation signifies heterosexual conformity or genuinely alters the queer psyche. The paper asserts that each reappropriation questions the stability of gender categories, revealing how both performative acts and bodily changes paradoxically destabilise rather than reinforce gender identity. By tracing this lineage from epic to screen, the paper demonstrates how cultural texts both uphold and challenge normative gender discourses, offering a South Asian perspective on the intricate relationship between body, performance, desire, and identity.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, South Asian Cinema, Rabindranath Tagore, Rituparno Ghosh, Transformativity, Chitrāngadā.

INTRODUCTION

The re-enactment of the myth of Chitrāngadā in different literary and visual terrains vouches for the South Asian psychological mapping towards transgender individuals, be it in the form of performative display of behaviour or bodily transformation. Starting from *Mahabharata* through Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama *Chitrangada* (1905) till Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 film, *Chitrangada,* the myth of Chitrangada has been reappropriated incorporating different issues, for example, matriarchy (as a form of resistance to patriarchy), queer performativity of the body, and bodily transformation (cosmetic surgery, gender reassignment surgery) as a means of heteronormative conformity. The question of gender-specific role and performance has predominantly disturbed the performers – Chitrangada in Tagore's *চিত্রাঙ্গদা* and Rudra in Ghosh's *Chitrangada*. Moreover, such bodily transformation or gender performativity has also caused dysphoric reception of the performers by other character(s). Chitrangada's 'effeminisation' in Tagore's play and Rudra's attempt at gender reassignment surgery in Ghosh's film further problematize their gender ambiguity. Thus, the chemistry between the body and its performativity both determines and perplexes gender demarcation. This paper locates the re-imagined gender identity of Chitrāngadā-myth depicted in literary and cultural reappropriations. In doing so, it looks into the transformative impact of the gender performativity in the performer, the audience, and other characters s/he interacts with. Complementing the aforementioned focus, this paper investigates (i) if transformation is an act of heterosexual conformity, or (ii) if performative transformation or bodily transformation can transform the (queer) psyche, i.e. desire and perception of gender.

Through a Butlerian lens, this paper argues that the Chitrāngadā myth serves as a generative site for interrogating the contingency and fluidity of gender categories across South Asian cultural productions. Rather than resolving into fixed identities, each reappropriation of the myth reveals how both performative display and bodily transformation paradoxically destabilise gender determinism while simultaneously confronting the pressures of heteronormative conformity. The genealogical trajectory—from epic narrative through theatrical performance to cinematic representation—demonstrates how cultural texts participate in an ongoing negotiation between normative gender regulation and queer possibility. Each iteration of Chitrāngadā troubles the binary logic of masculine/feminine, revealing what Butler terms the "contingency" of gender while exposing the psychic costs of attempting to achieve gender coherence through transformation. This paper contends that the persistent return to Chitrāngadā's story across centuries and media itself testifies to the unresolvability of the gender problematic it stages. The next section of this paper deals with a metanarrative delineation of the Chitrāngadā in the Mahabharata and how such a myth initiates a third-wave feminist discursive conflict (gender-role determinism) within the matrimonial milieu.

Theoretical Framework: Performativity, Transformativity, and Gender Contingency

To analyse the re-imagined iterations of Chitrāngadā myth, this paper employs Judith Butler's theoretical apparatus of performativity and transformativity as articulated in Gender Trouble and subsequent works. Butler's framework proves particularly generative for understanding how gender operates across the textual, theatrical, and cinematic representations of Chitrāngadā precisely because it refuses essentialist notions of gender identity while attending to the material and psychic consequences of gender performance. The concept of performativity allows us to examine how Chitrāngadā's masculinity in the Mahabharata, her aesthetic transformation in Tagore's drama, and Rudra's attempted bodily modification in Ghosh's film all constitute gender not as an interior essence but as a 'stylised repetition of acts' that produce the illusion of gender coherence. Equally crucial is Butler's notion of transformativity – the capacity of performative acts to transform not only the performer but also those who witness, interact with, or consume such performances. This dual framework enables an examination of how each iteration of the Chitrāngadā narrative both performs and potentially transforms our understanding of gender possibilities and limitations.

Thinking 'Body': Representing Chitrāngadā in Mahabharata

Chitrāngadā was formed in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* as the daughter of the Manipur king Chitrabhahana. As the legend says, being enchanted by the beauty of Chitrāngadā, Arjun, the warrior asked for the hand of Chitrāngada from her father. The kingly line of ancestry has long been childless, and hence, Shiva has given the boon that each successor of King Prabhanjana will have a child. It has invariably been a male child until Chitrabahana had the daughter Chitrāngadā to perpetuate the race. Hence, Chitrāngadā's father brought her up as his son and made her his heir, teaching the art of war, archery and other fighting skills expected from the man-ruler. When Arjuna asked to marry her, Chitrāngadā's father agreed on one match-making condition that after begetting a son, Arjuna cannot claim the custody and leave the son to perpetuate the kingship. (Vyasa 2009, p. 109). Arjuna then lived for three years in Chitrabahana's capital and, after the birth of his son, took leave from the kingdom to continue with his adventurous wanderings. In the epic narrative, Chitrāngadā is portrayed with a hint of transgression of the normative gender role. Her military skills, exhibition of courage and vigour are discursively significant and potentially with further appropriation and adaptation, attempts made by writers, film directors like Rabindranath Tagore and Rituparno Ghosh. Her father's consideration for equal *primogeniture* [1], for the state of Manipur made him different (somehow strange) from the kingdom of Hastinipur and opened up for a re-construction of our ideas of inheritance and its gender fixity. Such feminist preoccupation with equality in monarchic distribution challenges the structuralist patriarchal discourses of lineage. Chitrabahana's utterance regarding Chitrāngadā – "আমার কন্যা হয়েছে, তাকেই আমি পুত্র গণ্য করি" ("she is a *putrika* [2]") leads us to a non-deterministic pluralism of gender identity, and Chitrāngadā's lesson and performance of martial art enhances the performative framework of gender identity as proposed by Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. Though Chitrāngadā in the epic by no means does look like a man (in a different edition of *Mahabharata*, she is described using feminine attributes such as *charudarshona* and *bararoha*; i.e. good looking and well-proportioned), Chitrabahana's act of raising her as *putrika* (gender-neutral term) and fantasising her as *putra* (son) both engage the androgynous potential of the Chitrāngadā episode. In Chitrabahana's utterance, "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" (Ganguly 1883-1896: 421), even if the bodily transformation is not hinted at, the psychological fantasy (*bhabana* in Sanskrit, i.e., fancy) of Chitrāgandā's father involves a performative problematic in Chitrāngadā's subject position and therefore in the metanarrative. The linguistic flexibility of the term "putrika" also incorporates the fluidity of gender and an implied acceptance of variation in our gender perception. Both the mental passing-on of Chitrāngadā as male by her father and her successful adoption of so-called 'masculine' physical art are instrumental in queering the field of gender discourse. Marking the shift from text to stage, next section attempts an understanding of the appropriation of the Chitrāngadā myth on the stage of the early twentieth-century gender-role deterministic society.

Rethinking Body: Appropriating Chitrāngadā in *চিত্রাঙ্গদা*

Tagore's 1892 dance-drama adds semantic layers to the legend of Arjuna and Chitrangada by making their desire ambiguous and also by supplementing the mere matrimonial implication of the Chitrāngadā myth by queer psychosomatic

entanglements, which incorporate the notion of gender-deterministic sartorial adornments and aspects of cross-dressing. By turning Chitrangada from merely a dependent on her father regarding the matrimonial decision to a more present, performative, and interactive individual in the plot, Tagore modernised and foregrounded the gender problematic. On one hand, he added dance and music to the Chitrāngadā episode to render it more theatrical, while on the other, he redrew the gender boundaries of masculinity and femininity to exploit the "aporetic moment of the original episode" (Banerji, 2015, p. 180). In Tagore's translation of ***চিত্রাঙ্গদা***(*Chitra*)**,** he revised the semiotics of divinity (divine boon) of Shiva with signs like 'powerless', thus endorsing a more human agency. Tagore made -Chitrangada utter that "the divine word proved powerless to change the spark of life in [her] mother's womb- so invincible was [her] nature, woman though [she] be." (*Chitra* 3). Moreover, the inclusion of gods like Madana (*Kamadeva*, Eros) and Vasanta (Lycoris) sheds light on the agency and question of *rupantar* (transformation, metamorphosis).

Chitrāngadā, born as a female, is brought up like a 'man', taught the art of war and is considered to be the protector of Manipur. Her skill in archery, manly attire and performance as a warrior led her to be mistaken as a man by Arjuna. Tagore metamorphosed her into *kurupa* (ugly, a stereotype for the manly woman devoid of feminine charm) unless Madana/*Kamadev* turns her into *surupa* (embodying female charm). Chitrangada swings between the gender-deterministic female sartorial adornments and her inner male self. She utters, 'পুরুষের ছদ্মবেশে মাগিব সংগ্রাম তাঁর সাথে/ বীরত্বের দিব পরিচয়'. Such বীরত্ব or so-called male vigour and her desire to look like more feminine in a stereotypical sense made her androgynous. Her inner masculine self was fighting to fit in with her external outfit. In her words, 'অনভ্যস্ত সাজ (unusual/queer attire) লজ্জায় জড়ায়ে অঙ্গ রহিল একান্ত সসংকোচে' (*চিত্রাঙ্গদা* ১৩). Bracelets, anklets, waist-chain, and a gown of purple-red silk have become queer (assuming both connotations, i.e. strange and non-straight) for her. Her closeted male self finds such female adornments rather inappropriate to comply with. In fact, the sartorial adorments could not transform her male psyche; hence, her female attire is very close to the case of (psychological) cross-dressing. This is a critical condition for a female subject when her own conformed dressing is queer to her psyche, while her non-conformist (male) performativity is subject to stigma to the early 20th century spectator/reader. Such a hostile reception of potentially queer narrative is evident in D. L. Roy's observation (as cited in Banerji 2015: 182), where he reacts to the representation of Chitrangada as 'prostitute-like profligate woman self-indulging with her lover Arjuna and therewith desecrating the virtuous chastity of daughter and wife depicted by the original epic'. The dysphoric and fluid gender orientation makes Chitrangada's desire difficult to demarcate into any fixed category. Her body has become her burden momentarily when she was enamoured of Arjuna and asked the gods to get her body rid of 'primal injustice, an unattractive plainness' and render it femininely attractive. However, the aporia of gender identity enhances the moment Chitrangada claims her beauty as 'illusion', 'falsehood' and 'deceit of a god'. Being transformed into *surupa*, her womanly appearance seems to be a mask for her, and it becomes difficult for her to adjust to the gender-deterministic beauty code; rather, she wants Arjuna to love her, knowing her performative transgression. Thus, the materiality of Chitrangada's body 'has become her own rival' ('স্বপত্নিরে স্বহস্তে সাজায়ে স্বযতনে, প্রতিদিন পাঠাইতে হবে আমার আকাঙ্খাতীর্থ বাসরশয্যায়') and she feels rather an androgynous battle inside her which led her to ask the god to take back the boon of somatic beauty.

Chitrangada's sartorial transformation contradicts her valour as a man, though it complements the nurturing mother in her supporting her image to the villagers, "she is our father and mother in one". By shedding the flower-beauty, Chitrangada unveils her manly garb, which reverses the semiotics of dignity for her. Thus, by shedding off the female cloak, Chitrangada gets rid of her *in-the-closet* state. Or it can be said, the bodily adornment/transformation could not offer her an alternative to cherish her love for Arjuna; she regains her ease returning to male attire. Her liberation from the beauty myth thus requires her to be of equal capability to Arjuna. (Datta, Bakshi & Dasgupta, 2016, p. 195). However, the linguistic androgyny existing in both the 1892 (in Bangla) and 1936 (in English) versions of the text is due to the lack of a separate pronoun for *shey* (সে; he, she or it) in English; moreover, Bengali attributes like *rajmata, yuvoraja, birjo,* and the like further complicate the gender signifier. Considering the English translation ('she is our father and mother in one') of the Bengali phrase 'এক দেহে তিনি পিতামাতা', the lack of gender-deterministic signifier in Bengali (deterministic 'she' is replacing ambiguous 'তিনি') can be located, and therefore, readers of the Bengali version will only be more certain of such linguistic fluidity. Though Chitrangada's venture into gaining Arjuna's love marks a feminine endeavour, in the later part of the drama, an epiphany of gender-co-existence occurred in her; she preferred an equal share of her performance towards the protection of the state and the nurturing of their son. For her, shame/stigma was in her tender, blooming beauty, in the mask of *surupa* (beautiful) she wore. Following her transformation into *surupa*, she critically analyses her metamorphosed subject position, traces her imperfection, and realises that it is her 'former existence' that she desires. Thus, metamorphosed sartorial and bodily condition does not transform her queer ego, rather intensifies her gender position as something open, fluid and in the process, not deterministic. The next section casts a more performative and transformative perspective to elaborate a significant role played by the director cum actor of a film in substantiating the gender discourse related/referent to the archetype of Chitrangada.

Re-Drawing Bodily Boundaries: From চিত্রাঙ্গদা to Chitrangada

Ghosh's Chitrangada: Narrative, Context, and Autobiographical Cinema

Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 feature film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* further exploits the notion of gender dysphoria of the subject(s) as found in Tagore's dance-drama *চিত্রাঙ্গদা*. By borrowing from the epic narrative of Chitrangada and contemporising the question of gender subversion, Ghosh rendered his film inclusive of the question of transformativity, autobiographical incorporation, and the politics of gender marginalisation both at personal and social levels. Being both a gay activist and film director, Ghosh exploited the dramatic trope of Tagore's drama to challenge the existing homophobic and heteronormative reading of Tagore's text. Following an adaptation chain from text through stage to screen, Ghosh critically analysed his subject position in the frame narrative of the film, found expression for his own queer agency as auteur-director, and underscored the marginality of subcultural groups like drug addicts and gender outcasts (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT]). Such attempts, as Daisy Hasan argues, dramatise the re-reading of cultural texts of the oppressed groups along subversive or oppositional lines (Datta, Bakshi & Dasgupta, 2016, p. 190).

The film tells the love story between Rudrajit Chatterjee (Rudra, played by Rituparno Ghosh), a Kolkata-based choreographer and dance director living with his parents, and Partho (starring Jishu Sengupta), a percussionist working on Tagore's stage-play *Chitrangada* to be directed by Rudra for Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. Tagore's original dance-drama functions as an aesthetic backdrop, endorsing the performance art of dance through Rudra's choreography. The narrative traces the relationship between gay Rudra and bisexual Partho alongside Rudra's identity crisis, his family's discontent about his gender orientation, and his homoerotic affair. Both transgress the norms of a heteronormative society, with Partho adding another layer of marginalisation through his heroin addiction. The major conflict emerges when they plan to adopt a child to mark their love, but Indian law prohibits same-sex couples from adopting. Consequently, Rudra undergoes sex-reassignment surgery to become 'technically' a woman. However, his bodily transformation fails to secure adoption, as Partho rejects their relationship in this new gender parameter. Ultimately, Rudra's family accepts him back despite the unexpected body-remapping of their son.

Rudra's choice of choreography as a profession against his family's consent represents a transgression of middle-class aspirations and familial conventions. Ghosh himself learnt dancing to pay tribute to Tagore's dance-drama and as an aesthetic complement to the film's performance-based structure. The overlap between Ghosh's own gender position as an androgynous director, his role-playing as dancer, and his sex reassignment surgery in real life (undertaken just before the 2010 film *Arekti Premer Golpo*) creates a profound blending of subjective and gender identity. This autobiographical insertion proves pivotal in understanding the transformative politics of the film. Rudra serves as the agent to perform transgressions, ambivalence, speech acts (through dance), and transformations. In one interview, Ghosh expressed the importance of character selection, stating, 'I identify with parts of all my films, but if I had to choose a character that was closest to my heart' (as cited in Banerji, 2015, p. 183). In an imaginary conversation following Rudra's gender surgery, he narrates the story of Chitrangada to one of the crew (Shubho) of the play he is choreographing. The overlapping analogy of Rudra and Ghosh's condition leads Shubho to ask whether it would be recognisable that Rudra's production is Tagore's *Chitrangada* (Banerji, 2015, p. 183). The semiotic transformation from stage to screen embodies shifts in roles and identities, moving between director-actor, actor-actor (within frame narrative), and auteur-actor.

The act of re-reading Tagore's *চিত্রাঙ্গদা*, directing and choreographing drama within the film narrative, acting in the drama, and performing gender-dissidence raises essential questions of transformational politics. Can performance lead to necessary transformation? Is transformation what our 'crowning wish' desires? Can we really become what we wish to be? Ghosh's subversive reading of Tagore's text by a gay and androgynous spectator engages in a fluidity of gender identity formation. By replaying the conflicting wish between Chitrangada (in *চিত্রাঙ্গদা*) and her father, Ghosh brings to light the twenty-first-century social mindscape regarding the homosocial paradigm. Ghosh's adaptation critically marks a transformative developmental trope in terms of homophobia, as evidenced in the conversational dialectics between Rudra and his family. Such a dialectic emerges in Rudra's final verdict regarding his identity through gender reassignment surgery. Ghosh, as a gay spectator, conceptualises his own act of body transformation (breast implant surgery in 2010) with Rudra's gender reassignment act undertaken to adopt a child and to become the 'woman' he wanted to be.

J. L. Austin's (1911-1960) theorisation of "performative utterances" from a linguistic and philosophical point of view entails the notion of the impact of an action on the interlocutor. Austin conceptualises each locution (actual words spoken) as having a function to endorse or an affective impact on others. Thus, speech has a role to play on a pragmatic level, which is termed as 'speech act', and it is no wonder that the title of Austin's most famous book (1955) is 'How to Do Things with Words', which itself hints at speech act theory. Judith Butler employed Austin's notion of performative utterances and speech acts in the spectrum of gender studies to develop her deconstructive discourse of gendered identity formation. The conceptual notion of speech act is contextually adapted by Butler to something which can be called gender act. Butler reverses the course of identity as the source of our gesture and behavioural pattern; rather, she emphasised the fact that identity can both be a source and a result of our performances, i.e. acts, gestures, socialisations and so on. Thus,

gender norms, according to Butler, are culturally and socially constructed, followed by repeated performances. (qtd in Edwards, 2009, p. 78)

Moving on from Butler's conceptualisation of 'performativity' from a gendered perspective to the impact factor of performativity, her notion of transformativity of the performativity entails the political aftermath of the repetitive "stylised' performativity. She perceives transformativity from the receiver's subject-position as an expression of self-analysis and interpretation. Thus, the 'theory of performative agency can become a theory of political transformation' (Cahill & Hansen, 2003, p. 168). As Kelly Olivier argues, the social norms that form and, in many cases, stigmatise the subject do not function in the same manner in the projected turning of performativity. Rather, the subject's Freudian repressions of pre-existing desires come to the foreground because of the prohibition. (Cahill & Hansen, 2003, p. 169). Complementary to the discussion of the political implications of transformativity, Butler's notion of subjectivity formation is important to mention in this regard, as it traces her emphasis on the acts of 'exclusion' and 'othering':

… this exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated." (qtd in Cahill & Hansen, 2003, p. 169)

With an understanding of the invocation of transformativity through performativity as suggested by Butler and Olivier, we can locate an attempt by Ghosh to create his mirror image (Lacan) in his film *Chitrangada* which found the symbolic signified (Saussure, 1959) to re-channel (or to create a channel of expression of) his (Ghosh), Rudra's and queer spectators' oppressed desires and wishes. Though a question might be raised if Rudra's body transformation let him be what he wished to be or have. Rudra was ditched by Partho when he technically became a 'woman'. Partho saw him as a 'half-thing', asserting his decision to have a child from a real woman, not a 'synthetic one'. Thus, the liminal gendered position of Rudra following his gender-reassignment surgery/physical transformation made him more queer than just queer to his lover and to himself. His ontological comfort zone became more ambiguous than ever as her 'crowning wish' was to be loved as he is, not as a metamorphosed one. Thus, assuming a Butlerian tone, it can be said that Rudra's so-called attempt at a correction towards the gendered body that he cherished was merely an 'illusion' of a fixed gender. His body once again proved the 'contingency' of gender. At first, Rudra troubles his gender through his performativity and then further troubles it through transformation. Bodily transformation as an expression of ideological conformity thus increased the unclassifiability and, hence, perplexed the psychological transformation. Rudra further complicates his gendered ontology through 'melancholia' (following Butler's elaboration on Freud's notion of 'melancholia), a psychic reality caused by the loss of a same-sexed object of desire (in this case, Partha). (Butler, 2002, p. 55). In Butlerian theorisation, it can be understood as 'heterosexual melancholia' since we read Rudra's bodily transformation as conformity to a heterosexual kinship pattern. The institutional child-adoption law forced him to give consent to the heterosexual matrix as the way out. However, Rituparno gave his film a more humanistic rhetoric by making it impossible to undo the sex-reassignment, whereas in Tagore's play, the transformation of Chitrangada into *surupa* was caused by a temporary divine intervention, and a retraction took place in Chitrangada's bodily appearance, i.e. she returned to the state of *kurupa* before the estimated one-year boon was complete. However, though Rudra in the Ghosh film decided and started the reassignment surgery, he finally retracted pondering on the potential impermanence of his body. Rudra could not finally fix the cause of the 'perennial embarrassment' of his parents. This is how the bodily transformations led Tagore's Chitrangada and Ghosh's Rudra to a discomfort zone, further queering their psyche. It also leaves us in an ambiguity regarding the singular signification of 'crowning wish'. The indefinability of the gay-male category became more desirable to Rudra than the defined category of the transformed 'woman'. Likewise, in Tagore's drama, Chitrangada's aesthetic transformation into so-called feminine *surupa* or pretty (woman) made her subject position uneasy both for her and for Arjuna to accept. She wants to be loved as the manly-female, the *kurupa*, i.e. to be loved as she is. However, Rudra's mother's sensibility towards her queer son is an extension of the non-existence of mother figure in Tagore's text. Rudra's mother represents the growing social tolerance of queer population, which endorses homo-social acceptance.

Performativity, Cinematic Queerness, and the Genealogy of Transformation

Ghosh's film further complicates the performative-transformative dialectic through its meta-theatrical structure, wherein Rudra, a gay choreographer, stages Tagore's *Chitrangada* while simultaneously experiencing his own bodily and psychic transformation. This doubling – Rudra performing Chitrangada, who herself undergoes transformation – creates a mise-en-abyme effect that foregrounds the constructed nature of gender performance itself. The film's visual grammar consistently emphasises this layering by intercutting scenes of Rudra rehearsing the dance-drama with his consultations with cosmetic surgeons, suggesting an equivalence between theatrical performance and bodily modification as equally 'performative' acts in the Butlerian sense.

The character of Partho, Rudra's lover, embodies the regulatory force of heteronormative desire that compels bodily transformation. Partho's insistence on adopting a child – a wish that Indian adoption laws at the time rendered

impossible for same-sex couples – functions as the institutional catalyst forcing Rudra towards gender reassignment surgery. Here, the law operates not merely as an external prohibition but as an internalised imperative, what Butler would recognise as the psychic incorporation of social norms. Partho's eventual rejection of Rudra's transformed body as 'synthetic' and 'half-thing' exposes the impossible bind of heteronormative conformity, whereby transformation undertaken to achieve social legibility paradoxically produces further abjection. The transformed body becomes, in Butler's terms, even more 'queer' than the untransformed one, occupying an uninhabitable zone that fits neither normative category.

Ghosh's autobiographical insertion into the narrative – the film features the director himself in conversation with Rudra – adds another layer of meta-performative commentary. This gesture positions the film not merely as a representation but as what Butler might call a 'citing' of both the Chitrāngadā myth and the director's own queer subjectivity. The cinematic medium itself becomes significant in Ghosh's reappropriation. Unlike the epic's narrative or Tagore's theatrical staging, cinema enables a particular relationship to the body through close-up, editing, and temporal manipulation. Ghosh exploits these cinematic techniques to render visible the labour of gender performance. Extended sequences showing Rudra's dance rehearsals, his application of makeup, his consultation with medical professionals, and his embodied movements all work to denaturalise gender, making visible what Butler describes as the 'sedimented' nature of gendered acts. The camera's lingering attention on Rudra's body, particularly in moments of transformation, creates what Laura Mulvey (1975) might recognise as a queered gaze that resists both voyeuristic objectification and identificatory pleasure, instead producing a productive discomfort that mirrors Rudra's own dysphoria.

Moreover, the film's temporal structure, which moves non-linearly between Rudra's past, present, and the mythic time of Chitrangada, suggests that gender trouble exists across temporalities. The myth is not safely contained in the past but erupts into contemporary queer life, just as contemporary queer struggles retroactively illuminate the radical potential dormant in the ancient narrative. This temporal queering parallels Butler's insight that gender is produced through citational chains that extend across history.

The perpetual indecisiveness of the gender identity problematises as well as opens up the regulatory gender-deterministic behaviourism and reactionary politics. Borrowing Austin's terminology, 'perlocutionary act' in gender performance can have an impact on the readers (i.e. Rituparno Ghosh as a reader of *Mahabharata* and Tagore's *চিত্রাঙ্গদা*) and consequently the reader can be the maker of a new text (i.e. Ghosh's *Chitrangada*). Ghosh's film creates a new 'queer idiom' (coining Eve Sedgwick's term), placing his own queer body within the narrative. In doing so, Ghosh's film exploits the body as both subject and medium. *Mahabharata*, Tagore's *Chitrangada*, and Ghosh's *Chitrangada* reflect an ongoing social paradigm shift regarding gender, desire, and identity politics. If *Mahabharata* initiates the destabilisation of gender-role determinism, Tagore's text gives a more specific delineation of the gender ambiguity, whereas Ghosh's film deconstructs our horizon of expectation regarding gender tropes and creates space for queer spectatorship and readership, engaging the problematic of performative and transformative discourse.

Tracing the genealogy across these three texts reveals a progressive intensification of both gender ambiguity and its psychic costs. Where the *Mahabharata* presents Chitrāngadā's gender variance as relatively unproblematised – her *putrika* status accepted within the narrative logic – Tagore's appropriation foregrounds the affective disturbance of transformation, the desire to be loved as *kurupa* rather than *surupa*. Ghosh's film, in turn, exposes transformation's impossibility, whereby Rudra cannot achieve the gender coherence he seeks precisely because such coherence is itself, following Butler, an 'illusion'. Each iteration thus performs a kind of epistemological labour, revealing progressively more of what Butler calls the 'constitutive contradictions' of gender. The myth's persistent return across centuries suggests not resolution but what we might term productive irresolution – a continued cultural working-through of gender's fundamental instability that each age must renegotiate through its own idioms and anxieties.

Conclusion: The Contingency of Gender and the Politics of Transformation

This genealogical examination of the Chitrāngadā myth across epic, theatrical, and cinematic reappropriations demonstrates how cultural texts both regulate and resist normative gender formations. The persistent return to Chitrāngadā's story reveals gender not as a stable category but as a site of ongoing contestation, where the 'stylised repetition of acts' that Butler identifies as constitutive of gender continually threatens to expose its own constructedness. Each iteration of the myth performs a double gesture, acknowledging the pressures toward gender conformity while simultaneously revealing the impossibility of fully achieving such conformity.

To return to this paper's initial questions, is transformation an act of heterosexual conformity? The analysis suggests that transformation is always already caught within heteronormative demands – whether the marital imperative in the Mahabharata, the aesthetic pressure in Tagore, or the legal-institutional constraints in Ghosh. Yet simultaneously, these very attempts at conformity paradoxically produce further queerness, further 'trouble' in Butler's sense. Can performative or bodily transformation transform the queer psyche? The evidence from these texts suggests that transformation transforms not toward resolution but toward deeper ambiguity. Chitrangada's rejection of *surupa* status, Rudra's incomplete surgery,

and the perpetual oscillation between gender positions all indicate that transformation destabilises rather than stabilises gender identity.

The South Asian genealogy traced here offers crucial insights into how cultural productions function as archives of gender dissent, preserving alternative possibilities even as they document the regulatory force of heteronormative structures. The myth of Chitrāngadā remains generative precisely because it stages the irresolvable tension between the desire for gender legibility and the inevitable excess that escapes all categorical fixing. In doing so, these texts open space for imagining gender otherwise, even as they document the material and psychic violence enacted upon those who inhabit gender's constitutive outside. Future scholarship might productively extend this analysis to contemporary South Asian queer cultural productions, examining how digital media and transnational circuits create new iterations of these ancient troubles.

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[1] a form of primogeniture in which gender does not matter for inheritance

[2] especially. a daughter appointed to raise male issue to be adopted by a father who has no sons