



Womanity as Liminality: The Clash between Femininity & Womanhood
and the Birth of Womanity in Rituparno Ghosh's Chitrangada

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Abstract:

What does it feel like to inhabit a body the world refuses to acknowledge? Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), offers a complex yet subtle meditation on gender, identity and self-fashioning, where the protagonist, Rudra- born male and living as trans-masculine choreographer- inhabits a liminal space between Femininity and Womanhood. This paper takes Rudra as the central figure whose journey is not a linear progression from Manhood to Femininity or later Femininity to Womanhood, but rather, a sustained oscillation- a chaotic, trans state, haunted by the impossibility to complete assimilation into either category. He remains in a state of limbo which is beautifully portrayed by Rituparno Ghosh as a heterotopic theatre where the body is scripted, re-scripted and fractured under the weight of external gaze and internal aspirations. Luminous mirror shots, whispered voice-overs, and fluid choreography reveal his inner obscure identity.

Through Homi K Bhabha's idea of 'Third space' this analysis demonstrates how Ghosh constructs a cinematic grammar of trans-feminine interiority that resists objectification even as institutional scripts police his corporeal truth. By mapping the poetic sanctuary of Rudra's inner world alongside the socio-legal barriers she confronts, this paper introduces a hybrid feminist-queer methodology for South Asian cinema studies. In doing so, it charts new pathways for understanding how film can imagine, legitimize, and celebrate identities that both challenge and expand conventional definitions of gender identity.

Key Words:

Womanity, Womanhood, Femininity, Liminality, Trans

Introduction:

Rituparno Ghosh was a prominent Bengali film maker whose urbane, artistic style and lyrical aesthetics redefined Bengali as well as Indian cinema. By the 2000s he openly established himself as a queer icon challenging the conservative 'Bhadralok' (urban middle class) of contemporary Bengal. In his personality and his cinema, he explicitly flaunted a non-binary life and philosophy. In the late 2000s Ritu's films became rising

centred on LGBTQ+ themes for instance *Memories in March* (2010) and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), explicitly dealt with queer protagonists. These films, going against the traditional audience, brought queer discourse in the mainstream Bengali cinema. Ghosh's career fit with India's decriminalization of homosexuality (Delhi High Court overturned section 377 in 2009). In this burning issue Ghosh used his artistic style and media presence to force the middle-class people to accept non normative sexualities and gender identities. *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) - his final feature - is widely accepted as the dramatization of one of the most complex and blooming stories of gender transformation in Indian cinema.

Ghosh's *Chitrangada* draws on Tagore's adaptation of *Mahabharata*'s princess Chitrangada (who was raised as a son) to present a truly modern in nature identity. The film's lead, Rudra Chatterjee, is a choreographer from an upper-class Bengali family who had always existed in the binary of genders surrounding him. In the opening Rudra directs a theatre production about Chitrangada, instructing an actress, Kasturi to embody Chitrangada's masculine energy. This mythic parallel depicts Rudra's own journey, his own identification as neither fully male nor female. In one key scene in the latter part, he insists a medical official being recorded as a woman need not mean changing his outward style - "it is not the appearance of femininity that matters but the ownership of it". Throughout the film, Rudra increasingly flaunts feminine dress outside rehearsal and explores an intimate relationship with the male drummer of his theatre, Partha. This relationship comes under social scrutiny when Rudra and Partha plan to adopt a child only to find out that same sex couples are neither allowed to marry nor adopt under the Indian law. Rudra's parents find it difficult to accept his decision to change his sex that overtly challenges the familial script of sonhood and daughterhood. Rudra's random experiments with clothes, performance or at later stage surgery is never random. Rudra's character in the reader's eye unknowingly shrieks 'Who is Man? And who is Woman?' Thus, refusing to be bound to the established norms this ambivalent, in betweenness embodies liminality, Rudra is a trans masculine, gender-queer figure whose identity is engraved in a hybrid third space beyond the binary.

To analyse *Chitrangada* this paper adopts a hybrid feminist-queer methodology that combines Foucauldian idea of body politics, Derrida's key concept of 'Différance' and Homi K Bhabha's idea of 'Third space'. This paper offers a close reading of the film's key sequences, especially, the scenes that represent Rudra's battle with the binaries with institutional powers, hybrid subjectivity, genderless performance that shaped his liminal identity. Thus, this introduction has therefore set up *Chitrangada* as a rich site for exploring the fragility and fluidity of gender. By foregrounding Rudra's self-fashioning against mythic and institutional backdrops, the film invites us to reconsider the body and identity beyond rigid scripts. Our paper will follow that invitation, using post-structuralist and postcolonial tools to decode how Ghosh's *Crowning Wish* crowns a new kind of subject in cinematic space.

Discussion:

This paper deals not with the basic binary of man and woman or their society decided behaviours but with the trans state between femininity and womanhood. Now what is the difference between the latter two?

Womanity as Liminality

Femininity refers to the socially and culturally constructed set of qualities, behaviours, and aesthetics traditionally associated with women—such as gentleness, grace, or passivity—which can be expressed by any gender. Womanhood, on the other hand, is a broader and more inclusive concept that encompasses the lived experience, identity, nurturing qualities and collective existence of women themselves, beyond stereotypes or traits. In short, femininity is about how society defines “feminine,” while womanhood is about being a woman in all its complexity and diversity. In *Chitrangada*, there are three significant women figures, among them, Kasturi can be related with femininity as her character totally aligns with socially accepted markers. Whereas, Rudra's mother and Mala (Rudra's former dance partner) can be associated with Womanhood as they present an evolved nature through their decision makings in the respective situations. Now Rudra stands on the verge of both the worlds, significantly different in their own ways, making him rich in Womanity.

Kasturi's presence in *Chitrangada* epitomizes socially sanctioned marks of femininity. In her first appearance, she drapes herself in pastel saris, moves with measured poise, and greets Rudra in a soft tone. Her gestures—folded hands, downcast eyes, gentle nods — never stray from the expected codes of “ladylike” behaviour. Through Kasturi, Ghosh shows how femininity can be performed almost like a costume: its contours clear, its boundaries defined by social approval. Rudra's mother inhabits a broader terrain of womanhood defined by lived experience and quiet resistance. Behind closed doors, she defies family expectations to send Rudra to dance lessons, valuing her child's passion over rigid tradition. Her decisions, be it negotiating with her husband, shouldering community gossip or protecting Rudra's secret, reveal a deep sense of strength born of maternal love. She is not bound by scripted behaviour; instead, she exemplifies a woman whose identity flourishes through care, sacrifice and most importantly deliberate choice. Mala, Rudra's former dance partner, also illustrates an evolved sense of womanhood. She became a part of the theatre of Rudra by choice becoming the most trusted dance partner of Rudra who indeed was very picky and critical in every dance move. When the script brings her back after a long time leaving the theatre, she gracefully rejects the artistic style of expression offered by Rudra again giving familial reasons and asserts her choice of nurturing the child over dance she once loved. It's never about being free or not, it's about having the free choice of will. Mala's trajectory highlights women as authors of their own stories—agents whose complex motivations and aspirations extend well beyond passive grace. Positioned between these two worlds, Rudra occupies a fluid, trans state that neither costume of femininity nor rooted womanhood can fully contain. Rituparno Ghosh's choreography blends Kasturi's poised stillness with the assertive energy of his mother and Mala. Onscreen mirror shots fracture his reflection, while voice-overs layer introspection over external expectation. In this liminal space, Rudra resists complete assimilation into either category, instead tracing a continuous oscillation that enriches our understanding of gender as dynamic and multifaceted.

In *Chitrangada* Rudra's representation by Ghosh functions not as an unresolved anomaly between the categories of Femininity and Womanhood but as a performed site of Womanity, a living hybrid that brings the concept of liminality of Bhabha into consideration. His body, voice, stage performances or behaviour don't

simply mix masculine and feminine signifiers but they attain themselves to stand clear in the third position in which the meanings of Femininity and Womanhood are negotiated, contested and deconstructed. The character of Rudra when seen through Homi K Bhabha's framework of Hybridity, ambivalence and the Third space, appears less as a failure to conform to the socially accepted norms and more as a productive form of a person knowledgeably rich in cultural sense, stage awareness and possessing eyes of a critic ; the threshold that generates a new normative language rather than one that passively occupies existing lexicon. Womanity is articulated to Rudra's character in various segments of the movie. On stage, gestures commonly accepted as feminine such as curvilinear arms, the use of costumes are performed by a body whose life history and his identity complicate those very gestures. Bhabha's notion of Hybridity helps to see the performances on and off stage not as mere imitation but as translation. The gestures, although following recognizable forms, are refashioned through Rudra's eyes. He sees not the binary world but a space in between to circulate his non-binary blood to the art forms is destined to represent. He doesn't merely ask Kasturi to completely transform her feminine attitude to manly one but rather asks to incorporate recognizable masculine acts. In Bhabha's terms such translation occurs in a "third space" of enunciation where cultural sensibility is displaced and recomposed. In Rudra's performances the aesthetic grammar and femininity is neither assimilated nor wholly rejected ultimately but reinforced into Womanity – a field that demands not only a character but the reader also to see through and in between the world of black and white.

Conclusion:

The film time and again stages mimicry and ambivalence to Bhabhaian dynamics that prove to destabilize authoritative structures and sociomoral identity. When Rudra chose not to perform or resemble the form of Womanhood or Femininity it carries a visible difference that challenges the viewers' socially made instincts. This no similarity or not semblable character for the contemporary viewers creates a sense of disturbance which is political. It exposes the brittleness of fixed gender categories which has been imposed by the society, brings how these caged categories and the subverted through marginal resemblance. Rudra's cinematic form intensifies this liminality. Mirror sequences, emitting identity, closeup shots build Rudra's image bit by bit. His identity becomes not just a single character sketch but a widespread umbrella that holds in-betweenness. The film stages this transposition through mirror shots, costumes and voice where meaning is produced not in purity but in negotiation. Even in social interactions his presence almost forces others to confront their classificatory framework, pushing for recognition of a subject that cannot be assimilated into normative binary.

To read Rudra as Womanity to recognise that liminality here in the film is not transitional but generative. He doesn't pass through an "in-between" phase towards stable identity but rather he sustains the liminal as a productive mode of being. This sustained liminality, framed by Bhabha's Hybridity, shows that gender itself can exist as a durable hybrid formation, constantly negotiated, redefined and evolving. This Rudra embodies Womanity as liminality, offering a radical reimagining of gender as a space outside the socio-

political park flowing as a river not polluted as the rivers we see but as what is ideal. For instance, it is accepted that blue water is clear water but the water is actually clear – the blue comes from the reflection of the sky- readers or the viewers are presented as the mirror for the political agenda to rule to binaries and we reflect them without giving a second thought

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