

Un-patriarching Tagore's *Chitrangada*

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This paper will seek to look into how the titular character of Tagore's Chitrangada has been a victim of patriarchy since her childhood and well into her adulthood. The strictly gendered upbringing of the protagonist as a man was a gross misogynistic imposition of gender roles that suppressed all her expressions of femininity. Upon falling in love with Arjuna, Chitrangada feels compelled to undergo feminisation to impress her beloved, thereby subscribing to the cisheteronormative conditioning where a woman feels forced to modify herself for the sake of a man.

Arjuna's fascination for the mysterious warrior-princess (Chitrangada) who has been described by the subjects as possessing a unique blend of masculine and feminine qualities is a subversion of the typical expectations of male heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Chitrangada's anagnorisis in act six is the ultimate feminist retelling of (her)self. Not only does she appeal to Madan to rescind his boon but she also asserts herself as Arjuna's equal in the song "Ami Chitrangada". Even though, Chitrangada's transformation eventuates through heteronormative and patriarchal tropes of attraction and sexuality, the denouement of the play is unquestioningly feminist and more so because Arjuna accepts Chitrangada as she is without expecting her to forsake any of her qualities.

Keywords: Gender, sexuality, cisheteronormativity, patriarchy, feminism

Just because gender roles are performative doesn't mean one's gender identity is a performance.

It is this dichotomy that characterises Tagore's dance drama, *Chitrangada* (1892). Born as a woman and raised as a man, Chitrangada grew up practicing masculinity exclusively while suppressing any expressions of femininity. The cultural imposition of masculine gender norms by her father was patriarchal and misogynistic for it inferiorised Chitrangada's (female) sex under the assumption that only a man was capable of being a warrior and protector. It was also transphobic because it tried to stereotypically masculinise the protagonist in a sense that compromised her cisgender expression as a woman- the gender she identifies with but for long is prohibited to practise because of her cultural and social upbringing. Chitrangada's experience with her (cis) gender identity, her gender expression (culturally masculine) and (hetero) sexuality posits the inevitable questions regarding the nature of gender: whether it is essentialist (that follows the born-this-way narrative) or constructionist (that believes

gender is socially constructed). By constantly and effectively invoking the transgender and transsexual narrative with respect to the protagonist, Tagore also queers the performance of (Chitrangada's) gender in a heteropatriarchal cisnormative milieu. At the end of the dance-drama, we realise that Chitrangada's gender identity is essentialist but her gender expression is socially constructed. Such vastitude of the gender phenomenon inevitably broadens our understanding of it with the implication that the gender spectrum is diverse, limitless and differently experienced and practised by one and all.

Sanyal (2018, p. 131) expounds that Chitrangada experiences her sexual awakening upon meeting Arjuna, the famed Pandava. The song "*Bodhu kone alo laglo chokhe*" [O Friend, what strange light has touched my eyes] portrays the gamut of experiences she journeys through after "coming out" that is after recognising her sexual desires. The following lines of the song: *chhilo mon tomari protikkha koril joogey joogey deen ratri dhoi* delineate that Chitrangada has been awaiting this awakening since ages, since the dawn of time. A perusal of the subsequent acts of the dance-drama reveals that this much awaited awakening and Chitrangada's attraction towards the Pandava transpire through heteropatriarchal tropes of attraction.

Chitrangada's desire to be feminised once she falls in love with Arjuna delineates that she is a victim of the cisheteronormative conditioning that forces women to modify themselves for the sake of a man, for the sake of "gaining" his love and admiration. Patriarchy demands every woman subscribe to the same model of femininity if they aspire to be with a male companion. Chitrangada, unquestionably smitten by Arjuna, falls prey to this vicious and insidious force of patriarchy, and asks her *sakhis* [companions] to adorn her in the song "*De toralamaye notun kore del notun abhoroney*" [Dress me anew]. It is this heartfelt desire to gain Arjuna's love and admiration that is palpable in Chitrangada's desperation to adopt an avatar that is entirely new, entirely feminine. Her deep-sated patriarchy makes her believe that the Pandava will not accept her due to her

"masculinity" and her lack of typical femininity. Thus, Chitrangada is prepared to unlearn and discard her (learnt) masculinity and thereby forsake a part of her gender expression that she identifies with for a man she idealises and idolises, for a man completely unaware of all that she truly is- a kind, empathetic, fierce warrior and protector. When Chitrangada approaches Arjuna he rejects her- not because of her masculinity but on account of being a *brahamacharya* or an ascetic. Our crestfallen protagonist is left despairing as a result and she continues to wish for feminisation to court Ajuna.

Simultaneously, she feels disgusted that her love for a man has emasculated her, divested her of all the virility she has practiced and identified with since childhood. The warrior princess is also painfully self-aware of the fact that the actual process of womanising herself would completely and in some finality emasculate and erase her bonafide gender expression. It is the (prospective) loss of *pourasho-shadhona*, [the lifelong pursuit of masculinity] that further perturbs Chitrangada's and in turn aggravates her existential and identity crisis. Chitrangada's *sakhis* echo her discomfiture when they comment: "*Sakhi, ki dekha dekhile tumi! Ek poloker aghatei khoshilo ki apon purono parichoy*" [What have you seen, lady? That in an instant you have shed your old form]. Sanyal (2018, p. 132) elaborates on this unyielding and relentless agony that Chitrangada experiences during this nascent stage of attraction. She explains that the metamorphosis that Chitrangada's desires- the transformation from the masculine to the feminine though initially desirable would ultimately feel unnatural to her sense of self.

Despite the shame and guilt in recognising that she has been emasculated, Chitrangada invokes Madan, the Hindu god of love. She besieges him to feminise her so that Arjuna may be captivated by her coquetry and feminine charms. Chitrangada confides in Madan that in her effort to be masculine, she has never had the chance to learn or practice femininity, something that she has not desired up until now. Madan grants her the boon- that she would get to live as the *surupa* [the beautiful one] for one entire year.

Thus, Chitrangada is womanised completely under the cultural compulsion of cisheteronormativity. Her springtime transformation therefore keenly follows Simone de Beauvoir's rhetoric that "One is not born a woman, rather becomes one". Chitrangada's pursuit of "womanhood" eventuating through the patriarchal tropes of attraction delineates the interrelatedness of gender and sexuality: the warrior-princess feels compelled to perform her "cisgenderedness" to placate the hyperphallicness of male heterosexuality, the assumed counterpart to female sexuality. In this process of feminisation, Chitrangada abandons an entire lifetime of achievements, knowledge and military prowess. She essentially loses parts of herself just for the sake of a man. Nothing explains the patriarchal romanticisation of heteronormative love better than Chitrangada's willing and impulsive sacrifice of herself for a man who has rejected her before and who might not accept her despite the change she has voluntarily undergone. Chitrangada's transformation from her existing way of being to the one she desires follows closely the transsexual narrative.

A period of elation and relief follows after Chitrangada has acquired her new body. The song "*Amar onge onge ke bajaye, bajaye bashi*" [Who has filled my body with music] captures her euphoria. But there is also a tacit discomfort that subsists despite her overwhelming bliss. She takes time getting acclimatised to her new body, an experience not uncommon with the transgender individuals who are transitioning. In navigating the newness of her body or self, Chitrangada takes cognizance of her latent anxiety. She feels criminal for desiring a body that she wants but is socially or culturally prohibited to pursue. Chitrangada's guilt is thus a product of her inherent transphobia, and a direct outcome of her internal misogyny. Besides, by associating her self-worth with her appearance that is only *maya*, [illusion], Chitrangada reduces herself to mere superficiality that is facile body aesthetics. Gone is the proud, formidable warrior princess who once took pride in her unmatched valour and gallantry. In her place is a sacrificial lamb that is thinning herself out just to be with a man.

Chitrangada's intentions ultimately eventuate because her disguise mesmerizes Arjuna completely. The Pandava exclaims that the woman who he sees before him is the epitome of divine creation. Arjuna had rejected Chitrangada initially when she was not typically feminised. But now the Pandava is so enchanted by the *surupa's* beauty that he is prepared to offer up his *kirti* [fame] and *pourashogorbo* [manly pride] in exchange of his beloved's companionship. Arjuna explains that Chitrangada's unmatched beauty has shattered his oath of celibacy. The quick dismantling of the erstwhile *brahmacharya's* asceticism after chancing upon conventional femininity proves just how fragile male heterosexuality is. The transition from an ascetic to a lover confuses Arjuna and the song "*Ashanti aaj hanlo eki dohonjwala*" [this conundrum has given rise to unimaginable angst] captures his consternation. Thus, both Arjuna and Chitrangada feel challenged due to their attraction towards each other. The conflicts that arise in acts three, four and five resolve themselves in the final act (six) when both the characters achieve self-actualisation by defying the extant norms of heteropatriarchy.

Chitrangada as an entity is constantly split into the limited binarism of cultural gender. Her subjects repeatedly gender her attributes: *snehobole tini mata, baahubole tini raja* which means she is as merciful as a mother and as valiant as a man or king. The unique confluence of the masculine and the feminine that characterises the mysterious warrior-princess, Chitrangada appeals to Arjuna. He cries out in surprise and elation when he gets to know that the subjects' protector is a *nari* [woman]. The Pandava is so excited by this revelation that he starts desiring this mysterious and valorous warrior-princess despite being committed to the same Chitrangada who is still in the disguise of the *surupa*. Arjuna's uninhibited and simultaneous attraction towards the two different selves of Chitrangada (or two different women) is a reminder of the prevalence of (male) polygamy and polyamory and its cultural acceptance during the age of *The Mahabharata*, the epic where the characters of Arjuna and Chitrangada feature.

Chitrangada's derision while describing her former-warrior-princess state is yet another display of her internal misogyny exhibiting itself as self-deprecation. She constantly belittles her unaltered past self- the *kurupa* [the unpleasant one] even when Arjuna expresses his interest in acquainting the true Chitrangada. In her *surupa* form, Chitrangada explains that *kurupa* lacks the modesty that typifies a woman. However, such a description does not discourage Arjuna. He continues pining for this mysterious Chitrangada who to him is *ekadhore milito purush nari* [the rare amalgamation of man and woman], and a bonafide warrior like a true *kshatriya*. Thus, Arjuna's attraction towards the *surupa* and the supposedly "hybridized masculine-feminine" *kurupa* diversifies the understanding of male heterosexuality by subverting its tropes of heteronormativity and attraction in general. Moreover, Arjuna's insistence on Chitrangada's distinguished *kshatriya* status is indicative of caste hegemony, a social issue Tagore explores extensively in his seminal and timeless dance-drama, *Chandalika* (1938).

The titular character is relieved once she realises that Arjuna desires the warrior princess that she is. Chitrangada exalts because her beloved has finally sought out her real self. All her past doubts and inhibitions gradually dissolve. She is no longer guilty that she is beguiling a man she loves by the duplicity of her appearance that she knows is illusory as it is supposed to last only a year. This realisation marks Chitrangada's first step towards anagnorisis. Subsequently, she decides to re-emerge as herself again- as the *kurupa*, the identity she now proudly claims. So, in act five, Chitrangada appeals to Madan and asks him to rescind his boon. The *sakhis'* song that follows captures the feministic ethos that Chitrangada herself re-iterates in the song, "*Ami Chitrangada*" [I am Chitrangada]. It is in this verse that she declares and asserts her identity. She proclaims who she is confidently and unabashedly. She is now no longer the conflicted heroine who was once ashamed of herself. *Un-patriarched* and *feministised*, Chitrangada proclaims that she will neither be hailed as a goddess nor be neglected as a commoner. She demands to

be Arjuna's equal in their relationship. The Pandava accepts, he professes: "blessed I am."

To summarise what has been discussed so far, Chitrangada's anagnorisis leading to the social and personal integration of her-self is thus a feminist retelling of her character, and of the journey she undertakes. Even though Chitrangada first loses herself to a heteronormative relationship, it is that very relationship that gives her an entirely new understanding of her personhood - more specifically her womanhood and the unique way in which she experiences it and chooses to exercise it. Arjuna's willingness to accept someone who is not typically feminine frees Chitrangada from the heteropatriarchal assumptions of companionship. It also provides her with the space where she can freely practise her expression of identity. Moreover, the Pandava's espousing of a woman who does not fit into the rubrics of typical femininity is a defiance of the strict codes of male sexuality and patriarchy at large. Therefore, both Arjuna and Chitrangada excel as self-actualised feminist characters that are capable of accepting each other despite the strict conditionings they have been subjected to and have grown up with.

A perusal of Chitrangada's anagnorisis and subsequent transformation therefore raises important questions regarding the nature of gender expression, gender roles and attraction with respect to sexuality. Chitrangada's learnt ("masculine") behaviours do not compromise on her femininity or her female-hood solely because she identifies as a cisgender woman. Moreover, Chitrangada's doubts regarding the legitimacy of her heterosexuality is a display of transphobia- for nearly five acts she believes that she has to be a certain kind of ("feminine") woman to be acknowledged by a man. The titular character's second and final transformation: from the *surupa* to the *kurupa* marks a central tenant of the transsexual narrative or journey where the individual feels the most grounded after aligning their gender expression (regardless of how masculine or feminine that may be) with any of the several gender identities they identify with. Therefore, Tagore's evocation

of a (queer) transformation through Chitrangada's character is very freeing, and comforting: by effortlessly queering the limitless interaction between and beyond the two ends of the gender spectrum, the playwright frees sexual and gender behaviours from the confines of cisheteronormativity.

The dance-drama *Chitrangada*, therefore upholds Tagore's feminist motto. The dramatist protagonist-ises and feminist-ises a minor and oft-forgotten character from *The Mahabharata*. The locus that Tagore provides Chitrangada with allows her the power of agency. This dance-drama also observes Tagore's artistic essence. By using song and dance to liberate Chitrangada and Arjuna from the tropes and norms of patriarchy the playwright celebrates the emancipatory qualities of art and expression. Several other dramatic techniques enrich this already vivacious dance-drama. For example, Tagore's use of the *sakhis'* collective voice almost like the Greek chorus amplifies the inner cogitations of the chief character and of the society at large. The playwright extraordinaire also merges the social and imaginary realms by invoking the divine through the character of Madan. Tagore explores how the divinity is unbothered by the perceived masculinity or femininity of a character, and by doing so offers a caustic criticism of the incredibly gendered status quo, a very human affair that genders even the divinity and the gods.

Besides exemplifying immaculate imagination and artistry, this eponymous dance-drama also demonstrates Tagore's rebellious anti-establishment stance. By revolutionizing the treatment of gender roles and sexuality he dismisses the Victorian morality of contemporary life based on the limited binarism of man and woman only. The feminist denouement of the dance-drama also presents a powerful commentary on privilege, by portraying that the fortunate can dare to transform from one identity to another and still retain honour. It also elucidates that the point of return is only for those who can dare to lose, and not for those who cannot afford to. Tagore's (queer) ideations as early as the 19th century also emphasise

that "alternative" sexualities and identities aren't all that alternate and have been in vogue for a very, very long time. The textual support and evidence provided by dance dramas such as *Chitrangada* legitimises the modern struggle for equal rights and recognition without being denounced as something new and experimental. It is because of these reasons that readers must be indebted to characters such as Chitrangada and their creators like Tagore for they tell important, powerful and rebellious stories that testify and validate queer lives, their struggles and all their achievements without sounding patronizing or dismissive.

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