



## Intersecting Freudian Psychoanalysis with Queerness: A Study on Partha Chakraborty's "Samantaral" and Kaushik Ganguly's "Nagarkirtan"

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Date of Submission: 04-12-2024

Date of Acceptance: 16-12-2024

### Abstract

The society we live in is inherently patriarchal and it promotes heteronormativity as a norm. Queer identity is, hence, frowned at and queer individuals become victims of epistemic violence every now and then. Their portrayal in popular culture is also limited, often being controversial. Through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis, this paper mainly attempts to explore two Bengali films namely Partha Chakraborty's "Samantaral" and Kaushik Ganguly's "Nagarkirtan" which vehemently showcase a struggle against heterosexuality as well as the various forms of oppression and marginalisation that the queer individuals experience.

### Keywords

Queer, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Identity crisis, Heteronormativity, Cross-dressing, Transphobia,

Under the influence of Michel Foucault's analysis of 'Power' and 'Sexuality' and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (Butler 1990), Queer theory originates in the early 1990s challenging the binary understanding of gender and sexuality. It emerges as a response to the limitations of identity politics, promoting a more fluid and inclusive perspective on human experiences (Seidman 1996). Teresa de Lauretis coins the term "queer theory" at a conference she has organized in 1990 at the University of California. In her article "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," Teresa de Lauretis tries to broaden the discourses that existed on lesbian and gay studies. She uses "queer theory" to mark a disruption of the normative discourse on sexuality advancing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of sexual identities, moving beyond the fixed categories. Queer theory aims to uncover and deconstruct power dynamics and assumptions placed inside cultural norms and 'Queering' becomes the process of opposing heterosexuality. It critiques normative definitions and categories related to sexual orientation, gender

identity and expression, arguing that these are socially constructed and most often limiting.

Society, therefore, becomes a powerful influence on gender and sexuality; social expectations pertaining to masculinity and femininity in society shape our gender roles. In this context, one must refer to Judith Butler who is known for her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) challenging notions of traditional gender identity by arguing that gender is fluid and socially constructed. Another renowned American scholar and critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her 1990 book entitled *Epistemology of the Closet* postulates that Western culture operates on basic binary thinking of sexuality, specifically the oppositional pairing of homo- to heterosexual. A binary system enforcing oppressive norms by erasing fluidity and variability in sexual identities is a principal concern for Sedgwick. Sedgwick's criticism shows how literature, culture, and society at large foster binary structures delimiting identities and experiences, hence entrapping individuals within a restrictive "closet".

Patriarchy celebrates social structures where power and authority are predominantly held by men, often leading to the exclusion or marginalization of others. Much of Michel Foucault's works are on how power dynamics intend to create societal norms and practices. He says, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something one holds on to; it is something that circulates" (Foucault). In his work *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault has forwarded the idea that power is essentially productive in nature and gives birth to norms and knowledge regulating practices like sexuality and gender. These norms are enforced by patriarchal systems, while those that are deviant are ostracised. The queer communities who cannot fulfil societal expectations are often hit with oppression, and violence. The hegemonic discourses attempt to dehumanize the queer communities by framing their identities as deviant from the "natural" i.e. the male-



female binary resulting into internalized homophobia or transphobia or acute trauma.

Siegfried Kracauer in his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) attempts to project that films capture and reflect reality with all unnoticed details and hidden truths of society and thus become a medium for social change, creating a critical view of the society with all its follies and disagreements. Partha Chakraborty's "*Samantaral*" (2017) and Kaushik Ganguly's "*Nagarkirtan*" (2019) are two of those Bengali films that vigorously showcase cruelties the queer individuals in our society go through with respect to mistreatment, mental trauma, and psychological effects. Parimal, the protagonist of the film "*Nagarkirtan*", was born a male but considers himself a female and so takes on the name 'Puti'. Though Puti's outer physique is of a male, his soul does not accept it, and his love interest, Madhu, is a bisexual. In "*Samantaral*," Sujan, the protagonist, has a male body but is actually an intersex person. To deal with such complex ideas of 'self', one may refer to Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," described in his *Écrits* (1966). Lacan explains how an infant forms an idealized self-image after recognizing itself in a mirror and therefore, this act of recognition makes up the sense of wholeness but, at the same time, initiates alienation, as the ideal self is apart from the fragmented lived reality. It is a founding process of 'ego' that involves both empowerment and self-division simultaneously. While this "mirror stage" is extremely important for a coherent self-image, it proves to be difficult for queer children increasing their risk of being alienated from the authentic self in relation to societal expectations or family acceptance. This can further be exacerbated by internalized heteronormative norms and the negative responses either from a caregiver or from peers. Puti and Sujan have been otherized since their childhood and the reluctance of their respective families to accept their difference leaves a catastrophic impact. Puti's father and Sujan's family compel them to stick to cis-gender normative standards by quashing their actual desires. Both of them become victims of harassment in school; Puti's involvement in playing the role of 'Sarada Ma' is severely condemned by his father, after which he leaves home to stay with the Hijra community. Sujan is harassed by his friends, molested by a school staff, and is beaten up by his brother. All these experiences drag social stigma, religious beliefs, traditional gender norms to the forefront.

Freud's ideas about the id, ego, and superego are important for understanding trauma

and identity issues among queer individuals. The "id" refers to our basic needs for being real, loved and accepted; yet these emotions can be exacerbated by societal rejection as well as discrimination leading to emotional suffering. The "ego" mediates these desires against societal norms making it hard on individuals to live their true lives amidst people's expectations. The "superego" takes in external constraints – such as parental and societal standards – that create strict systems of gender and sexuality within which one feels guilty or ashamed about who they are or even develop an internalized homophobia. It is this conflict within that hampers finding a satisfying identity as queer individuals attempt to balance their true want (id) with societal demands (ego) and personal expectations (superego). This situation gets worse through trauma and discrimination further complicating one's ability to form a unified fulfilling identity. Freud's theory gives us an understanding of how these dynamics can affect queer people's psyche, self-acceptance, or overall well being. In "*Nagarkirtan*," Puti's case where she is turned down and beaten up for her identity in society, frames the interplay of Freud's id, ego, and superego. The desire for living authentically and being accepted emanates from the drive of the id to achieve immediate satisfaction; at the same time, the ego tries to balance that with living by societal norms and keeping the self safe from harm. Moreover, it is the superego, civilization's moralistic standards, condemning her identity, which is contributing to her trauma by way of internalized judgment. In a similar light, using Freud's framework, in "*Samantaral*," Sujan's displacement and struggling after a traumatic event can be critically perceived. His immediate reactions, like desperation and the urge to escape, reflect the id's demand for relief, and all his efforts to rationalize his situation and seek help manifest the role of the ego. It is through moral and ethical standards that he feels compelled to live up to that the superego comes to the fore, denoting how his desires clash with these internalized values. In view of this concept by Freud, it goes without saying how Puti and Sujan's reactions to trauma are shaped by the interplay between their primal desires, rational strategies, and moral expectations.

"The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish." (Freud, 154). Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) lends a view into trauma in queer communities elaborating how unconscious desires and unconscious conflicts come up before the individual as dreams. Stigmatization by society coupled with internalized homophobia does the trick of very deep repression,



often symbolically portrayed in dreams. Sujan and Puti in “*Samantara*” and “*Nagarkirtan*” struggled with this. Unfulfilled desires to live as women haunt them. Puti dreams of sex reassignment surgery but is bound by financial constraints. Sujan’s nephew Arka cannot understand the feelings of his uncle. Sujan’s visits to the prostitute area, his longing to touch a wet mud sculpture of a goddess, and his comments to Arka’s girlfriend about wanting a body like hers are all misinterpreted as perversion. These acts, in fact, are indicative of his deep longing to assume a female identity. The story shows the fumbling ways that pent-up desires and societal pressure express themselves in the lives of queers. The identity crisis they face can be understood in terms of Erik Erikson’s definition in his 1968 book, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* where an identity crisis is discussed as “a sense of discomfort with one’s sense of self, usually accompanied by a re-evaluation of values and goals concerning role in society.” The crisis prevents one from finding “identity satiation,” or a state of complete satisfaction and wholeness with one’s identity. To put it briefly, identity satiation represents an absolute condition of wholeness and the coherence of the self-concept.

In “*Nagarkirtan*,” Puti cross-dresses as a woman by wearing a saree and a long hair wig. His lover, Madhu, feels uneasy and asks about their relationship, “Can two men have a relationship?” When Puti’s wig falls on the floor in front of Madhu’s family, they are shocked and judge it as abnormal. Sujan’s family forces him to conform to traditional masculinity and restricts him from shaving his beard or moustache. One day Sujan’s nephew Arka finds him in a saree and makeup and is unable to accept it. Sujan appeals for comprehension, stating he is a girl inside, but nobody comprehends him. Drag queens are seen as performance artists, and cross-dressing is tolerated much more in this mode of entertainment. Queer cross-dressers breach mainstream gender standards, and there is far greater condemnation and criticism for these cross-dressers. Their cross-dressing can be considered ‘authentic’ expression of identity that exposes the biases of society and discomfort towards non-conforming gender identities.

Queer relationships are non-accepted in society. “*In Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*” (1993), Butler states “But which bodies come to matter and why is a question of power and discourse. Those that do not fit the normative framework are marginalized and rendered invisible.” (Butler). He points out that this refusal to entertain queer relationships is an operation of profoundly internalized norms that regulate not just

heteronormativity but also binary gender categories. The norms compose a social order that side lines and stigmatizes those relationships which, in some way, did not conform to traditional heterosexuality and binary gender expectations. The relationship between Puti and Madhu experienced intense scrutiny and rejection based on the bodies that socially appeared, which they never felt to be their true self. They were both assigned male at birth, and their relationship was considered sinful for not conforming to the standards of heteronormativity. When Madhu’s family discovered Puti was a transwoman, their reaction was quite hostile, and they demanded Madhu to leave the house, which speaks how pervasive transphobia is. Puti has faced serious ostracism in society where violence has accompanied it, in Nawadip, a group of hijras humiliated her by disbanding her clothes and announced her to the society as male, snatching her gender identity. The police treated Puti even worse, arrested her, and denied her relationship with Madhu, that “there are so many beautiful women, why he fell in love with a hijra” showing that there is a deep-seated prejudice. Under societal burdens, even Puti’s bisexual childhood lover, Subhas, had betrayed Puti and went on to marry her sister in order to fit into the heteronormative mold. In both cases, Madhu and Subhas were not able to withstand the high tide of social stigma, which cost them their personal and emotional sacrifices. The narrative captures the devastating nature of rigid gender norms and heteronormativity for queers who undertake hostilities in the less hospitable terrains of this earth.

Sujan in “*Samantara*” is not taken outside, and from the very beginning, it is felt that he has some sort of psychological disorder. In fact, he has never been taken to a doctor. His father feels that his son’s illness is psychological, not physical and hence he dismisses the very need of medical intervention. Sujan adopts an unusual way of coping up with his emotions- he starts talking with ants and birds and eventually gets solace. It has become an integral part of his routine to share his thoughts with those non-human entities whom he finds more humanly than the hollow men around him. The negative incidences and look for positive perspectives out of them. This kind of behaviour is a classic example of “cognitive reframing” or “cognitive restructuring”. This psychological theory developed by one of America’s premier psychiatrists, Aaron T. Beck, is geared to change the way one views negative thinking processes—enabling an individual to throw out such negative, distorted thoughts and to form better and healthier



positive or constructive thoughts. The basic premise is to improve emotional health through a change in perception and action based on a negative circumstance or event and, for Sujan, this was looking for the best amidst his small and confined world. He redefines his experiences so that he can find acceptance from his family and society according to his inside self. His cognitions are directed towards making him cope with the neglect and misunderstanding there is at home. There lies a mental strategy of helping him find a sense of belonging and space to keep sanity, other than what the limitations imposed on him allow. Sujan, therefore, is not passively accepting his circumstances but positively readjusting his outlook in order to foster resilience and emotional health.

Trauma is a central concept in psychoanalysis, which consists of deep perturbations in psychological functioning due to overwhelming experiences. Psychoanalytic theory was developed by an Austrian psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud during the late 1800s. In his 1896 essay "*Heredity and Aetiology of Neuroses*," he coins the term "psychoanalysis." According to Freud, behaviour is driven by unconscious thoughts and repressed memories, mostly those from childhood. He believes that to make these unconscious thoughts conscious is the pathway to healing and insight. The primary aim of psychoanalysis is to release repressed emotions and experiences. Discrimination and mistreatment of queer individuals lead to severe mental health challenges: increase the risk of suicide as the only way out from isolation. Social stigma, legal difficulties and the consistent epistemic violence against Puti and Sujan, catalyse their mental breakdown. Their struggle to survive the odds gradually turns them suicidal and both of them decide to end their lives. As Sigmund Freud explains in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)*, the "death drive" or "Thanatos" is an instinctual self-destructive principle acting against the "life drive" or "Eros". Puti and Sujan discover themselves in their non-normative identity and their "death drive" triumphs over "Eros". In this respect, the suicides of both the characters are portrayals of a combination of personal struggle and societal failures in the face of overwhelming emotional distress resulting into an 'escape from life's sufferings.'

Even after the attainment of apparent legal developments with respect to anti-discrimination laws, same-sex relationships, and gender identity protection, the LGBTQ+ community still remains on surmountable grounds. They do not enjoy the same status in society as the "male" and "female," due to deep-rooted prejudices Even with IPC Section 377

being decriminalized, the legal and social inequality against LGBTQ+ communities have not been ceased to exist. Though the celebration of Pride Month throughout the month of June commemorating the Stonewall Uprising in 1969, helps raise LGBTQ+ visibility, prejudices persist: cross-dressing and makeup are condemned as disruptive, pride flags are burnt, queer people become subject to abuse both in real and virtual life. Their virtual presence is threatened, their quest for equity and equality is mocked at and often they face life-threat and to the worst, are compelled to suicide. Such inhumane consequences of societal rejection and the fiascos of an (in)effective legal system are poignantly cinematographed in "*NagarKirtan*" and "*Samantaral*" adding fuel to the issue of (in)EQUALITY and the systematic denial of the basic human rights of the Queer.

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