

## Being in between the Gender in Indian Society: A Study on the Films *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan*

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### ABSTRACT

The Indian society is a patriarchal one believing in heterosexual normalcy, invalidating all other gender identities. Although people who are “in between” the gender have always desired for social acceptability, their existence is still not acknowledged in this society. Rudra, a gay and Puti, a transgender are the two protagonists from the films *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) and *Nagarkirtan* (2017) face challenges for not belonging to the existing gender binary in Indian society. Their journey is filled with toxicity and marginalization for their unconventional gender identity. This study focuses on how this patriarchal gender system has been oppressive towards the non-conformists. It also explores why homosexual and transgender individuals feel to undergo the transsexual transition to conform to the heterosexual dichotomy of the society. This is a qualitative content analysis. Considering two Indian films as its primary source, it explores several past researches as its secondary source. This article draws ideas from LGBTQ++ theory, "Gender Performativity" theory by Judith Butler, and "Representation" theory by Stuart Hall.

**Keywords-** LGBTQ++, Gender, Indian patriarchal society, Transgender, Non-conformity, Homosexual.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Every individual is born with a particular sex, and to function properly within a society, he or she must conform to the norms prevailing in that culture. Patriarchal discourse asserts that the relationship between gender and sex is innate and integral; thus using the term “sex” and “gender” interchangeably. But one’s sexual identity does not change over time, but how one sees themselves in relation to their gender may sometimes change depending on their culture and society. Drawing a line between them Butler argues, “Perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” (Butler p. 9)

While most people use and comprehend the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably, Butler draws a line between “sex” and “gender.” In her “performativity” theory, Butler also differentiates between sex and gender, arguing that the latter is a social

construction and that, as a result, a person’s gender should be based on how they perform, rather than on their biological sex. The individual’s success will determine whether he or she matures into a woman or a man. In traditional Indian society where heterosexuality is the sole “normal,” a man with feminine inclinations or a woman with masculine instincts is pressured to act like a man or a woman regardless of their true gender identity. As a result of heterosexual normativity in patriarchal culture, those who express sexual preferences that differ from the norm are often marginalized. Because of this, the transgender community and the gay community are often portrayed as repressed and stigmatized.

*Chitrangada: the Crowning Wish* (2012) is directed by Rituporno Ghosh (1963-2013) who played the role of the protagonist as well. Rudra is a dancer and play director who, despite his father’s disapproval, enjoys dressing and dancing in a manner that is traditionally not associated with men. He falls in love with Partho and their love relationship gets complicated as they cannot have a baby and the Indian society does not allow a gay couple to adopt children. That leads

Rudra to go for the transsexual journey to change him into a woman, complying with the gender binary of the society. Partho leaves him referring him as a “synthetic” woman. Rudra realizes at the end that however he tries, he cannot conform to the society’s gender binary; rather he should transcend it and get hold on to his own gender identity as a gay.

*Nagarkirtan* (2019) is directed by Kaushik Ganguly (1968-) where the protagonist Puti is by born a boy who feels that there might be a mistake with his body because all his desires and inclinations are of a woman; entitles himself as a transgender. He faces terrible oppression for not behaving like a boy and then starts to live with the Hijra community facing terrible marginalization in the society. Falling in love with Madhu, Puti decides to go through the surgery to change her sex and fix her body with her femininity only to find out that even if she changes her body, the patriarchal society will never accept her as a woman. Puti is marginalized, oppressed in the society and commits suicide as she cannot provide evidence of her being neither a woman nor a transgender.

Both the films have been interpreted individually from different perspectives by eminent scholars earlier. *Nagarkirtan* (2019) has been analyzed by (Mandal and Das) who draw parallels between the representation of the Hijra community in religious texts and their current dilemma in a patriarchal culture. (Bhattacharya) also attempts to uncover the violence that transgender people face on a daily basis as a result of having an atypical gender identity through the character of Puti in his study. *Chitrangada* (2012) has been discussed presenting the similarities in showing the unconventional gender identity between the ‘Chitrangadas’ of Tagore and Ghosh by (Sen). (Bhattacharjee) concentrates on the way third gender concerns are portrayed in Indian films, with a particular emphasis on this movie. (Bag) analyzes two movies—*Dance Like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani and *Chitrangada* by Rituparno Ghosh—to discuss the protagonists’ performativity and the ways in which they create their sense of self.

Upon looking at several researches that have been made on both the movies, no study has been found that has been done on both the films altogether. The focus of this paper is to provide a unique perspective on how this patriarchal gender system has been oppressive towards the non-conformists. The aim of this approach is to highlight the pain, frustration, and yearning for societal acceptability of homosexual and transgender people in the patriarchal society further emphasizing the pressing need to rethink the very concept of gender.

## II. METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative research analysis that applies the content analysis of the cinematic texts to understand

the protagonists’ ongoing challenges imposed on the homosexual and transgender people. The movies *Chitrangada* and *Nagarkirtan* are taken as the primary sources while various articles and past publications are taken as secondary sources. For the purpose of proving its conclusion, this study also makes use of terms from LGBTQ++ theory, Butler’s “Gender Performativity” theory, and Stuart Hall’s “Representation” theory.

## III. PERCEPTION OF GENDER IN INDIAN SOCIETY

The term “gender” refers to the qualities that an individual must possess to function normally in society. (Butler) argues that gender is a social construct and that patriarchal mechanisms force individuals to comply with the gender binaries. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, is unchangeable, regardless of cultural or environmental influences. However, patriarchal systems in Indian society use sexuality and gender identity interchangeably. That is why; the only identity available to a person is either that of a man or a woman, strictly adhering to the binary. In India, males are in positions of power, control, and authority of the society. Women are expected here to behave in a submissive way whereas men continue to be dominant in the society. Both the genders have fixed gender roles to follow such as men have to be strong, controlling, behave in a manly way, wearing particular clothes whereas women have to be soft, taking care of the children, cook at home and listen to their men.

Homosexuality is a taboo subject in India and has been for quite some time. Members of the LGBTQ community continue to battle for the equality and respect to which they feel they are entitled in the twenty-first century. There is a major problem with the frequency of discrimination against the LGBTQ community in Indian society, where the phrase “gay-sex” is still socially undesirable. It is interesting to note that the first known demonstration of LGBT rights took place on August 11, 1992, exactly 45 years after India earned independence from British domination. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has been in effect for about 150 years. Section 377 states, “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with <sup>1</sup> [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine” (*India Code: Section Details*). People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) have been campaigning for years to have Section 377 repealed or amended to legalize and regulate homosexual behavior.

#### IV. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF *CHITRANGADA* AND *NAGARKIRTAN*

*Chitrangada* (2012) portrays Rudra, a choreographer who struggles with his own perception of gender identity. His family members anticipate that he will grow up to be brave and courageous, particularly his father who can be characterized as a stereotypical patriarch who expects that his son will behave like a man and embrace the sexuality he was born with. It is inconceivable to him for Rudra to follow feminine gender roles, such as the ability to dance like a woman, to put on “ghungoor,” or to dress unlike a man. During the final scene, while his mother and father were eating supper together, his father once more exclaimed, “A boy will be like a boy, isn’t that natural?”

The relationship that exists between Rudra and Partho is not typical to the patriarchal society. Partho is a bisexual whereas Rudra is a homosexual having similar goals to move in together and jointly adopt a child. However, because the Indian society does not permit two male couples to have a love relationship and adopt a child, Rudra makes the decision to alter his body into a female one. The Indian society gives the appearance of heterosexual couple complete normalcy, whilst the lesbian and gay couple is not accepted in the society. Even if they want to live a normal life and participate in this society, they must conform to the heterosexual marriage ideal, which is a patriarchal concept.

*Nagarkirtan* (2017) portrays Puti aka Parimal who feels that everything about him is feminine except the body. Unable to cope up with the male role that he has to perform in his family like wearing ‘kurta pajama’ and being strong, he left the house and join the ‘ghetto’ of the transgender people, named himself as Puti. In this new place she could dress like a woman as she had always wanted to. Her relationship with Madhu is a prominent one as he is willing to help her with the sex-transformation surgery. But his persistent appeal with Puti not to cut her hair until his internal struggle can transcend his prejudices of dating a man. It symbolizes numerous people of society’s inability to overcome the gender belief system established in them at an early age.

Madhu and Puti speak with Manabi Bandopadhyay, India’s first openly transgender college principal, about the details and cost of the surgery. She explains that the entire surgical procedure is intricate and costly. She also says that this is not the end of her problems, as other female academics routinely discriminate against her by denying her access to their restrooms. Nevertheless, she urges Puti to have the treatment because it will alleviate her current daily suffering. Collectively, these images depict the pain of the transgender community in India and the interminability of that suffering unless the mentality of the people is addressed.

#### V. RECONCEPTUALIZING THE GENDER IDENTITY OF RUDRA IN *CHITRANGADA*

In *Chitrangada*, Rudra is portrayed as a gay man which is the gender minority in the LGBTQ++ community. According to (Gay Center), the word “gay” refers to the “people whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex.” Rudra can also be examined as a “drag” gay in the film who follows the style opposite to his sexual identity. Rudra and Partho’s romantic relationship exhibits their identity of being gay and bisexual, a part of LGBTQ++ community.

Butler states that gender is “performative.” She thinks that one’s gender should be determined through how he or she acts, performs rather than one’s in born sexual identity and says, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (Butler 33). Rudra appears to embrace his existence depending on his performance, since he chooses to dance and have sexual relationships with men despite the societal restrictions on homosexuality. Though he has lived his entire life in opposition to the gender binary, he resolves to submit to it to become a mother disregarding the idea that motherhood is also a “performance.” Taking care of a child and raising it is part of continual “performance” and maturation, regardless of one’s ability to give birth. He realizes whether he can “perform” the responsibility of a mother is all that matters.

For his non-conforming gender identity, Rudra faces social, personal, familial, and psychological marginalization. His father, a genuine believer in patriarchal conditioning, is against the concept of his son dancing with “gunghoor” in his legs. Unfortunately, he is too constrained by the norms of his society to give his son the freedom to dance. When questioned about switching careers from engineering to dance his father asked, “Why study engineering then?” and Rudra replied, “You forced me to.” (21:09-21:21)

Stuart Hall discusses the “regime of representation” that occurs through the representational practice of stereotyping in his book *Representation*. The symbolic function of stereotyping is to establish boundaries and exclude everything that does not belong (Hall). The distinction between “Us” and “the other” is clearly delineated by stereotyping. As it categorizes persons according to the norm and excludes the “the other,” stereotyping is also an instrument of knowledge and power (Hall). He also believes that it entirely depends on the individual who “represents” “the other,” since his/her perspective and point of view have the most impact on the “representation.” In the Indian patriarchal society, where the patriarch has the ability to determine the gender entity, it is entirely up to them how they “represent” non-heterosexual individuals. The

patriarchal upbringing of society demonstrates that only heterosexuals are considered as “Us,” while all other sexual identities are treated as the “Other.” Consequently, individuals with diverse sexual orientations, like as Rudra, are forced to be marginalized in society and to change their sexual identity to conform to the gender binary of heteronormative society.

It is apparent from the conversation with the physician that Rudra feels so ostracized in society due to his sexuality that he feels compelled to assert his existence to let the world know that he also exists. To conform to the gendered conventions of society, he does everything, including enduring this excruciatingly unpleasant procedure. He says, “To me, it’s a technical necessity. All I need from you is a certificate that I’m a woman. No other changes. I am not going wear a sari. So, to me, it’s more of a cosmetic surgery.” (01:10:03-1:10:22)

For the reason Rudra gets ready to go through the transsexual journey, the only reason for which he wants to fit into the gender binary seems to betray him, leave him in a lonely state saying,

Partho: say if I have to have a child, then I would have my own child, my own blood.... Ask yourself Rudy. I never wanted you to change. The man I loved was not this ha..ha..half thing. If I have to have a woman, I’d rather have a real woman. Not the synthetic one. I’m Sorry. (01:36:40-01:38:05)

He decides to stop this transformation process because he has the transcendental realization that he should not change himself to fit into the binary of gender identities. Rather, he should search for his own “self”; he should focus on being “I.”

Rudra denies the mere “gender identification” and defines himself by his soul, his creativity, and his artistic intelligence. This is also expected of a society, in which “in-between” gender individuals will not be required to conform to a gender, but will instead be introduced and identified by their “performance.” Rudra realizes at the end of the film that no one can be exclusively male or female. Every individual is perpetually in the process of forming their identity. Gender is a continual process as well. Rudra finally realizes this and says,

“- Why is a building called a building even if it is complete?

- Why? - Because no transition is ever complete. It is an ongoing process.” (02:06:19)

## **VI. PUTI: A SPLIT PERSONALITY BETWEEN BODY AND MIND IN NAGARKIRTAN**

(Sikder) identifies transgender woman “a term used to define the people who was assigned as a male at birth, but at a later stage of life they realise that they identify as a female” (n.p.). Puti, the protagonist of *Nagarkirtan* (2017) is not transgender by birth. S/he was

formerly known as Parimal and has always been attracted to men. S/he was in love with his/her homosexual master, Shubhash da. His lover, however, betrayed him and married his sister. Parimal was unable to endure this, so he fled his house. Later, he joined the transgender group, turned himself into Puti, and began living with them.

From the opening scene of this film, Parimal has always possessed a feminine inclination. He was always sexually attracted to men, such as Shubhash da and subsequently Madhu. S/he enjoys dressing like a lady, and his/her qualities and attitudes are all feminine. In one conversation, s/he tells Madhu that s/he is a woman with the wrong body. Because of his sexual identity as a man, he is expected to follow the gender role and behavior as well. S/he claims, “Because, I am actually a girl, Madhu da! They could not make me a boy just by making me wear a shirt and pants.” (00:52:45- 00:53:51)

Judith Butler offers the way people can reduce the gender-based violence and the fixation of gender based on one’s sex. She suggests that one’s gender identity should be defined by one’s ‘performance’, not by one’s ‘natural body.’ Thus, one should give importance to one’s “doing” rather than one’s “being.” She says, “gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler 25). As s/he applies lipstick and saari, Puti’s character is observed to “perform” as a woman. S/he is aware that s/he is a female on the inside and desires a romantic relationship with Madhu da. As Beauvoir argues, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” (Beauvoir 301). Her performance demonstrates that her gender identity should be female, but s/he inhabits a masculine body.

Puti’s sufferings did not end for running away from her parental house; rather, it was a beginning. She joins the “Hijra” community and starts to live with them as now nobody can question her dress up and desire. Only then does she realize that her journey becomes more difficult because she belongs to the marginalized group of people of the society. Now her journey is not only about her sexual identity but also as a human being. Because transgender individuals are stigmatized as outcasts in Indian society. Stereotypical social classification makes them to be treated as untouched, neglected. As Stuart Hall talks about stereotyping, “stereotypes are used to maintain the boundaries between different groups of people because racial boundaries have proven to be fallible” (Hall p. 258). These individuals are deprived of their basic human rights and are compelled to beg for money or steal it from others to survive because of the apparent hostility towards these “other” gender identity. (Hall) also argues about stereotypes, “is threatening, a site of danger, of

negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the ‘Other’” (Hall p. 238).

Transgender people in Indian society experience hatred and aggression as the society’s “Other,” as Hall describes them. In a heteronormative society, the gender identities of man and woman are regarded as “Us,” while all other gender identities are regarded as “Other.” As depicted in the film, individuals are unwilling to move into the apartment located close to Hijra’s residence. They believe that because Hijra reside there, the place is not a “bhodrolok para.” Consequently, it is apparent that they are considered as society’s “Other.”

Puti is interested in undergoing the transsexual surgery so that she may better align her body with her female instincts. S/he says to Madhu, “I have been like this since birth. A girl! There is a mistake in my body. It needs to be rectified” (00:53:55-00:54:00). The incomparable qualities of Puti’s body and mind cause her to suffer not just socially but also psychologically. S/he longs to be a woman who is true to herself in every way. For a person who is interested in transitioning to a different gender identity, there is a procedure that must be completed. According to National Centre for Health Research, “Before beginning transgender transitional medical treatment, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) recommends meeting with a mental health professional for a gender dysphoria diagnosis and psychotherapy. According to the American Psychiatric Association, a gender dysphoria diagnosis is when a person’s physical or assigned gender (such as someone born female or born male) does not match the gender they feel (for example, feeling they are male or female). Most doctors will not offer most medical transitioning options unless the individual has this diagnosis” (Newman). It is obvious from the research that the surgery of Puti was very tough and very hard to afford. But s/he still wanted to do it and was preparing money for the surgery because s/he feels the pain of the procedure will be less than the suffering, s/he was living with this ‘incomplete’ identity.

The incomparable qualities of Puti’s body and mind cause her to suffer not just socially but also psychologically. S/he longs to be a woman who is true to herself in every way. S/he desires to convert into a lady, marry Madhu, and have a “normal” life. S/he cannot do it due to the expense of sex reassignment surgery, which s/he cannot afford as a member of the lower middle class. This raises the question of whether s/he would be able to live as a woman in this heteronormative culture, even if s/he could physically convert into a woman. Even if Puti could transform her ‘male’ body into a ‘female’ one, she would not be able to live a better life in this ‘gendered’ society. Because here, being transgender is considered a social shame from which no transgender individual can escape. Even if they have surgery to acquire their “own” gender, society will never accept their “new” identity.

S/he could never live as an ‘individual’ in a culture where s/he was socially ostracized for his/her whole life. S/he lived with transgender individuals and desired to alter his/her body to match her intuition. S/he was unable to do it where s/he was economically marginalized due to lack of funds. S/he was ultimately forced to leave Madhu’s home and endure public abuse from his/her own community members because s/he was unable to provide proof that s/he was transgender. Here, s/he was forced to be physically and mentally ostracized. S/he commits suicide at finally, without having a particular gender identity of being a man, a woman or a transgender. Manabi Bandopadhyay says something in her talk with Puti that summarizes the struggles of transgender individuals. When Puti asks, “It is very painful?” She replied, “The operation’s pain is lesser than the pain you are living with, Puti.” (00:37:06-00:37:15)

## **VII. VOICING AGAINST PATRIARCHAL INHUMANITY TOWARDS THE GENDER NON- CONFORMIST**

The fixed gender dichotomy that exists in today’s patriarchal culture needs to be altered. Because of this gender binary, people of diverse gender identities, such as those in the LGBTQ community, are subject to violence. Those who don’t identify with either gender strictly are completely marginalized in our culture. Otherwise, many more Putis will have to sacrifice their lives for not fitting in, and many more Rudra will have to endure unimaginable suffering to conform to the gender norms of society. There needs to be a shift away from gender role “stereotypes.” Stuart Hall writes in Representation about the “stereotypes,” “reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall 257). If the gender binary can be rethought, then perhaps the violence against gay and transgender people can be reduced.

This article offers to follow Hall’s strategy of “reversal of the stereotypes” and rewriting the gender norms to offer the LGBTQ people having a beautiful society to live in. In this new civilization, binary gender distinctions will no longer exist. All negative gender stereotypes will be replaced with positive images, so that people do not have to alter themselves to conform to the binary gender system. If Rudra and Puti from these films had the opportunity for gender neutrality and had not been forced to conform to gender preconceptions, then Rudra would not have had to endure this painful operation, and Puti may not have had to sacrifice her life. The decision by the Supreme Court of India on September 6, 2018, to overturn Section 377 and declare that homosexual acts carried out between two people with both parties’ knowledge and consent will no longer be considered a criminal offense marked a watershed

moment for the LGBTQ community in India. It is a matter of hope that the introduction of acknowledging each gender identity in this society has started.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

As a result of its rigid adherence to gender binaries, Indian patriarchal society makes it impossible for individuals to live authentically in accordance with their gender identification. Both *Chitrangada* (2012) and *Nagarkirtan* (2017) depict the struggles of their respective protagonists, Rudra and Puti, as they try to conform to the gender norms of a patriarchal society. Everyone in the LGBTQ community should be free to identify with and act in accordance with their preferred gender. They shouldn't have to hide their sexuality or gender to fit in with society's standards of heterosexuality. All members of the LGBTQ community can see themselves reflected in the violence and hardships endured by Rudra and Puti in these two films. The world should look different for the LGBTQ community, and the way we talk about them needs to be reworked. This study attempts earnestly to show the marginalization of the people of "in between gender" of the society through the characters of both the films. It concludes to find out that homosexual and transgender people are facing terrible oppression for not fitting into the gender binary in the society.

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