

Sartorial Objects, Transgender Bodies and Destabilized Meaning: A Study of Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan*

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Abstract

Kaushik Ganguly's 2017 film *Nagarkirtan* narrates the story of Puti, a transgender belonging to a hijra group in Kolkata, who desires for a gender reconfirmation surgery. Puti's sartorial choices help her construct or emulate the appearance of a body she longs for but cannot avail due to her poor financial condition. On one hand, her sartorial choices help her to express her felt gender; on the other hand, it betrays her by either limiting her identity or giving out misinformation about the body that lies beneath. The paper uses Butler's idea of impermanence of meaning behind signs and Halberstam's idea of 'trans' being a destabilizing element of societal norms to present a qualitative analysis of the trans protagonist's social performances through sartorial preferences as depicted in *Nagarkirtan*. Since the film under discussion shows its transgender protagonist at various stages of life, the paper also discusses her clothing choices throughout the years to explore the complex relationship among the clothes, the trans body and societal expectations.

Keywords: Sartorial objects, transgender, performance, sexed body, clothing

In a scene from Kaushik Ganguly's 2017 film *Nagarkirtan* a little boy from the village of Nabadwip, West Bengal, enters his house and excitedly announces, "Chotka has come, with a woman" (Ganguly, 2017, 01:03:52). He understands that a woman is accompanying his uncle because the person in question, known as Puti, looks like a woman as well as dresses like one. No one in Nabadwip seems to question the gender identity of this unacquainted woman as her performance is not at odds with her *apparent* sexed body. However, during a *kirtan* organized on the eve of *Dol Purnima* Puti's wig unwittingly and dramatically comes undone and the loss of a sartorial¹ object subverts everyone's assumption about her sexed body, and she is revealed as a trans woman. What has been kept hidden from the participants of the *kirtan* is Puti's sexed body or biological constitution by means of layers of sartorial objects. These objects constitute her gender performance in cognizance with the identity she desires and wants to embody.

The term 'trans' not only problematizes any direct relationship between a body and its social performances, but also denies specifying the stage of transition the body is at. A person can be termed as "trans" if s/he has gone through surgical or hormonal or both treatments to change their biological identity. They can also be termed such if they have gender ambiguity or dissatisfaction with their biological identity and has not yet opted for or does not want to go through any medical or surgical procedure. Therefore, what we see of the trans person's social performance does not *necessarily* indicate the sexed body which is performing, as the body may or may not have started transitioning.

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In Puti's case, as in the case of other trans bodies shown in the film, sartorial choices give them the appearance (hence social performance) they desire. Such choices also become matter of contestation and misunderstanding, which result into mayhem and tragedy. The film hints at the absence of any stable or fixed social meaning behind sartorial objects. The paper aims to explore this complex dynamics between trans bodies and its performances by means of sartorial choices in the context of Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan*.

Kaushik Ganguly has directed more than twenty films that cover a host of subjects like physical intimacy in *Shunyo E Buke* (2005), psychological complexities of a Foley artist in *Shabdo* (2012), a famous child actor's sinking into oblivion in *Apur Panchali* (2014), the marginalized state of circus dwarfs in *Chotoder Chobi* (2014), and gradual disappearance of single screen movie theatres in Kolkata in *Cinemawala* (2016). But three of his works solely focus on alternative gender and sexual identities. The said works are his telefilm *Ushnatar Janye* (2003), and feature films *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) and *Nagarkirtan* (2017). His works on queer subject matters embody "converging vulnerabilities" of its protagonists and reveal that "many queer lives are lived among us, escaping notice, often because of our collective indifference, or worse, neglect." (Chatterjee, 2019, para 9)

The plot of *Nagarkirtan*

Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan* tells the story of a non-normative romance where the man, Madhu (played by Ritwick Chakraborty), is an urban poor living in Kolkata and working as a local Chinese restaurant delivery man by day and a flautist for a *Sri Krishna kirtan* group at night. The other person involved in this romance is called Puti/Parimal/ Pari/Rinku (played by Riddhi Sen) at various stages of her life. Puti, born as Parimal, was biologically assigned the male sex but feels that he has a woman's soul trapped in a male body. Parimal's family's rejection of their son's feminine mannerisms and his lover Subhash's yielding to heteronormativity and marrying Parimal's elder sister Rina made Parimal leave the town. He joins a *hijra* group or *gharana* in Kolkata and gets renamed as Puti. Instead of going through a ritual castration or *nirvana*, she yearns for a complete medical transformation and "not leave an inch of Parimal behind on this body" (Ganguly, 2017, the author's translation, 00:58:42). Despite having occasional doubts about Puti's appearance and desire, Madhu helps her in her quest for a potential gender reconfirmation surgery. However, when Puti's guise of being a biological woman unceremoniously gets exposed in front of Madhu's family and community, she elopes and subsequently gets publicly beaten by another *hijra* group due to a misunderstanding. She finally finds herself in police custody where she kills herself by hanging. The movie ends when Madhu visits Puti's *hijra* household in clothes she used to wear.

In the film, Puti and Madhu's non-heterosexual romance is full of tropes commonly used to depict heterosexual romances in mainstream Indian movies and many of such tropes pertain to sartorial choices made by female actors to portray hyper-feminine characters. Towel wrapped (here *gamcha* wrapped) head with wet locks dangling on the forehead, head covered with scarf while carrying a lamp helping the hero navigate his way through dark corridors, fixing *anchal* of sari in front of the mirror, doing *shringar* to meet the beloved are references to heterosexual cinematic romances. Such

visual references or tropes are juxtaposed with visuals of a transwoman shaving stubble or putting layers of women's undergarments to emulate the contours of a feminine body. Images of female bodies that are not biologically so, portrayed as hyper-feminine or aiming to be such in keeping with conventional Indian film 'heroines', problematize any model of "one mind/one body" (Carver, 2007, p. 120). Consequently, the slipperiness of that notion enunciates the futility behind the search for any permanence of meaning behind signs such as gender specific clothing.

Identity categorization and self-expression

Butler (1993) in her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" addresses the ontological anxiety behind specifying one's identity by means of categorization. She says,

. . . identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of a lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies. (Butler, 1990/1993, p. 308)

This desire to keep any indicative sign void of any permanence of meaning gives space for exploration of one's identity without the pressing need to subscribe to any category in particular. Halberstam (2018) questions any essentialist view of gender, and thus keeping any sign void of any particular significance. He states in his book *Trans**,

When logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise. (Halberstam, 2018, p. xii, Preface)

Puti's situation is complicated if the categories of transsexual (bodily transformation) and transgender (social performance) are followed rigidly. As a child Parimal gravitated towards feminine clothing and make-up, as an adult Puti longs for medical transformation but has already started to live the life of a woman through her performance. But her dressing like a woman is not merely cross-dressing for erotic or stage performance purposes, it is a necessity for self-expression. So Puti's trans identity is not a fixed category; rather it "puts pressure on all modes of gendered embodiment and refuses to choose between the identitarian and the contingent forms of trans identity" (Halberstam, 2018, p. xiii). A trans person represents the possibility of transforming or changing what one is born as, which basically renders any sign of identification void of any permanence of meaning whatsoever. Moreover, a trans body can be at any stage of medical or social transformation and still be called a trans. Therefore, if we can call Puti a transwoman, who feels like a woman, dresses like one, wants to get transformed medically but lacks the financial means to do so, we can also call Manabi Bandyopadhyay, who plays herself in the film, a transwoman who shares the same desires as Puti and undergoes the surgery but is still on hormones.

Halberstam (2018) uses the term 'Trans*' to accommodate such varied stages and crossroads of physical and social transitions in which the asterisk part of the term, "modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and

identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis” (Halberstam, 2018, p. 4). Hence, the asterisk part enunciates the impermanence of meaning when speaking about a transgender body and “keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be” (p. 4).

About the instability offered by not committing to any fixed category or not ascribing to a particular meaning to any sign Butler (1990/1993) says,

I am permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling blocks, and understand them, and even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble. In fact, if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting to me: it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with. (p. 308)

The interrelation of biological and performative identities takes into consideration the sex chromosomal pairings XX and XY and “the social ‘coating’ on the sex” (Srivastava, 2014, p. 370). Now the ‘coating’ is primarily the way of constructing social identities through performance. To summarize Butler, gender is “enacted in practice through repetitious citation of this *mélange* in every kind of thought and action through which human subjects are understood and valued” (Butler as cited in Carver, 2007, p. 129). And this performance incorporates various issues like family, marriage, motherhood, fatherhood, pregnancy, dressing, body movements, and sexuality etc. that in any number of combinations create identity and imbue meaning to the biological body. This performing “resonates with the idea of ‘becoming’ gender” (Srivastava, 2014, p. 370). The model of trans issue that *Nagarkirtan* deals with is that of a

. . . woman in a (wrongly) male body, necessitating the external transition from male to female body. This model, co-responding to the biomedical model of transexuality, has a relatively recent genealogy in the Bengali media and particularly in the much publicized transition narratives of two trans women, Manobi Bandyopadhyay and Tista Das. (Dutta, 2015, p. 263)

In the film, Puti wants to materialize her quest for transition while she is in the *hijra* community unlike Manobi or Tista who have no connection with a structure like *hijra* group that has an inherent power relation of its own. Each of the *hijra gharanas* has *guru*, *naiks*, and *chelas* (Rao, 2017) and they have very clearly defined roles to play. Such power relations require Puti to follow the orders of her *guru*, Arati, any exception of which brings punishment. Moreover, she is not one of the upper-middle class gender queer characters who are results of neo-liberal economy. She is not Rudra, Abhiroop or Ornob from *Chitrangada*, *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Memories of March* respectively whose sartorial preferences and medical transformation (or the rejection of it) are not curbed by their finances. However, Puti, a subaltern both inside and outside the group, has cheap clothing on her body that gives her the desired feminine appearance and allows her to perform her desired gender.

Portrayal of transgender characters in Indian cinema

“Transgender” is not a category that has remained unrepresented in Indian movies, but in most of the cases in the late 1980s to early 2000 transgender in Indian movies is either a

villainous figure or a companion to the queen in a period drama where the character mostly remains unexplored. Movies such as *Sadak*, *Sangharsh*, *Murder 2* have represented transgender characters but “None of those films, however, are informed by the discourses of identity politics made current by the post-liberal LGBTQ movement” (Bakshi & Sen, 2012, p. 168). The reading down of section 377 of Indian Penal Code in 2009 and the tug of war that has been going on between the Indian national policies and pro LGBTQIA+ organizations ever since have paved ways to more perceptive and analytical queer representation in Indian cinema. If we specifically speak about representation of the transgender, films like *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Chitrangada*, *Samantaral*, *Super Deluxe*, *Qissa*, *Nagarkirtan* are being produced by different regional Indian film industries and in most cases they are getting considerable attention by audience and critics alike. A more humane exploration of the transgender characters – be it their struggle for social assimilation, familial recognition, sexual freedom, assertion of motherhood, medical transformation etc. can be found in more regional movies than mainstream ones. Nevertheless, the representation of transgender bodies have moved away from stock villainous characters towards a more poignant and humane exploration of their stories.

Kaushik Ganguly does not gloss over the sense of unease that accompanies the presence of a transgender person among heteronormativeⁱⁱ cisgenderⁱⁱⁱ people. Trans identity creates “category crisis” (Garber, 1992, p. 16) since it problematizes clearly defined gender binaries. *Hijra* is a category which the urban population is more or less familiar with as they encounter *hijras*, not without disdain, in traffic signals or at home when a child is born. Apart from the demand of alms by the *hijra* groups, the issue that unsettles the cisgender population is that the latter group really does not know how to categorize the former, how to deal with the varying levels of bodily transition they are at and hence how to approach them or deal with them. *Nagarkirtan* explores this anxiety and suspicion concerning the ambiguous state of the trans body hidden or accentuated by feminine garments. The film does not shy away from people’s general curiosity and anxiety about the secrets the sartorial pieces hide. The film addresses queries like— Is the clothing of the trans person an exhibition and indication of the ongoing medical transformation from a male body to a female one? Or does it indicate the desired end of the transitioning body? Does it only express the dissonance between assigned identity and a felt one? Or does it merely create a ploy to exploit casual commuters by extracting money without any question about gender identity being involved?

The film starts with a tribute to Rituparno Ghosh, ace filmmaker, writer and actor from Kolkata who enjoyed popularity for his films as well as his expression of queer identity. As a tribute to him, the screen flashes the lines “Poro jonome hoiyo Radha” with Ghosh’s photo (Ganguly & Ganguly, 2017). This sets the tone for *Nagarkirtan* and its exploration of inexhaustible forms of gender identity markers. The line is taken from a Bangla song by Subhadra Sharma which roughly translates into “Be Radha when you are reborn”. The suggestion of transition into Radha, a woman, articulates Ghosh’s desire for an alternative gender identity. Dasgupta and Bakshi (2018a) says, “Ghosh’s radicalism in its myriad forms indeed brought queerness out of the closet to dwell in the *bhadrolok*’s living room” (p. 105) and thus paving ways for future generation of filmmakers to put

forward a more non-stereotypical and sympathetic representation of queer figures on screen. Ghosh came out as queer, later in his life. He has been a subject of media attention for his effeminate mannerisms and his desire to go back to the pre-colonial androgynous ways of dressing. Dasgupta and Bakshi (2018b) remarks,

The linkages between pre-colonial dressing and androgyny to contemporary queer fashion amongst Bengali males is exemplified by Ghosh who acknowledges his queer sartorial choices as an invocation and nostalgia for a precolonial/ancient Indian tradition. (p. 70)

The clear demarcation between masculine and feminine clothing loses its distinctive value when it gets placed on the body of a non-normative person like Ghosh. The queer documentary film director protagonist Abhiroop of Ganguly's film *Arekti Premer Golpo* is played by Ghosh himself where his sartorial choices gets cinematically explored. A subtle critical exploration of whether Abhiroop wants to hide behind his effeminate hair style and his shaving of his head as a way of metaphorically coming out of the closet through sartorial expression find its way in *Nagarkirtan* as well. Madhu's horror at her removal of Puti's wig is a running metaphor and a paradox which underscores society's need to demarcate between identities through specific signifiers in one's appearance.

Sartorial objects and expressions in *Nagarkirtan*

Nagarkirtan begins with a *kirtan* that speaks of Radha's desire for *madhur abhishar* [secret meeting], a forbidden voyage taken to meet her beloved Krishna. While the song is played in the background we see that a woman puts on sari and leaves her house stealthily at 4 a.m. The camera focuses on the woman's curves, her casually fixing her *anchal*, setting her long hair and swaying her handbag only to subvert audience's expectation in the following scene. The apparent feminine contours of the body clad with hyper-feminine red and yellow floral georgette sari, yellow blouse with elaborate criss-cross pattern on the back, red lipstick, dangling earrings, anklets producing characteristic sound, high heels and the reference to mythological Radha cinematically reveal the body of a transgender. As the film progresses the audience gets informed that this woman is a transgender who desires gender reconfirmation surgery. The movie makes visual references to multiple sartorial objects related to the feminine performance by trans women who are either at various levels of medical transition or are desiring it. Inside the *hijra* household where Master Babu Gokul rents a cheap room we see paraphernalia of female garments hanging on the drying line, stacks of glass bangles, *bindis* stuck on the mirror, bottles of cheap nail polish etc. What subverts the significance of the above mentioned sartorial objects used by Bengali women is that they are worn by people with gender identities at odds with their biological constitution.

The film's engagement with clothing and bodies that wear them is underscored in another scene where Madhu peeps inside a house through window shutters and discovers three transgender persons at various stages of undressing. The themes of dressing and undressing continue to construct its exploration of what clothing means to a trans person and how it is different from cisgender people's dressing up. In another scene (Ganguly, 2017, 00:14:21) the camera shows the corridor of Master Babu Gokul's shabby apartment. At one glance, the camera shows a few transwomen sitting on the floor with

different musical instruments. At the front of the long passage way, Madhu is playing flute and Puti is offering him tea. At the far end of it, an old man, another tenant of the house, is sitting on his armchair and the camera focuses on his wife serving him tea. All the women in the scene are wearing conventional women's clothing— *sari* or *salwar-kameez*: yet, all of them are not same in their biological constitution. The older lady is born with a woman's body, the trans women sitting on the floor have possibly gone through ritual castration or are at different stages of transition and Puti has not opted for castration and is yearning for a surgically transformed body. The scene (Ganguly, 2017, 00:14:21) brings varied biological bodies with similar sartorial choices that points at the futility of ascribing any particular signification behind the sartorial pieces.

The scene of bathing in the Ganga (Ganguly, 2017, 00:09:51) and the multiple uses of *gamcha* become symbolic of gender specific use of that single piece of absorbent fabric, but soon after its meaning becomes destabilized and the signifier becomes hollow when Puti's trans body is taken into consideration. In this scene Master Babu and Madhu take a bath in the river when Puti enters the *ghat*. Madhu is wearing the *gamcha* around his waist like a sarong while rubbing his body with soap, a very public display of his masculine body. On the other hand Puti, who possesses the same anatomy as Madhu but projects herself as a female with the help of clothing, is wearing a cotton dressing gown and using the *gamcha* as a *dupatta* or a scarf to cover her chest which is a gesture common for women when they go for a public bath in the river. Thus, to assume that gender specific uses of garments are codified by what lies underneath the garments, that is, the body, is rendered problematic in this scene. Adding to the nuances provided by clothing pieces in this scene, Puti starts emptying her bucket which holds pieces of women's outer and innerwear while periodically fixing her *gamcha/ dupatta*. In this scene, the sartorial pieces underline their performative functions, which clearly is not the same for everyone possessing similar physical or biological attributes.

One of the actors in this film is Manabi Bandyopadhyay who plays herself. Manabi is India's first transgender person to be appointed as a college Principal and she currently works in Krishnanagar Women's College in Nadia, West Bengal. Kaushik Ganguly uses Manabi, who was known as Shomnath prior transformation, as a manifestation of Puti's transsexual desire. Puti has never met a surgically transformed and hormone treated trans woman before Manabi, something she aspires to be. Madhu gets to know about Manabi from a television interview and brings Puti to her to inquire about the procedures and expenses of the gender reconfirmation surgery. In one scene Puti and Manabi sit face to face and Puti says with exuberance, "*Apni darun Madam! Ekkebare meye-chele*" ["You are extraordinary Madam! Fully a woman"] (Ganguly, 2017, 00:34:02). For her Manabi is the model who has her male biological body transformed into a female one and the feminine sartorial objects on Manabi's body are 'in sync' with her female body. But, as per Manabi's experience, "*Manush roj gale chor mere bujhiye dibe ashol ar nokol er tofat ta*" ["People will teach you differences between real and fake the hard way"] (Ganguly, 2017, 00:36:27). Manabi reinstates the discriminations she has faced in spite of legally being a woman. Keeping legalities at bay and based on just appearance, both Manabi and Puti do not wear unisex clothing like trouser and t-shirt, but *sari* and *salwar-kameez-dupatta* respectively that are distinctively

feminine. Both of their bodies are feminine, in the conventional sense of the term, but beneath Manabi's *sari* there is a female body in the medical sense of the term. And beneath Puti's *salwar-kameez-dupatta* there is a man's body that is trying to emulate that of a woman's with layers of inner and outerwear in order to assert her felt gender.

Crossdressing and the trans gaze

Halberstam (2005) suggests, it is important to look into the past of a transgender film to deal with or understand the trans gaze being expressed through the cinematic medium. He says,

The exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female, causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film's past in order to live the film's present and prepare themselves for the film's future. (pp. 77-78)

Nagarkirtan follows a non-linear narrative technique occasionally reverting to Puti's past as Parimal. In one of the flashback scenes (Ganguly, 2017, 01:14:25) the viewers can see young Parimal wearing sari and wig to impersonate Sri Sharada Devi in a 'dress as you like' segment organized by a local club. This instance enrages Parimal's father because the occasional impersonation is not just a random instance of cross-dressing, it is also a continuation of Parimal's fascination with feminine garments. Parimal's gender preference at such an early age destabilizes the traditional notion of Bengali nuclear family consisting of father, mother, daughter and son with consolidated gender identities. So the masculine watchmaker father, who essentially believes in "a heterosexual paradigm of oppositional duality, which prescribes gender roles and gender social codes", also maintains that, "those who violate these roles and codes are categorized as transgressive, condemned as obscene, and perceived as appropriate subjects for various forms of persecution and punishment" (Sharma, 2006, pp. 1-2). The father criticizes his son's preference for feminine dresses and immediately orders his wife to undo the feminine sartorial markers the child gravitates towards. He disapprovingly says to his wife, "*Tomake ei niye aksho bar holo bolchi, Parimol ke ar meyeder poshak porabe na*" ["I have told you thousand times not to allow Parimal wear women's clothes"] (Ganguly, 2017, 01:15:47). Such an act of prohibition, the father believes, will ensure the repositioning of the minor transgender subject from the boundaries of gender subversion to a more secure arena of masculine behaviour. Interestingly, children's cross-dressing for 'dress as you like' around the Indian subcontinent is not uncommon. But young Parimal cross-dressing as Sharada Devi as a continuation of his fascination for feminine objects is not the same as other children's occasional cross-dressing just for winning a prize or stand out from other contestants in school or club functions. The film's flashback to Puti's childhood shows that Parimal could not reiterate the performance (in the form of masculine clothing) that was forced on him and eventually had to change his performance according to his desired body.

In another instance of flashback, the audience is allowed a peek into Parimal and Subhash's relationship. Subhash was Parimal's and his older sister Rina's tutor; he shared a romantic relationship with Parimal. Parimal even requests Subhash to move to the USA with him so that they can be legally married there. But Subhash emerges as one of those men "who exercise their patriarchal privilege as *free* and *moral* citizens by not allowing

their masculinity to be challenged in spite of their sexual attraction for their own gender” (Rao, 2017, p. 4), and he agrees to marry Rina to conform to heteronormativity. Puti and Subhash’s clothing choices are strikingly similar; both of them wear *kurta* with Aligarhi pants, but their similar clothing is not indicative of any sameness in meaning. While Parimal later becomes Puti to act on her desire of becoming a woman and to reiterate the performances that are subversive, Subhash redirects his bodily acts towards a more heteronormative framework. Another instance of similar sartorial choices between Shubhash and Parimal occurs during Shubhash’s wedding with Rina. Shubhash and Parimal both dress up in gold silk *kurta* keeping up with the custom of wearing dressier clothes during Bengali wedding ceremonies. Here one silk *kurta* wearing person is the groom, another person is expected to perform the role of the groom in the future but wants to perform the part of the bride. Here, both the male characters sport similar sartorial objects: yet, they lurk around opposite sides of the same spectrum. Shubhash succumbs to social doctrines, whereas Parimal faces heartbreak due to the same doctrines and leaves his house to start living without the fear of ostracism.

One of the most powerful scenes that ties desires for sartorial subversion and social prohibition against it is the one in which Parimal is seen putting make up on Rina on her wedding day. The *shringar* that is prohibited for Parimal, as he is biologically ascribed as male, gets projected on the older sister who is receiving what Parimal is denied. For Parimal it is important as “Shringar through particularly gold jewellery from early Hindu mythology to the contemporary context denotes self-adornment and a powerful means to expressing status, beauty, romantic or erotic love ‘the substance of aesthetic experience’” (Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2018b, p. 73). This scene becomes more significant as the women onlookers surrounding Parimal and Rina tease Parimal about how perfectly he does his sister’s makeup. One of the women jokingly asks, “*Ei Parimal tor bou ke ki nijei shajabi?*” [“Parimal, will you adorn your wife yourself?”] (Ganguly, 2017, 01:25:26). Doing so, the woman unknowingly exposes the problematic dynamics between gender specific sartorial elements and the body that wears it. Later, while Rina and Subhash get married, Parimal puts on a bride’s red headscarf and lipstick and sees his reflection in the mirror in utter dismay. Parimal’s attempt at *shringar* is an enactment of the rituals Rina is observing during the wedding, something that Parimal wants to experience but is betrayed by conventions. Parimal’s screaming, crying and wiping off the red lipstick becomes a dramatization of his suffocation in an undesired body.

Another sartorial object the film focuses on is Puti’s wig. In Puti’s introduction scene (Ganguly, 2017, 00:02:03) the camera captures her clothes, body movements and her hair from afar, which gives the impression of her being a woman, but when the camera gives a close shot of Puti, the audience understands her subversive behaviour upon discovering the wig. Her wig ignites varied reactions from different characters in the film. Madhu’s sister-in-law, who is initially unaware of Puti’s transgender identity, mistakes her fake hair for the real thing and compares it with female actors’ properly groomed hair. For Madhu, a man who knows that he wants Puti but still second guesses himself on the pretext of the non-normative nature of their relationship, does not want her to remove the wig unless her hair grows to a longer length. Madhu is appalled at the sight of Puti’s removing the wig and immediately moves his eyes away, as for him Puti with

all the usual or conventional performances of a woman is the person he desires. Any cessation in the reiteration of such performance reminds Madhu that the woman he loves is biologically a man. Madhu's unease in seeing Puti in a rather manly haircut reveals his dependence on the outer appearance achieved through objects like wig. In essence, Madhu substitutes fake hair for the real thing he wants. For Madhu, the fake hair does what real hair would do, and when the real hair grows out it will in turn replace the fake object. In this way, both the wig, and women's naturally long hair lose any permanence of meaning as both of them become substitute for one another.

Destabilized meaning of sartorial objects

The climax of the film is a dramatization of Madhu's fear about the loss of Puti's wig and the revelation of her sexed body. While her wig inadvertently starts coming off, it is Madhu who first notices it. Puti's wig gives her a more feminine appearance, hence makes her *look* like a woman and consequently people treat her as one. Nevertheless, as Halberstam (2005) contends, after a transgender person's "body has been brutally exposed" it becomes difficult to "perform her gender at odds with the sexed body" (p. 77). The problem with fixing any particular meaning to a sign (the sign being transgender sartorial choice in the form of a wig) occurs in the mob scene as well. Puti runs away from the *kirtan* programme, and the next day she is seen in the Nabadwip market. Since Puti had left her belongings while fleeing, she had to ask for alms from shopkeepers in the market to buy food, which is a common practice for *hijras*. Nonetheless, every *hijra* group has a fixed territory and it is a mutual understanding that none should collect money beyond that. As a consequence, Puti faces a mob attack by the local *hijra* group as they think that Puti is just a boy posing as a *hijra* to extort money. The mob lynches Puti and tears her clothes and wig down to reveal a body that has no marks of biological transition, not even the ritual castration of *hijras*. To the mob, this revelation of a *seemingly* male body changes the meaning of clothes that covered the body. They interpreted her sartorial preferences, which Puti used for aiding self-expression, as a mere cover-up for making money. Ironically, they fail to understand that the intended function of their own sartorial objects on their castrated and hormone treated body is similar to that of Puti's. Her male body awaiting transformation betrays her again by not allowing to fix a particular significance to the performative signs.

A more incisive commentary on the problem of allocating any one particular meaning to an identity marker gets cinematized through the revelation of Puti's suicide in police custody. After being lynched and stripped Puti is arrested by local police. Then comes the cinematic revelation of Puti's hanging body from the ceiling, stark naked, drenched in colours as she was attacked on the day of *Dol Purnima*, the colour festival dedicated to Sri Krishna. On the occasion that traditionally celebrates non-normative love Madhu discovers Puti's naked body hanging from the ceiling. When Madhu reaches the cell he sees Puti's body without any of the feminine sartorial objects that created her female identity, except the anklets. The camera also shows her clothes that she has removed and piled up on a table before killing herself. While she was being attacked by the mob she defends herself by saying, "*Ami beta chele*" ["I am a man"] (Ganguly, 2017, 01:43:57) in order to pacify the mob that was beating her. The forced assertion of her

gender that she did not identify with becomes a re-enactment of the time she spent with her family. Puti has never felt that she was a “*beta chele*”, and her struggle was to efface such identification. When she kills herself, in her nakedness she avows the betrayal of her chosen sartorial signs as she had relied on those to portray her felt and desired identity until she gets herself transformed. The film ends with Madhu entering the house of the *hijra* group Puti belonged to. The camera shows him wearing Puti’s wig and sari with traces of red lipstick and *bindi*. This appearance of a cisgender man in women’s clothes previously worn by his transgender lover further unsettles any fixed meaning that can be ascribed to the sartorial objects.

Riddhi Sen, the actor portraying Puti, said in an interview on the occasion of his receiving the National Award for the best actor for *Nagarkirtan*, “An artist can’t ignore the society and tell a story” (Rosario, 2017, para. 5). Therefore, one cannot find many instances of transgender cinematic representations where the subject has been given a fair chance beyond stereotypes. In cinema, like in real life, not to deal with the trans person is considered more convenient than to engage with the complexity of their identity. While India has transgender people as activists, educators, entrepreneurs, and members of the Parliament, it has not ensured the equality of identification, let alone the equality of right. The Transgender Person Protection of Rights Bill was passed at the end of 2019, in the name of ensuring their rights. However, it steals the capacity of identifying their gender from themselves to a five-member district committee (Tapasya, 2020). Such decision gets a prophetic cinematic representation in the tragic scene where a group of people are deciding Puti’s identity based on her physical constitution. *Nagarkirtan* offers commentary on such derogative practices and presumptuous assumptions of the heteronormative system that snatches the right to instate one’s identity, especially if this one in question exists beyond the standards of normalcy created by the heteronormative society.

Conclusion

This paper has explored and highlighted the disjunction between sartorial objects and the particular sexed bodies that are expected to wear them. By examining clothing choices of different characters of *Nagarkirtan*, who have dissimilar gender identities and sexual orientations, the paper enunciates the idea that there are no fixed rules that can directly indicate one’s sexual identity through that person’s clothing choices. The very sartorial objects that Puti has been making use of to look the part of her desired sexual identity betray her in the end through misrecognition and mob violence. Here, the fundamental de-stability of meaning that sartorial objects present is at par with that of the transgender body, a phenomenon that is discoverable through Puti’s predicament in the film.

ⁱ Refers to someone’s particular style or manner of dressing.

ⁱⁱ The belief that heterosexuality is the only accepted or normal mode of sexual expression

ⁱⁱⁱ Refers to someone whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person was assigned at birth

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