20 Secrecy, Curse, Psychiatrist, Saint: Scandals of Sexuality and Censorship in Global/Indian Publics

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In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.

– Eve Kosowsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)

To get it out of the way, let's begin with a hateful portrayal. The farcical 2014 Bengali film *Obhishopto Nighty* (The cursed nighty) follows the absurdities that ensue when a nightgown cursed to awaken sexual appetites is passed from woman to woman across contemporary Kolkata. Entangling realities and meta-realities, the film's fantastical and exhilarating message of sexual liberation is paired with a critique of censorship and its bureaucracies, as ludic scenes are interrupted by a censor board sitting beneath giant scissors streaked with blood. Amid all the fun, there is a sour note in the form of a crass portrayal of a non-binary character, a newspaper editor whose queerness is played for a laugh as their over-the-top desires draw revulsion from the main character. The character is an undeniable send-up of filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh, who died a year before the film was released. The film's thinly veiled mockery – so homophobic, so shocking – so spoiled the reception of the film that it became the topic of most of the film's (limited) media coverage, including an account of filmmaker Aparna Sen's dramatic walkout on a screening (*Times of India* 2014).

For a film that (cl)aims to expose the hypocrisies of sexual repression, is this hypocrisy? The ugly limit of progressive critique? Or is it obvious – a step too far in a film that makes fun of everyone (as though all mockery is the same)? Or does it point to an encompassing logic, one that both impels and interrupts concepts of "freedom of speech"? Or is it simply a map of permissible and impermissible desires in post-millennial West Bengal?

A few other themes are worth consideration. First, *secrecy*, which is here associated with things spectral. The accursed nighty falls into the hands of an ingénue actress, Brishti/Apsara, who, when wearing it can bypass her moral and physical aversion to the grotesque movie producers who want her to barter sex for film roles; in short, the nighty helps her put out. When a reporter, Apu, learns that Brishti/Apsara "broke a record" by signing twelve films in one night, he seeks out her secret and discovers the nighty. The article he writes goes viral and the city is hysterical with a sex panic-cum-scandal (pun intended – and used in the film's marketing) with sightings of the nighty (which Apsara has lost). Apu learns from a fortune teller about the nighty's dark past (a dying lounge singer cursed the nighty as revenge on her lover/murderer). Together Apu and Apsara essentially exorcise the nighty, rendering it useless. At one level, the plot's architecture is Freudian, its therapeutic that of the hysterical symptom. But there is also the matter of the *curse* – a second key theme. Aligning repressed speech with repressed desire, vignettes show the undoing effects of sexual liberation (generated by a curse), embodied as both symptom and secret by the nighty. Curse, secret, symptom – tangles of agency and its absence, twisted sisters of expression – propel a message about free expression and the agentive subject.

Perhaps in atonement for *Obhoshopto Nighty*, or basic irony, Parambrata Chatterjee, the actor who portrayed Apu, starred in *Samantaral* (2019) about a male-presenting person whose mental illness-like symptoms are revealed to masquerade the film's central secret: that she is transgender and wishes to live as a woman. Though the secret of her gender identity is initially *understood* by another female character, the secret is *explained* to the audience by a psychiatrist, in a minor but pivotal role. And so we arrive at a third element: the *psychiatrist*. At key moments of *Obhoshopto Nighty*, the film-within-a-film (if that is what it is) stutters to a freeze-frame, and the censor board – comprised of a businessman, fire chief, sociologist, "film and theater personality," and psychiatrist – debate the scene's merits according to their specialization: the sociologist elucidates the ills of modern society, the psychiatrist describes psychological syndromes. In one subplot, a middle-aged singer besotted with Rabindranath Tagorea asks a wall-sized photograph of the bard, "Who sings your songs best?" The photo replies, "Tumi, tumi, tumi" ("You, you, you," in the familiar form). The film stops and we are back in the cutting room, where the actor asks, "How can they make this kind of joke about Tagore?" The psychiatrist explains, "This is the idea of the woman, not of Tagore … You can call this a kind of hallucination. You can call it Extra-Tagore Syndrome." (The actor insists they "beep" Tagore's "tumi," asking, "How can you interfere with a cultural icon?")

In Bengali films, psychiatrists pop up everywhere. Occasionally villains, they are more often sympathetic characters who propel the plot through

discovery and exegesis, *explaining* (diagnoses), *contextualizing* (behaviours), *educating* (about mental health), and *enabling* (characters to solve dilemmas). The quality of their speech is remarkably consistent, aligning truth with transformation, freedom with therapeutics, producing speech that is often semi-concealed and ephemeral, along the way, to the side, dislodged from the permanence of publicity. In few cases does their language attach to either "Western" or "Indian," "secular" or "religious" forms (compared to the diacritical quality of psychiatrist characters in certain Hindi films; Pinto 2014). In *Obhoshopto Nighty*'s censor-board scenes, the psychiatrist contributes to the film's economy of knowledge with absurd theories that encompass another economy of knowledge – that of the secret that orients the primary plot. Playing with the proximity of cultural offence and social/psychological explanation, he is both made fun of and part of a larger poking fun at sexual prurience and wounded cultural sentiments, whose capacity to violence is made vivid by the massive scissors. (Is it an accident, perhaps, that the derided gay character is an editor?)

What happens if we take seriously the way these elements hang together – not just sex and the scandal of making it public, and not just critique of censorship and offensive speech (obvious bedmates, or nighty-sharers), but another set of things: psychiatrists, secrets, curses, what, for now, I'll call (imperfectly) "homosexuality," and what is sometimes, as in *Obhishopto Nighty*, collapsed with it, what for now I'll call (imperfectly) "transgender"? How might these elements, enchained, help us reckon with the relationship between "freedom of speech" (a supposedly atemporal liberal form) and "secrecy" in its temporally, culturally, and representationally located forms?

Historically, Indian film censorship has focused on sexuality, regulating pleasures in visual form that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, attached to questions of class and the varying ability of audiences to "recognize" and thus "be offended by" sexual innuendo (Mazzarella 2013; Mazzarella and Kaur 2012). Towards the end of the twentieth century, questions of censorship increasingly figured as a "cultural offence," which came to be sutured less to heterosexual sex acts (like kissing) than to portrayals of homosexuality, though, of course, these have long been conjoined, as in the simultaneous obscenity trials of Ismat Chugtai and Saadat Hasan Manto in 1944. Beyond film, economies of secrecy and exposure figured in scandals over "cultural offense," and censorship involved as much a politics of reading and revising as speaking/showing. In censorship of books, scholarship, and other literary portrayals, diverse qualities of secrecy did more than invite corrective work; they become the voice of correction. It is at these junctures – and their obvious/unobvious scenes of contraction – that "homosexuality," as a discrete identity/form, became especially potent, through and against diverse registers of what we might call "queer."

Suggesting campy pleasures, *Obhishopto Nighty* invites us in and betrays us. If its colourful indie absurdities entice us into circuits of reading by breaking and re-erecting boundaries between reader and text (fourth walls would be too easy), its sudden homophobia/transphobia requires we take seriously what such critical economies traffic in. It raises the possibility that the arrangement – sex is a problem of publicity and its political and social conditions – recognizable in the history of censorship *of* film in India can be productively reversed when it comes to portrayals of censorship *in* (this) film: publicity, and its contours may be a product of the way certain instantiations of "sex" motivate economies of concealment and disclosure. This analytic choreography is drawn from the early work of Eve Kosowsky Sedgwick, notably the book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), whose argument can be summarized as follows: since the end of the nineteenth century, "energy of attention and demarcation … has been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public" (71). As such, "the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning" in the twentieth century are "indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/ homosexual definition," including "secrecy/disclosure and private/public" at the heart of chains of associated pairings (72). What "history of readings" (Sedgwick's phrase) might be propelled by the problem of *Obhishopto Nighty*?

This chapter offers one possibility, shifting from film to text, by revisiting an academic scandal of the 1990s, the 1890s text it debated, a culturally adjacent (1890s) text, and a recent film that reconceives the second 1890s text. Sedgwick (1990) is part of this history in compounding ways, offering both contexts and metatexts that allow us to trace mobilities that are at once "of" as well as "in" their time. I borrow that cadence from Mazzarella and Kaur (2012, 6) who note that censorship in India "is not just *in* but *of* the public sphere," constituting what "public" might come to be and who has rights to it, a thing not just of censor board screening rooms but publics more generally (see Mazzarella 2013). As such, formal censorship is a "particular," even "privileged" form of a "more general set of practices" of "cultural regulation" (Mazzarella and Kaur 2019, 9), "public cultural interventions" that may seem diametrically opposed – a readerly dilemma akin to that of *Obhishopto Nighty*. Among the products of these intervention is a sense of the obvious, the open secret, a form Sedgwick (1990, 8) considered an integral effect of the epistemology of the closet, by which "particular insights generate, are lined with, and at the same time are themselves structured by particular opacities." Important to that passage is its emphasis on the particular. The open secret is not one thing but many, its public one of contradictory "interventions" – like moral opprobrium and liberal understanding. With particularities in mind, we might ask less if a thing is obvious *or* contradictory, and, instead, what forms of the obvious are transferrable and transformable.

Scandal

In the last years of the twentieth century, the field of religious studies, especially the corners concerned with Hinduism, was wracked with debate over the 1995 publication of *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, by Jeffrey Kripal. Based on Kripal's PhD dissertation, *Kali's Child* re-examined biographical and religious writings about the nineteenth-century Bengali sage Ramakrishna, arguing that, contrary to the orthodox view of the Ramakrishna Order, the saint's mysticism was driven by Tantric concepts and practices, mystical experiences fuelled by homoerotic energies. Through psychoanalytically informed analysis of passages from the *Kathamrita*, the hagiographic text on Ramakrishna's life written by his follower Madhusudan Gupta (or M.), Kripal argued that a better understanding of mysticism, especially its tantric forms, might come from exploring the ways "homosexual" erotics shape transformative religious experiences. Kripal focused on sections of the *Kathamrita* designated "secret teachings," accounts of Ramakrishna's experiences of the goddess Kali and interactions with his devotees. Kripal (1998, 5)[1] argued that these had been obscured in "bowdlerized" translations and the transformation of Ramakrishna's teachings into the asceticized, masculinized vision of Hinduism established by Ramakrishna's successor, Vivekananda, and promoted by the Order.

Kripal's (1998) observations were neither entirely new nor surprising, though the frank discussion of the homoerotics of mysticism was considered innovative for Hindu studies. Initially, *Kali's Child* was well received in academia, receiving the History of Religions Prize from the American Academy of Religion and positive reviews from prominent scholars (Haberman 1997; Parsons 1997; John Hawley 1998; Radice 1998; Urban 1998). Most academic reviewers felt that *Kali's Child* raised important questions, initiated conversations about mysticism and homoeroticism, and rigorously read important texts. Some noted that Tantrism was a metonym for larger disciplinary concerns, and that, in Kripal's hands, the *Kathamrita,* was a site of scholarly "recovery" and dismantling of puritanical revisionism (Patton 2019). By "recovering" aspects of Ramakrishna's life and teachings, Kripal had restored the freedom and exuberance lost in "the straightlaced, socially conscious asceticism through which Vivekananda brought Ramakrishna to the world" (John Hawley 1998, 404), and his effort to "penetrate the layers of pious obfuscation and reverential distortion" had "recover[ed] the original Bengali texts" (Urban 1998, 318).

1 From this point onward, references to *Kali's Child* are to the second (1998) edition of the book, which includes Kripal's preface responding to the events described here. For a more thorough review of the debate, see Brian Hatcher (1999).

Meanwhile, fires of criticism were being lit in reviews accusing Kripal of sensationalism, mistranslation (Oppenshaw 1995; Ray 1997), "monocausal reductionism" (Larson 1997, 658), and failing to consult the Ramakrishna Order (Larson 1997). Members of the Order wrote painstaking rebuttals, arguing that poor understanding of Bengali had led Kripal to impose homoerotic desires and actions on the saint (Ātmajñānānanda 1997). Calls were raised for the book to be banned, letters were written asking the University of Chicago to renounce approval of Kripal's dissertation. Perhaps the most inflammatory, or at least most infamous, response was a full-page review in Calcutta's *The Statesman* newspaper written by Narasingha Sil (1997), also author of a psychoanalytically informed biography of Ramakrishna (Sil 1991), which had connected the saint's religious experiences with childhood abuse. In his review, Sil (1997) lobbed insults accusing Kripal of attacking Hindu culture, having poor knowledge of Bengali, exhibiting crassness, and producing a work that was, in the final words of the review, "plain shit." *The Statesman* published initial responses, but following a flood of letters took the remarkable step of closing the conversation in a 1997 Op-Ed titled "And Now Let It Rest." While diatribes against *Kali's Child* continued in print (Tyagananda 2000; Tyagananda and Vrajaprana 2010), they began to find a home on the internet, amid the consolidation of Hindu nationalist voices on new websites that collated, facilitated, and amplified diverse accusations of cultural offence, notably in US academia.[2]

In several essays and in the preface to the second edition of *Kali's Child*, Kripal responded to his critics, apologizing for certain mistranslations and defending his arguments, the soundness of his translation, and validity of his analytic. For Kripal and his supporters, the debate emphasized the fortress of policed speech, puritanical thinking, and historical revisionism that surrounded Ramakrishna, and Hinduism more generally. It was the critics, Kripal wrote, who reduced a complex discussion of mysticism to a pointed discussion of Ramakrishna's sex-life.

Many agreed that what Kripal "exposed" was hardly news. In an illuminating essay, Brian Hatcher wrote,

> While Kripal makes much of the way Ramakrishna's secrets have been concealed by his followers, one would have to say that they have done a somewhat poor job of concealing; after all, one can purchase the complete Bengali

2 As Patton (2019, 238) argues, the "second wave of critique [was] conducted largely on and through the internet," and "evolved into an institutional critique" by conjoining instances with scholars' home institutions. Rajiv Malhotra's Infinity Foundation hosts the Sulekha website that continues to hold an archive of critiques of Kripal's work, and is a key node in a network supporting Hindu nationalist causes in the US and funding university endeavours.

> utterances of Ramakrishna right in the foyer of the Ramakrishna Institute in Gol Park. (1999, 178)

Ramakrishna was always "the problem child," Hatcher (1999, 168) wrote, situating the conflict in the religious schools at issue – the neo-Vedantic nondualism and cultivation of *sadhana* (awareness) espoused by the Ramakrishna Order, and the Tantric practices focused on Kali and involving the transcendent power of sexual energies adopted, albeit ambivalently, by Ramakrishna. Because the asceticism of the Order could not accommodate Ramakrishna's "mansion of fun" (Ramakrishna's description of life with devotees), "any attempt to foreground the fact of Ramakrishna's powerful Tantric devotion to the mother will be met with the [Vendantic] denial [*neti*, *neti*]: 'not this, not this'" (Hatcher 1999, 168).

At the heart of Kripal's argument was an observation about both the nature of Ramakrishna's speech and the structure of the *Kathamrita*. Kripal (1998, 4) described the *Kathamrita* as "a reluctant text," its five volumes cyclically retracing the same four years (1882–6), gradually revealing the secrets at the heart of Ramakrishna's philosophy, with "more culturally acceptable" teachings appearing in its earlier volumes, and "'secret' dimensions" in "the background" in later volumes. Secrecy in Ramakrishna's life and words was less an act of concealment than an economy of exposure, a structure of speech through parables and brief descriptions that "simultaneously revealed and concealed … mystic-erotic energies [Ramakrishna] neither fully accepted nor understood" (5), including a "profound ambivalence" to Tantra that may have been even a "secret even to himself" (4). In this dynamic economy of knowledge, homosexuality was "triply concealed," first by/from Ramakrishna himself, second in the "complex cyclical structure" of the *Kathamrita*, and third in its "bowdlerized" translation (5). This structural sense of secrecy informs Kripal's use of secrecy as method, an analytic of reading as exposure that draws on the counter-normative quality of Tantrism and its famously esoteric language of "complex sexual metaphors" (31) that requires "tortuous hermeneutical strategies" to examine (32). For Kripal, the "study of secrets" is also a "study of the history of these secrets" (27), the latter of which includes the "appropriat[ion of secrets] by the larger culture" (7). Reckoning with the mystical structure of the secret makes it, for Kripal, amenable to psychoanalysis, whose hermeneutics he found compatible with Tantrism.

The place of psychoanalysis in the larger debate is perhaps counterintuitive if it is expected that what is offensive about psychoanalytic scholarship is its Western origins. Kripal's use of psychoanalysis did trouble critics, but not because it was culturally inappropriate. After all, not only had Sil (1991) published a decently received psychoanalytic account of Ramakrishna, but psychoanalysis has long been a mainstay in public intellectual writing in India.

Rather, as one reviewer put it, psychoanalysis was reductionist *in this instance* because, when applied to textual sources and not "patients," it could not *elicit* speech, but only *read* (versus Kripal's view that psychoanalysis opened texts to creative hermeneutics; see Ray 1997). Unlike an analysand, the argument went, a text cannot "talk free," making the reader responsible for ensuring that the "identifications" they observe "are generally accepted in the given culture" (Ray 1997, 102). Through a dynamic, reversible relationship between cultural offence, majoritarian "identifications," "analysis," and "free speech," critics rejected Kripal's arguments, not on the ground that his *speech* was too *free*, but for using a too *constraining* method of *reading*.

According to Laurie Patton (2019, 233), "At stake [in the Kripal case] are two competing interpretive publics: the Indian and the Euro-American (although mostly American) scholarly tradition and the interpretive tradition of the Ramakrishna order." But other, more readerly, mappings than "collision" require confronting the debate's cruder sentiments. It goes nearly without saying that the angriest critiques burn with horror at homosexuality, which, while evident in certain print essays (especially the painstaking examination of Kripal's translation), is especially (also obviously) so on the internet, where overt homophobia rings – ironically? obviously? – through Hindutva appropriations of the language of post-colonial identity politics, appropriations that decry "cultural appropriation" in calls for that scholarship be retracted. These assertions at the core of what Lawrence Cohen (2012, 106; emphasis in original) describes as the "painful" part of the story, acts of reading that transcend sides, conjoining "Kripal's argument and the critical, often quite wounded responses to it as twinned sites of *accusation*." A hermeneutic of accusation depends on and produces homosexuality as "specie-fied" (Sedgwick 1990, following Foucault) acts, feelings, and energies to be concealed/exposed, in which accusation and "recovery" are part of the same economy of knowledge, operations of language to be decoded. In the *Kali's Child* debate, circuits of accusation/recovery are closed in (direct-seeming) exchanges between Sil and Kripal: to Sil's suggestion that Kripal's writing exposed his own latent desires, Kripal (1998, xxi) accused his critics of "a deep cultural rejection of homosexuality" (certainly true) by referring to Christopher Isherwood, whom Kripal described as "openly homosexual," and who, a reader had once told Kripal, would likely have loved *Kali's Child* (xiv). Kripal (1998, xiv) recalled that Isherwood (1965) had written that in his own biography of Ramakrishna he would have liked to discuss Ramakrishna's sexuality but could not because of the project's endorsement by the Order.

The point, of course, is not that Kripal was as homophobic as his detractors, but that the structure of accusation, as L. Cohen (2012) describes, works through scenes that are not only about respectable publics and wounded cultural sentiments but also which articulate knowledge dynamics, seemingly

forcing diverse "publics" into collision – as pointed out by Patton (2019) – while showing them to share an economy of exposure. L. Cohen (2012, 106) writes, "At the least, *Kali's Child* is spectacularly inattentive to the historical formation of effeminate and homosexual accusation (and self-accusation) in the late colonial period and subsequently … The tragedy is that Kripal's analyses are often spectacularly insightful in attending to the poetics of ecstatic experience, but the denunciatory field in which they locate themselves may render them illegible to a self-respecting public."

In 1990s India, "boundaries of public civility and decorum were constantly being challenged" in "key areas" that included homosexuality, while media coverage of calls for censorship (notably of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*) produced the "dramaturgical standardization" of an "overdetermined clash" along lines of insider/outsider, religion/secularism, India/the West (Mazzarella and Kaur 2013, 3). As queer identities consolidated in cosmopolitan languages through HIV/AIDS activism and opposition to Section 377 (the "anti-sodomy" section of the Indian penal code that criminalized sex outside of "laws of nature"), new vocabularies also named sexual pluralities in challenges to cosmopolitan, elite constructions of "gay" identity (Reddy 2005; L. Cohen 2005).[3] While there is no question that the strongest critiques of *Kali's Child* were freighted with Hindutva homophobia, there is less evidence that emerging queer activism, consolidation of censorship around homosexuality, or even the homophobia of Kripal's strongest critics figured for his defenders. Brief mentions of this context feel partial and unfinished. For instance, though Patton (2019, 238–9) names "gay and lesbian" activists as one of "three public spheres with three very different sets of rules" that "collided" in the Kripal case, she writes nothing further about those activists or the context they might provide. Kripal himself is a lone voice in this regard, and even that voice, crucial though it was, was conditioned by particular opacities. The phrase "openly homosexual," describing Christopher Isherwood as a would-be supporter, is, like so much else, both of its time and in it.

Secret

According to Sumit Sarkar (2019, 188), the language of the *Kathamrita* should be understood in relation to the social context of Ramakrishna's followers – largely non-elite urbanites struggling under colonial rule, a middling class of "clerks" whose office jobs moved the machinery of colonial bureaucracy and

3 The "controversy" over Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* is a touchstone in this history. See B. Bose (2000), John and Niranjana (2000), Kapur (2000), H.S. Gill (2017), and Naim (1999), though this is not an exhaustive list.

for whom cosmopolitan possibilities were in view but out of reach. Allured by the Ramakrishna's rustic rejection of elite pretensions, they were drawn to teachings that rearranged the socio-political terms of language by upsetting distinctions between orality and literacy and between high and low cultures (Sarkar 1992, 1546). As Bengali literature moved towards a "greater chastity and decorum," Ramakrishna's rebuke of "the printed word" and English-educated elites, his "earthy and unsophisticated" parables, his vulgarities and colloquialisms were "an additional attraction" to followers for whom Bengali literary styles "may have felt slightly oppressive" (Sarkar 1992, 1546). Sarkar reminds us that we only know what we know about Ramakrishna from these disciples, and that while the *Kathamrita* was likely mostly "true," it was also "a site of *bhadralok* appropriation"; the text of M., the Calcutta clerk, "simultaneously illuminat[ing] and obscur[ing]" (Sarkar 1990–1, 99). Both account and product of its social landscape, the *Kathamrita* was written in the form of diary notes, "displays of testimonies to authenticity" in which "secret talks" were carefully located (Sarkar 1992, 1544).

In a moment uncommented upon by reviewers, Kripal (1998) mused over a familiar (at least in Bengali literary circles) point of contact: that Freud's writing, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1989), on the "oceanic feeling" came out of the writings of (and correspondence with) French writer and "mystic" Romain Rolland on Ramakrishna. If, as Kripal reminds his readers, psychoanalysis was already influenced by Ramakrishna, its own methods for working with secrecy long connected to his teachings, we might also consider other historical circuits in which language was a scene of transformation. Which brings us back to Tantra, and the social world of the *Kathamrita*. Sarkar reminds us, in an intertextual reading, that the *sandhya-bhasa* (twilight language) of Tantra is not the same as the *guhya katha* (secret words) of the *Kathamrita*. Describing Ramakrishna's language,

> Closer, in its use of everyday images drawn from rural life and labour, to the language of lower-caste sects than to the formal *sutra bhasya* format of high-brahmanical exegesis, its meaning always remained single and on the surface. *Sandhya-bhashya* had been marked by a richness and fluidity of metaphor: the boatman, the river, or caged bird of the Bauls can be understood in many different ways. Metaphor, in contrast, is rare in Ramakrishna: its place is taken by clearcut analogies or parables, with the intended message often carefully verbalized. (2019, 206)

While commentators in the 1990s considered Tantra's centring of heterosexual sex at odds with Kripal's reading, in later decades, anthropologists interested in moral and pedagogical aspects of queer life in South Asia saw Tantra

as informing "possibilities and limits of advice and self-transformation on the social margins" (L. Cohen 2012, 101). While Tantra's relationship to queer lives is, of course, connected to its figuring of the censorious (that which is forbidden becomes the means of liberation from morality), more important in these discussions are modes of language, in which pedagogic possibilities hinge on distinctions and transitions between literal and metaphoric understandings (Saria 2021). Verses in the "code" of *sandhya bhasa* offer possibilities of suggestion, play, and concealment and, at the same time, the possibilities of *literal* readings, allowing, as Vaibhav Saria (2021, 159–60) argues, queer pedagogies that mobilize forbidden forms of sex (such as incest) to be "liberated from and beyond morality."[4] Reading beyond economies of concealment and exposure, and not for "secrecy" but for "talk," figures the possible as not hidden in metaphor but, at times, literal, less an open secret than an "out" from the very moral economies that produce such codes (cf. Saria 2021; L. Cohen 2012). What would it mean to imagine these possibilities for Tantra into the "reluctant" text that is the *Kathamrita*? Might we contrast these forms of reading/hearing/doing with notions of concealment and revelation, accusation and recovery that traffic in open secrets and point, again and again, at that sedimented thing "homosexuality"? What intertextual circuits are thinkable?

Among these is the possibility that a rejection of depth for surfaces, metaphor for the literal, and formality for the direct could be – paradoxically/obviously – a foundation for "secret talk." If we put to the side the idea that secrecy is necessarily a matter of concealed (true) interiors, and consider the way "secret talk" might be created through textual management of diverse language potentialities, we meet the possibility that the *Kathamrita* may be at once a text (one of many) *of* a moment and an *account* of a moment (one of many) in which certain uses of language, including some associated with Tantra, those that may bear possibilities for queer instantiations of life "beyond" moral codes (Saria 2021), were made over as secrecy of a slightly different, slightly literary sort, an idiom with the ability to move. Perhaps the kind of secrecy the *Kathamrita* instantiated, in its speech (Ramakrishna's) and structure (M.'s), was at once an embrace and rejection of the diverse and particular possibilities of the literal, already bound up in a cosmopolitan world order against which it would come to be read, and through which accusations and recoveries would come to be made. Or is this fantasy an artefact of the intertextuality of the 1990s scholarly world? When Sarkar (2019, 197) observes that *Kathamrita* discussions of Tantric terms are labelled "secret matters," he adds a footnote: "I

4 In a delightfully nested set of citations, I cite Saria (2021, 159–60), who cites Siegel (1978, 188), who cites Bharati (1970, 171) on this point.

would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to this point to the ongoing work of Jeff Kripal, Chicago University research scholar."

Boon

To traverse the 1890s and 1990s may, thus, be to traverse the boiling down of that punctum in the textual history of secrecy into the dangerous secret of homosexuality, a traversal that includes in its timeframe the history of Section 377. Adjacent to the *Kathamrita*, other sources fill in some of that passage, taking us elsewhere than the transformation of the *Kathamrita* into the teachings of Vivekananda (certainly an important element), and pointing at another, even more open, secret at stake in *Kali's Child* and the *Kathamrita*, a fact that, in the 1990s, was treated as an evidentiary subset of the "secret" of homosexuality: Ramakrishna's bodily transgressions of gender. Biographies and psychoanalytic treatments of the life of Ramakrishna prior to *Kali's Child* considered Ramakrishna's adopting of female dress and instances of bodily gender crossing as at once elements of his mysticism and evidence of, variously, confused sexual identity, childhood trauma (Sil 1991), and psychoanalytic diagnosis (Kakar 1991). In Hindu figurations more broadly, sexuality and gender identity are variously collapsed and parsed in diverse literatures in which queer components and gender transgression are read as at once enabling and troubling heteronormative aspects of kinship, religion, and law (Ramberg 2014). In the play *Chitra*, published in Bengali in 1892 and English in 1905, Rabindranath Tagore (1914) retells the Mahabharata romance of Princess Chitrangada, a story whose actions and moral message depend on the concealment and exposure of ("true") gender, conflated with beauty and ugliness. In the Mahabharata, the back story to the actions of the play figure Chitravahana, king of Manipur, the first to bear a daughter in a royal lineage afforded the boon of bearing one child, a son, in each generation. With the responsibility of sustaining the royal lineage, Chitravahana raises Chitrangada as a son, concealing the secret of her gender so she might serve as heir.

Tagore's play begins with Chitrangada in male form describing to demi-god Madana her meeting and rejection by Arjuna, a Pandava brother exiled to the Manipur forest. She begs Madana to make her female (to have "perfect beauty") for one day, but Madana grants a greater boon: a year in female form. When Chitra meets and enchants Arjuna, she worries over her secret: her imminent return to masculinity. Arjuna, smitten, vows to "dissolve" his promise of chastity and Chitra, ashamed that in "disguise" she led him astray (made him "blind to the light of the deathless spirit!") begs Madana to revoke the boon. She declares she will reveal her "true self," "a nobler thing than this disguise." On their last day together, Chitra in female form and Arjuna meet a group of peasants whose village is threatened by attackers and who bemoan the absence of their protector, Chitra, who, they have been told, is travelling

on pilgrimage. Arjun wonders at the character of this Chitra – why would such a protector abandoned his responsibilities? What other needs would he have? Angry, Chitra replies, "Her needs? Why, what has she ever had, the unfortunate creature? Her very qualities are as prison walls, shutting her woman's heart in a bare cell. She is obscured, she is unfulfilled." Chitra asks Arjuna if he can bear seeing her true self. Arjuna responds, "A time comes when [Truth] throws off her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity. I grope for that ultimate you, that bare simplicity of truth." Chitra opens her cloak to reveal her true form, full of "flaws and blemishes," lacking in "loveliness," and offers the "gift" of the "heart of a woman," "an imperfection which yet is noble and grand." She explains that she is carrying Arjuna's child, who will carry on the line of the King Chitravahana. Arjuna declares, "Beloved, my life is full."

Tagore's *Chitra* is a tale of self-knowledge, a theme familiar in his other works; self-knowledge is soteriological, truth connected to a self freed from deceptive trappings. Spiritual awakening and truth are revealed through and against the economies of secrecy and deceit that are made necessary by gods' deals with mortals, their boons and curses. Costume and curse are aligned, individual freedom connected to social freedom and, especially, to reform of gender inequities. While the ability to cross (or layer) gender allows for self-discovery through love, it also facilitates the continuation of law in the form of kinship and kingdom. In many Hindu texts and narratives involving "gender crossing," it is not simply that one's "true self" is recognized in having one's "true gender" acknowledged, but that gender switching is the framework for larger dharmic struggle. Tagore's *Chitra* presents both social transformation and the continuation of law through the management of secrets of gender in a plot dense with therapeutic transformation and discovery.

On the one hand, there is a vast distance between Tagore's beatific *Chitrangada* and the "rather crude, if charismatic" Ramakrishna (Hatcher 1999) and his Tantric uses of gender transformation to discover the Mother in all women. On the other hand, if as Kripal (1998, xvii) points out, "Freud, Ramakrishna, and the modern category of mysticism … share a common synchronistic history," we can add to that synchrony *Chitra* and its Bengali and international publics. In both cases, while Tagore's writing is rich with feminist messages and female heroines, it is less easily appropriated for a history of queer life. Such limits appear at the point at which gender switching becomes something more than narrative mechanism, at which it represents the limit of the literal. In 1914, a *New York Times* review titled "Tagore's Ideal Woman" with the subheading "Under the Guise of an Old Hindu Legend, He Touches Modern Feminism," read,

> We did not look for an Oriental, even though a seer, to write a book (especially twenty-five years ago, when this was written) that might serve as evangel to the most advanced among Occidental women – yet this is just what Rabindranath

> Tagore has done. By "advanced," be it understood, we are not referring to that group of biological freaks to whom the term is sometimes applied, but to the sane and sincere women who are endeavoring – whether by advocating political equality with men or by opposing it is a detail – to secure the highest good for their sex. (1914, BR129)

Again the question – what is obvious, what contradictory? By 1914, for an international readership with ample room for both Tagore's *Chitra* and Ramakrishna's teachings (as presented by Vivekananda on his American tours), we find, as the limit-point for liberatory uses of gender transgression, the "biological freak," read out of a therapeutic economy of secrecy and exposures. What transformations, if any, are left between this censorious parsing of sexual types and the liberatory/hateful messages of *Obhoshopto Nighty*, whose opening epigraph is an invocation of freedom from another twentieth-century mystic – Khalil Gibran?

Therapy

Texts can be read in diverse ways. Another reading of Tagore's 1914 play, the film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, directed and starred in by Rituparno Ghosh (the subject of *Obhishopto Nighty's* mockery) was released in 2012 to critical acclaim. An account of a choreographer's staging of Tagore's dance-drama, the film weaves the story of Chitrangada into the life of a choreographer, Rudra Chatterjee, who begins but ultimately withdraws from gender affirmation surgeries. Ghosh's film nests temporalities – the clinical temporality of the hospital where Rudra recovers from one surgery and awaits another, the worldly temporality of Rudra's life leading up to the surgery, and the dance-drama of *Chitra*'s mythic stagings.[5] The clinical temporality opens with a shot onto the Kolkata skyline from Rudra's hospital window and a conversation with a counsellor, Shubho, the film's Madana. In encounters of profound therapeutic intimacy and care, Rudra and the counsellor witness the second temporality, walking along the edges of remembered scenes as Rudra recounts events – dinner table conversations with disapproving parents, an affair with Partho a drug-addicted drummer, rehearsals, and performances. Rudra describes deciding to undergo surgery to "become a woman" so as to adopt a child with Partho, because the government does not allow two men to adopt. After Rudra's first surgery, Partho reveals that he is leaving Rudra for a female

5 Pronoun usage in this film is challenging to translate from Bengali, which does not gender pronouns or verb forms. Across the film's timeframes, Rudra variously refers to themself as man and woman, and, in an early scene, insists the nurse stop using the honorific "Sir," raising questions about pronoun uses in English that Bengali largely avoids.

dancer in the troupe, with whom he is having a child, a betrayal layered with the additional shame of Partho's rejection of Rudra's post-operative body – "The man I loved was not this half-thing. If I have to have a woman then I want a real woman not, a synthetic one."

Ultimately, Rudra decides not to undergo vaginal construction surgery, choosing instead to have breast implants removed. This decision is not portrayed as a return to a hegemonically defined male body, indeed, the film never portrays Rudra has having such a body or identity; Rudra is confidently non-binary throughout the film. Instead, the decision is portrayed as affirmation of a self and gender not defined by state, kinship, or intimate mandates. Indeed, the idea of surgical gender affirmation is rendered insufficient, even violent, in contrast with a subtler, more malleable sense of gender, sexuality, and identity, replete with possibilities for care and acceptance. It is not a teleological body/gender that forms the narrative of transformation, but the *work* of gendering which, aligned with remembering, entails reversals and returns. In the final exchange between Rudra and the counsellor, the film declares its in-motion approach to self-realization. Throughout the film, Rudra has been receiving mysterious, koan-like text messages from an unknown caller. The final message asks, "Why is a building called a building even after it is complete?" Rudra, reading the SMS, says, "No transition is ever complete, it's an ongoing process,"[6] punctuating a discussion of the impossibility of self- and other-knowledge, an impossibility that contains the possibility for intimacy.

In its final moments, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, writes across the screen, "Be what you wish to be," even as its plot suggests that both "being" and "what one wishes" are ambiguous, incomplete, and unfinished work. Perhaps, the transformative work across genders that allows a malleable selfhood to be realized, with gender is a tool, not an endpoint. Or, a slightly different reading finds an assertion of the validity and beauty of non-binary gender identities. By either reading, this is not a coming out narrative. Indeed, moments of revelation are scenes of betrayal, in a larger narrative that is not driven by revelation or accusation. Rudra's gender identity is never concealed, nor is it at risk of discovery. As such, this film can be contrasted with recent Bengali and Hindi films portraying queer life through narratives of social acceptance, coming out narratives, in which transgender and gay characters are vehicles for (cis, straight) heros' moral transformation.

In a remarkable sequence, Rudra suggests to Shubho that they may not have fully understood Chitrangada and the way her life was directed by her father.

6 A configuration that would not work in Bengali, leading us to consider the possibilities and constraints inherent to, variously, the Bengali and English metaphors for transformation and their associated histories, a longer conversation. I am grateful to Brian Hatcher for pointing this out.

When Shubho asks if Rudra would like to "stage Chitrangada again," Rudra responds, "I mean, the production was fine, it had gloss, it had spectacle, but how much it reflected the soul of Chitrangada, I'm not sure. Now it seems to me that I don't know her well enough." This moment contains much that makes this film stand to the side of heremeneutics of concealment and exposure. Here is a possibility of return, of rereading, revision, open-ended interpretation. Here is a form of understanding to the side of revelation or accomplishment. Here, too, collaboratively with the psychotherapist, is an alternate reckoning of the therapeutic possibilities of speaking, alternate to an analytic of recovery.

Structure and Shape

Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (which prompted no censorious ire) brings us back to our original cultural product, with which it is representationally bound. Contained between the aesthetic polarities of *Obhishopto Nighty* (and its readerly juxtaposition of the obvious/contradictory) and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (which proposes a theory of reading as revision) is the recursive relationship between the 1890s of Ramakrishna, M., and *Chitra* and the 1990s of Hindutva censorship and academic scandals. Between these scenes is a twentieth century containing not only Section 377, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and transformations in publics that made cultural diacritics all, but encounters via "psy" therapeutics, such as that which arguably made both "gender switching" and psychoanalysis part of Bengali cultural patrimony, in which psychoanalyst Girindrasekhar Bose proposed to Freud that things might be different in India, where analysands did not fantasize about killing their fathers, but about switching genders (cf. Hartnack 2001).

Here, Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) becomes relevant as both context and meta-text, orienting scholarship in the decade of queer theory it inaugurated, the decade that included *Kali's Child* (1998), by reading literatures from the decade of Kripal's key source, authors (Melville, James, Proust) whose work bore the imprint and effect of the epistemological pressures that shaped the "gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large," concepts of public and private, secrecy and exposure that were "oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality" (Sedgwick 1990, 71). It almost goes without saying that the Kripal affair unfolded as though a Sedgwickian script. Yet Sedgwick's vocabulary for a "history of secrecy" (a concept Kripal also claimed) was absent from the academic conversation her language undoubtedly shaped. I don't mean to suggest a citational failure, or that one academic field failed to account for what was happening in another, but I do think that the strange way that Sedgwick's literary vision described the arc of the *Kali's Child* narrative gives us a particular point of entry to larger conversations. For one thing, her arguments are relevant to both

"thens" – the 1990s of *Kali's Child* and proliferations of recovery/accusation that produced "the homosexual" as both problem and solution for "India," and the 1890s timeframe of Kripal's and Sedgwick's literary sources.

Kripal raises the possibility that Ramakrishna's visions influenced Freud but leaves fewer lines of contact with textual worlds that might situate M., author of the record of Ramakrishna's life, in a reading Bengali public or articulate with other literary sources, sources in which secrecy (in diverse, particular forms) that may have mattered (in diverse, particular ways, including not at all) to Ramakrishna's devotees, clerks and elites, readers and cultural producers (like playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh). It takes but a modicum of literalizing to imagine, at the dawn of a century when Bengali texts and their envoys were attracting audiences in Europe and North America, while English literatures were established elements of Indian education, a trans-local sense of readership, that cross-cut with the filters, appropriations, and diacritics of reading under Empire, the possibility of what Lisa Lowe (2015) calls intimacies across continents. Or to find both a global literary form and an anticipation of political needs in Ramakrishna's and M.'s transformations (if that is what they were) of Tantrism into "secret talks." Such political expediencies may have include the orienting arrangement of social and moral worlds under colonialism, famously articulated by Partha Chatterjee (1993), the public, male domain of politics and colonial rule, and the private, female, "spiritual" space where anti-colonial sentiments could grow. And they certainly included the ways secrecy and disclosure were paramount to both a colonial state enacting sedition laws to quell counter-revolutionary action and to anti-colonial actors and the covert speech they generated, secrets in plain sight in Bengali theatre and communicated by revolutionaries who found solace with charismatic sages.

By locating her account as "Euro-American," Sedgwick (1990) invites us to ask whether and how the "epistemology of the closet" obtains "elsewhere." While the political and literary conditions surrounding *Kathamrita* might be read as points of difference, or at least variation, from Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet, their status as "different" differs from the (more radical) sense of difference that orients the *Kali's Child* scandal and readings of it. Thinking with literary form allows us to extend that story beyond the censorial repressions that mark the internationalization of Hindutva in the 1990s (and the transformation of Ramakrishna's message in the early 1900s), and to avoid the unhelpful argument that the true "western" or "foreign" subject in the *Kali's Child* case was not Kripal, but his detractors, speaking for a Hinduism they misrepresented, and the equally unhelpful suggestion that their condemnations were at odds with "civilizational" (in Cohen's terminology) sources more accepting of sexual and gender diversity. Forms of secrecy that circuited the 1890s and 1990s are as complexly "Indian" as they are both "Euro-American" and features of that modern thing, "world literature."

It could be pointed out that "the closet" is a Western formulation, as unfamiliar in South Asian, where queer possibilities for expression and exposure are not restricted to notions of "gay" identity or "coming out." But what is Tagore's *Chitra* if not a coming out story, of a kind? At the same time, what kinds of "coming out" are permitted/established through long-standing tropes of gender reversal? Might the same element that produces anxiety about the limits of feminism in one context (the *New York Times* review) generate different illuminations/opacities in another, even as it links them in global literary circuits? What might it do to include *Chitra* into Sedgwick's canon, and its readers and arrangements (beauty/plainness, curses/boons) into her "chain of binaries" (public/private, outside/inside)? Whose sexual politics, whose history of secrecy, would it expand? Would it alter or reinforce the sense of a world connected-up by identically named legal codes criminalizing queer forms of sex (Section 377 remained in place across the British postcolonial world), in which the closet was/is widely recognizable as a "history of judicial formulations" that "codifie[d] an excruciating system of double binds" (Sedgwick 1990, 70)? Sedgwick (1990, 56) describes the closet as "that curious space that is both internal and marginal to the culture: centrally representative of its motivating passions and contradictions, even when marginalized by its orthodoxies," in which what is at issue is not (only) "homosexuality 'itself'" but the "management of information about it" (70). That such a set of creations was and is "different" in India is true; that it was and is connected to broader systems of regulation through colonial law is also true. But also possible is that if the closet – a constantly moving production – follows trajectories that absorb and reallocate speech and its forms, bending towards diverse senses of the political, it draws on diverse energies and passions, including those that hew to "civilizational" texts and "turn" to ambiguous and diverse ("religious") narrative particularities otherwise unrecognizable in liberal formulations, secrets and curses, the therapeutic voice and cryptic actions of a saint.

How does this circuit between 1890s and 1990s matter now, in, if not a post-closet world, then a world in which such a thing is imaginable? There are two immediate responses: *Obhishopto Nighty* – a perturbing representation of a view to that horizon. And *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, a portrayal not conditioned by – yet taking readerly interest in – secrecy and exposure, curses and boons, where relationships between gender expression and forms of law are formed between persons with bodily stakes in each other, and therapeutics revisit but do not reveal. In its alternate theory of reading, understanding can be revised, decisions reversed. There is risk here, but it is not the risk of exposure. It is the risk of relationships, of, in Rudra's words, "suffering" another person, risking what never feels obvious.

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