
Identity, Image, and Intimacy: A Psychoanalytic Study of Literary and Cinematic Spaces

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Abstract

Contemporary literature and cinema serve as profound repositories of human emotional complexity, particularly in their exploration of queer identity, intimacy, and psychological disconnection. The intricate emotional landscapes presented in the selected literary and cinematic texts through a comprehensive psychoanalytic framework draw upon the Freudian, the Lacanian, and the Kristevan theoretical foundations alongside the contemporary queer theory. The study attempts to analyze the works; André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, Pedro Almodóvar's *Bad Education*, and Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* to illuminate how desire, repression, and gender performance manifest within narrative structures. This research will help reveal the emotional dissonance and fractured subjectivities constituting central epistemologies of modernity rather than mere narrative anomalies. The findings demonstrate cross-media patterns in portraying queer longing, familial estrangement, and identity fragmentation, challenging normative constructs of intimacy while asserting that literature and film function as emotional and cultural archives capturing the psychic residues of social marginalization. This study contributes to English literary studies by repositioning psychoanalysis as a flexible, interdisciplinary instrument for understanding modern subjectivity within both textual and sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, queer identity, emotional disconnection, gender performativity, modern intimacy, literary and cinematic narratives, repression and desire, cultural criticism.

Introduction

Background and theoretical framework: In the fragmented realities of contemporary existence, intimacy has emerged as both a fundamental human pursuit and an increasingly elusive paradox. Literature and cinema, as the most potent cultural instruments of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, continue to mirror the complex terrains of emotional disconnection, gender identity negotiation, and the silent intricacies of human desire. The psychoanalytic tradition, originating with Freud's revolutionary insights and evolving through the theoretical contributions of Lacan, Kristeva, Butler, and Žižek, has persistently sought to excavate the submerged textures of human subjectivity.

The unconscious negotiations of selfhood, sexuality, and relational trauma find particularly pronounced expression within literary and cinematic texts, where the boundaries between representation and reality blur in meaningful ways. As Judith Butler (2004) observes, "To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, a loss of location." This research endeavours to restore such context, offering analytical frameworks that provide location to affective struggles manifested in both written and visual narratives.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Literary and Cultural Studies: The field of English literary and cultural studies has witnessed growing critical engagement with the emotional topographies of modern life. Scholars like Lauren Berlant (2011) have reconceptualized intimacy as "cruel optimism"—a fantasy of emotional fulfilment that often proves psychologically harmful. Berlant's analysis of attachment to unrealizable futures mirrors the character trajectories found in works by James Baldwin or Sally Rooney, where protagonists long for connections that their social conditions never permit.

Recent critical writings (Ahmed, 2010; Felski, 2020) argue that affective criticism must transcend mere representation to analyse how texts themselves generate emotional responses—how they provoke, simulate, or distort intimacy. Queer archives are increasingly re-examined not solely for visibility but for their affective complexity (Love, 2007). Disconnection emerges as an active force embedded within neoliberal social relations, medicalized psychiatric frameworks, and digital detachment phenomena.

Representation of homosexuality and desire in contemporary media: Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, depictions of homosexuality and queer desire in literature and cinema have transitioned from enforced silence and coded subtext toward explicit articulation. However, even within this trajectory of increased visibility, portrayals of queer desire often remain haunted by psychological repression, social alienation, or tragic conclusions.

The theoretical framework employed here addresses analytical blind spots by creating comparative methodologies that interpret literary and cinematic representations through psychoanalytic semiotic lenses. This approach contributes original analytical frameworks for understanding how emotional modernity and queer desire are structured, distorted, and sublimated within cultural narratives.

Literary explorations of queer identity and desire: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* presents a paradigmatic example of how literary texts construct queer desire through memory, temporality, and sensual detail. The novel's narrative structure, utilizing retrospective first-person narration, creates temporal layers that mirror the psychological complexity of repressed desire. Elio's internal monologue reveals the intricate negotiations between conscious awareness and unconscious longing, exemplifying what Lacan theorizes as the subject's relationship to the symbolic order.

The text's exploration of intergenerational desire challenges conventional notions of appropriate intimacy while revealing how social taboos operate at unconscious levels. Aciman's prose style, characterized by sensual immediacy and philosophical reflection, creates literary spaces where forbidden desires can be articulated and examined without immediate social consequences.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* provides contrasting perspectives on queer identity formation within postcolonial contexts. The novel examines how cultural traditions, family expectations, and political violence intersect with sexual identity development. Arjie's coming-of-age narrative demonstrates how queer subjectivity emerges through resistance to normative gender expectations while navigating complex cultural loyalties.

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* offers additional dimensions to understanding psychological disconnection within family structures. While not explicitly focused on queer identity, the memoir's exploration of mental illness, family dysfunction, and emotional alienation provides valuable insights into how psychological distress manifests within intimate relationships.

Cinematic representations of desire and identity: Cinema introduces visual and auditory semiotic layers to psychoanalytic exploration, creating multidimensional spaces for examining psychological complexity. Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* exemplifies how cinematic techniques can illuminate internal psychological processes through external visual representation. The film's triptych structure mirrors stages of psychological development while examining how trauma, sexuality, and identity intersect across time.

The visual composition in *Moonlight* utilizes colour symbolism, camera positioning, and sound design to create intimate portraits of psychological struggle. Jenkins' directorial choices reveal how cinematic language can articulate experiences that resist verbal expression, particularly regarding repressed sexuality and emotional vulnerability.

Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* employs distinctive cinematographic techniques to echo characters' relational turbulence. The film's disjointed narrative structure and fragmented chronology reflect the collapse of linear emotional development. The famous dancing sequence in a Buenos Aires club appears suspended in time—ephemeral, passionate, yet inevitably doomed—demonstrating how cinematic form can embody psychological content.

Pedro Almodóvar's *Bad Education* provides complex explorations of desire, memory, and identity transformation. The film's nested narrative structure, combining elements of thriller, melodrama, and psychological study, creates spaces where gender performance and sexual identity can be examined through multiple temporal and psychological lenses.

Cross-media patterns and psychological themes: Across both literary and cinematic texts, several recurring patterns emerge in representations of queer desire and emotional disconnection. Characters frequently experience isolation despite proximity to others, suggesting that disconnection functions as the fundamental

grammar of modern relationships rather than representing relationship failure. These characters do not lack capacity for intimacy; they are systematically denied conditions necessary for safe emotional expression.

The texts consistently portray desire as simultaneously creative and destructive, offering possibilities for authentic self-expression while threatening social stability and personal safety. This duality reflects broader cultural anxieties regarding non-normative sexuality and unconventional intimacy patterns.

Gender performance emerges as a central theme across texts, with characters negotiating between authentic self-expression and social acceptability. The psychological cost of such negotiations becomes apparent through various narrative techniques, including fragmented storytelling, temporal disruption, and symbolic imagery.

Implications and theoretical contributions: Reframing Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: This research contributes to ongoing reconfigurations of psychoanalytic literary criticism by repositioning Freudian and Lacanian frameworks within postcolonial and queer contexts. Traditional psychoanalysis often presumes Eurocentric and heteronormative subjectivities, yet these case studies expose how queer desire and non-Western identities destabilize such assumptions. It demonstrates that psychoanalytic theory requires flexible application when examining diverse cultural contexts and non-normative identity formations. This adaptability enhances rather than diminishes psychoanalytic explanatory power, revealing universal psychological processes while acknowledging cultural specificity.

Literature and cinema as emotional archives: The textual analysis demonstrates that literature and cinema function as more than cultural mirrors—they constitute psychic landscapes where disconnection becomes narrative form, desire transforms into structural elements, and queerness operates as both method and content. These narratives challenge representational boundaries, questioning not simply who individuals are, but how they achieve being through silenced desires and failed intimacies. The texts examined hardly represent emotional complexity but they are structurally organized by it. This finding suggests that affective criticism must examine how emotional content shapes formal elements rather than treating affect as supplementary thematic content.

Conclusion

The study affirms that the queer identity and emotional disconnection constitute central epistemologies rather than peripheral themes in contemporary literature and cinema. The texts examined exhibit that modern subjectivity is fundamentally structured by negotiations between authentic desire and social constraint with psychological disconnection emerging as both symptom and survival strategy.

These cultural works function as emotional and psychological archives, preserving experiences of marginalization while creating spaces for alternative intimacy models challenging normative assumptions regarding appropriate desire, acceptable gender expression, and functional relationships while offering complex portraits of human psychological resilience.

The research demonstrates that psychoanalytic approaches remain valuable for understanding contemporary cultural production when applied with sensitivity to diverse identity positions and cultural contexts. Through examining how symbolic structures intersect with lived emotional experience, this study helps in deeper understanding of modern subjectivity while offering new pathways for psychoanalytic literary and cinematic criticism.

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