



The Return of the Repressed: A Psychoanalytic Study of Familial and Forbidden Desires in *Narayaneente Moonnaanmakal* (*The Three Sons of Narayani*)

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ABSTRACT

Narayaneente Moonnaanmakal (The Three Sons of Narayani), is a Malayalam film which presents a complex narrative of familial tensions, repressed desires, and social taboos, making it a rich text for psychoanalytic analysis. This paper explores the film through Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, examining themes of repression, unconscious desires, and the role of the Symbolic Order in regulating human relationships. The estrangement of the younger brother due to his interfaith marriage reflects the family's collective repression of social transgression, while Nikhil and Athira's relationship embodies latent desires that challenge familial and cultural norms. Sethu, the so-called "mad" brother, serves as a figure of the Real, exposing the illusion of permanence in human relationships. The study also examines how patriarchal anxieties manifest through the elder brother's aggressive response to Nikhil and Athira's bond, reinforcing Freudian notions of the Oedipal complex and castration anxiety. By employing psychoanalysis, this paper argues that the film not only critiques societal restrictions on desire and identity but also exposes the fragile boundaries that govern familial and romantic relationships.

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Introduction



Following its release on OTT platforms, the compelling family drama *Narayaneente Moonnaanmakal* has garnered widespread critical acclaim. The setting closely mirrors that of *Aalkkoottathil Thaniye* (1984), penned by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and directed by I.V. Sasi, where Narayani's three sons reunite at their ancestral home after a long separation, as she lies on her deathbed. From the outset, it is evident that tensions simmer between the eldest son, Vishwanathan (Alencier Lay Lopez), and the youngest, Bhaskar (Suraj Venjaramood), who returns home after many years. The middle son, Sethu (Joju George), often dismissed as a failure by his brothers, emerges as the most reasonable among them. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, the film reveals how repressed emotions, forbidden desires, and unconscious drives shape the characters' behaviour and relationships. The narrative confronts the tension between individual longing and societal norms, particularly through the strained sibling dynamics and the unexpected intimacy between cousins. This paper aims to analyze the film's emotional undercurrents—rooted in repression, projection, and the death drive—to uncover the psychological truths embedded beneath the surface of familial duty and cultural expectation.

Narrating the movie's plot

Vishwanathan, Bhaskaran, and Sethu—three long-estranged brothers—reunite at their ancestral home in Koyilandi as their mother, Narayani, nears the end of her life. Sethu, the quiet middle sibling with a learning disorder, has stayed behind to care for her, while Bhaskaran left years ago after marrying Nafeesa, a choice that created a deep rift with their traditionalist elder brother, Vishwanathan.

As the family gathers, old resentments resurface. Tensions mount when Vishwanathan discovers a budding romance between his daughter Athira and Bhaskaran's son Nikhil. Furious, he rejects the relationship, still clinging to past grievances. Bhaskaran, moved by his son's sincerity, chooses to support the young couple. Caught in the middle, Sethu gently urges his brothers toward reconciliation, hoping that love might finally heal their fractured family.

Repression, Projection, and Familial Conflict

The elder brother's hostility towards his younger sibling can be understood through Freud's concept of repression and projection. He outwardly blames their father's death on the younger brother's interfaith marriage, but this accusation may serve as a psychological defense—a way to deflect from his own inner conflicts and unresolved emotions. By projecting his anxiety and guilt onto his brother, the elder sibling avoids confronting his own sense of loss, failure, and helplessness in the face of their father's



declining health. In Freudian terms, projection allows the ego to manage internal turmoil by attributing unacceptable feelings to someone else—in this case, framing the younger brother as the source of disruption.

The elder brother's need to uphold traditional family values and cultural norms becomes a mask for his deeper emotional vulnerability. His refusal to acknowledge his brother's humanity, or even his right to choose love over caste and religion, is not simply moral outrage—it is repression, where emotional bonds are buried under the weight of social conditioning. His sense of identity is tightly bound to the "ideal son" archetype, one who protects family honor, making the younger brother's deviation a direct threat to that self-image. Moreover, the inability to mourn the father in a healthy way suggests a failure of emotional processing, leading to displacement of grief into anger. This repression of brotherly affection and unresolved mourning fuels the ongoing familial conflict, illustrating how the unconscious mind governs not only individual behaviour but also collective family dynamics. The result is a family fractured not by the actual act of marriage, but by the psychic mechanisms each member employs to cope with loss, difference, and change.

This psychic dissonance intensifies as the elder brother becomes increasingly fixated on preserving an imagined purity of lineage and tradition. His identity is not simply shaped by individual choice, but constructed within a web of social expectations, familial roles, and cultural scripts. In Freudian terms, the superego—the internalized voice of authority and morality—plays a dominant role in his psyche, enforcing rigid behavioural codes and suppressing any deviance from them. The younger brother's interfaith marriage, then, does not merely symbolize a personal choice; it represents a rupture in the unconscious order that the elder sibling desperately clings to. His aggression, tinged with moral superiority, can be read as a defense against the crumbling foundation of his inherited belief systems.

Moreover, the elder brother's hostility might also signal a deeper, unarticulated envy. While he portrays his younger sibling as reckless and disloyal, he might unconsciously admire the courage it takes to defy societal norms and pursue love. Freud's notion of reaction formation—the process by which an individual defends against unacceptable desires by adopting opposing attitudes—offers another layer of insight. The elder brother's contempt could be a mask for his own repressed longing for emotional freedom, intimacy, or even rebellion. Rather than confront these dissonant desires, he clings to an external order that validates his position of control and righteousness.



This dynamic reflects a broader cultural pathology in which emotional expression is often subordinated to conformity and duty. The family, in this sense, becomes not just a site of nurture, but also of surveillance and internalized repression. The mourning of the father remains incomplete not because of the absence of ritual, but due to the lack of emotional honesty. The family performs grief outwardly, but inwardly, it remains fragmented by unresolved tensions and silent wounds.

The younger brother, though vilified, embodies the potential for transformation—a shift from repression to recognition, from projection to empathy. However, this possibility is thwarted by the elder sibling's refusal to engage with his own interiority. The conflict, then, is not solely between brothers, but between competing psychic economies: one that clings to the security of repression and tradition, and another that dares to confront the unconscious and reimagine kinship through vulnerability, choice, and love. In the end, it is not the interfaith marriage that divides the family, but the fear of confronting what lies buried within—the repressed grief, the masked insecurities, and the yearning for authenticity.

Oedipal Complex, Forbidden Desire and the Return of the Repressed

The romantic and sexual relationship that develops between Nikhil and Athira—cousins who meet as strangers—can be interpreted through Freud's idea of the return of the repressed. In traditional family structures, cousin relationships are often governed by cultural taboos, especially in conservative settings. Their bond forms outside the rigid surveillance of family but eventually ruptures that secrecy.

Their intimacy represents a break in the Symbolic Order (Lacan), where cultural norms that govern behaviour are momentarily suspended. Nikhil's confession—"I feel like touching you"—is a moment when the unconscious desire surfaces in language, which is crucial in psychoanalysis. Their attraction is not just physical but deeply rooted in emotional vulnerability. Nikhil tells Athira that no one has ever listened to him the way she does—implying a craving for emotional recognition, which could stem from a childhood need for validation left unmet in his fractured family.

Freud theorized that repressed desires toward forbidden figures often emerge in the absence of a strong paternal presence, and in the film, both characters navigate a space where father figures are emotionally or physically distant. Nikhil's father, though present, is alienated from the rest of the family and bears the burden of past rejection, while Athira's father, though authoritative, is largely disconnected from her inner world and emotional needs. In such an emotionally fragmented environment, the boundaries set by familial structure begin to dissolve, allowing unconscious desires to surface. Their



growing intimacy can thus be seen as a reenactment of unresolved Oedipal tensions, where the emotional void left by distant or ineffective paternal figures makes space for desire to take shape in socially unacceptable directions.

The absence of healthy paternal authority creates a vacuum in which desire, once repressed, finds alternative channels for expression. For both Nikhil and Athira, their emotional connection is rooted not only in physical attraction but also in a subconscious attempt to find recognition, care, and validation—needs traditionally fulfilled within a stable parental framework. Athira, in particular, is shown to struggle with her mother's constant pressure to conform, especially in preparing for the PSC exams, reflecting the expectations of a patriarchal society projected through maternal authority. This authoritarian presence, combined with an emotionally unavailable father, intensifies her yearning for emotional intimacy, which she finds unexpectedly in Nikhil.

Nikhil, too, emerges as a character in search of belonging. Having been raised in a household rejected by the traditional family structure, his return marks not just a physical journey but a psychological one—seeking acceptance and affirmation. When Athira becomes the first to listen to him without judgment, it opens the floodgates to buried emotions and unmet emotional needs. Their shared moments, particularly their quiet conversations and physical closeness, can be seen as a transgressive yet deeply human response to emotional neglect.

This emotional transference, a key Freudian concept, plays out subtly in their dynamic. What begins as innocent connection gradually evolves into a manifestation of repressed longing. The breakdown of traditional boundaries in such emotionally charged circumstances allows the unconscious to override the socially imposed restrictions—turning their relationship into a mirror of the deeper fractures within the family structure itself.

Thanatos (Death Drive) and the Wish for the Mother's Death

One of the most compelling aspects of the film is how all the sons, despite their outward expressions of concern, secretly wish for their mother's death. This aligns with Freud's concept of Thanatos or the death drive, which suggests that human beings harbour an unconscious desire toward dissolution, escape, and the end of tension—often expressed as destruction of the self or others. In this context, the mother represents not only emotional attachment but also the last tie holding the family together—her passing would mark the final dissolution of familial obligations. The brothers, each consumed by their own



routines and responsibilities, see her prolonged life as a delay to their personal freedom. This subconscious wish is never directly voiced but is evident in their behaviour, awkward silences, and avoidance of genuine care.

When Nafeesu raises the question of morality—asking whether they are “bad people” for thinking this way—she channels the superego, the moral conscience shaped by societal values. Her husband’s humorous dismissal of this concern is not mere deflection, but a coping mechanism employed by the ego to balance the tension between the id (desire for liberation), the superego (moral guilt), and external reality. The tension between these psychic forces reveals how even socially unacceptable wishes, like wanting the death of a parent, can be repressed yet still guide behaviour. The film subtly critiques how emotional detachment and neglect can be masked by ritualistic concern, reflecting how modern familial structures often prioritize functionality over genuine emotional bonds. The death drive here is not only individual but collective, suggesting a shared psychological fatigue within the family unit—where love and obligation have turned into burden and resentment.

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