Voices from the Vault: Feminist Narratives and Resistance in Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*

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Abstract

Goynar Baksho (2013) (transl. *The Jewellery Box*), directed by renowned actress-filmmaker Aparna Sen, is a landmark in the Bengali horror-comedy genre. Adapted from the novel *Goynar Baksho* and the short story *Rashmonir Sonadana* by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, originally published in *Desh* magazine in 1959, the film blends supernatural narrative with sharp social critique. Set in postcolonial Bengal, it traces the lives of three women across generations through the metaphor of a haunted jewellery box, interrogating patriarchal ideology and inheritance. Drawing upon feminist film theories such as Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze,' Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity,' and 'postcolonial feminist thought,' this article examines the evolution of feminist consciousness in the film. The ghostly presence of Rashmoni/Pishima articulates suppressed female desire and resistance, while Somlata and Chaitali reflect the feminist evolution from pragmatic to progressive. Through satire, vernacular expression, supernatural elements, and the domestic sphere, the film critiques gender norms, class, and cultural identity. The study argues that Aparna Sen reimagines feminist agency, offering a powerful commentary on womanhood, resistance, and liberation in contemporary South Asian narratives.

Keywords: Cinema; Feminism; Gender; Identity; Postcolonialism

Introduction

Women's voices in film have always been overshadowed by scripts written by men and dominated by male-centric narratives, despite the medium's long history of influencing and questioning societal attitudes. In Indian films, Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) stands out as a notable exception, not just because it focuses on three generations of women, but also because it allows them to speak across time, across silence, and even from beyond the grave.

Based on Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's novella, the film switches between historical fiction, satire, and ghost story to create a complex narrative on women's agency, resistance and transformation in a patriarchal culture.

Set against the backdrop of post-Partition Bengal and spanning over several decades, *Goynar Baksho* follows the lives of three women: Pishima/ Rashmoni, an elderly widowed aunt who refuses to go quietly into the margins; Somlata, a young housewife navigating the domestic expectations of a traditional household; and Chaitali, a modern, politically aware girl with dreams of her own. The linking thread among these three women is a *goynar baksho* (jewellery box) that becomes far more than a physical object. It turns into a metaphor for secrets, inheritance, power, and the silent struggles passed down from one generation of women to the next. At its core, the film is a feminist reflection on voice and visibility. By using the ghost of a repressed woman as a narrator, Aparna Sen skilfully blurs the line between the literal and the metaphorical, allowing the past to speak to the present. In doing so, *Goynar Baksho* not only critiques the patriarchal structures that have historically silenced women but also offers a narrative of resistance that evolves with time.

This article argues that in *Goynar Baksho*, each female character embodies a different mode of resistance—from bitterness and wit to economic independence and political activism. This essay also seeks to understand how Sen's film reclaims the suppressed voices of women and offers a layered feminist vision that speaks to both the past and the present.

Research Paradigm

To explore the feminist perspectives of *Goynar Baksho*, it is important to situate the discussion within relevant theoretical perspectives that illuminate the film's layered treatment of gender, power, and identity. Through the lens of feminist film theory, it will attempt to comprehend better how Aparna Sen crafts a narrative that not only centres women but gives them a voice in a world that has often denied them one.

One of the earliest and most influential ideas in feminist film theory comes from Laura Mulvey, whose concept of the 'male gaze' argues that mainstream cinema often treats women as objects to be looked at rather than as subjective

agents. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that cinematic conventions frequently align the camera, the narrative, and even the audience with a heterosexual male perspective, thereby turning the female characters into objects of visual pleasure (Mulvey 11). *Goynar Baksho* actively resists this positioning. The women in the film are not romanticized or aestheticized for male consumption; instead, they are given the power to observe, critique, and resist. Pishima, in particular, disrupts the gaze with her unsentimental commentary on the lives of others and her presence as a ghostly narrator destabilizes the patriarchal control over both the narrative and its meaning.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity advances this discussion further. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler posits that gender is not a stable identity but rather a performance that is repeated through social norms and expectations (Butler 25). Each of the women in *Goynar Baksho* perform gender differently, revealing the constructed nature of femininity. Although Somlata seems to fit the stereotype of a dutiful homemaker, she challenges it by taking initiative for the family's financial survival through entrepreneurial initiatives. Chaitali, however, displays a very different kind of femininity that is unapologetic, politically involved, and unconcerned with conventional home life. These women demonstrate Butler's notion that gender is a variable and debatable process by fighting against or reinterpreting the roles they have been given.

To better understand how these performances are shaped by the Indian context, postcolonial feminist thought is especially useful. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," critiques the tendency in Western feminist scholarship to represent women from the Global South as a monolithic group—voiceless, oppressed, and passive (Mohanty 337). Instead, she urges for an analysis rooted in historical and cultural specificity. *Goynar Baksho* offers precisely this. Its characters are not merely victims of patriarchy, but active agents negotiating power within their socio-cultural realities. Pishima's ghost, still clinging to her jewellery, symbolizes both resistance and a refusal to be erased. Somlata reclaims economic space within the domestic realm, while Chaitali represents a generation that seeks political and personal liberation. The film thus resists homogenizing feminist narratives and instead portrays how women's resistance

is shaped by class, caste, and generational experience.

Methodologically, this article combines close visual analysis with theoretical interpretation. Specific scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs—especially the recurring symbol of the jewellery box—will be analyzed to understand how feminist resistance is enacted or subverted in the film. Pishima's ghostly voice, Somlata's metamorphosis, and Chaitali's idealism each provide unique ways to interpret gender as a performative, ever-changing identity. These analyses will be supported by critical frameworks drawn from feminist and postcolonial theory. The aim is not only to trace feminist themes in the film but to show how *Goynar Baksho* contributes to the wider discourse of feminist cinema by offering a narrative that is both culturally rooted and ideologically radical.

Generational Feminisms: A Triadic Exploration

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Goynar Baksho* is how it reflects the progress of feminism through three generations of women, each influenced by their social and historical context but united by common battles. The characters—Pishima, Somlata, and Chaitali represent various expressions of womanhood and resistance. They constitute a three-way picture of feminist development, moving from suppression and rebellion to compromise and ultimately emancipation. Through these three women, Aparna Sen explores the idea that feminist consciousness is not monolithic but fluid—rooted in context, shaped by class and culture, and constantly evolving.

Pishima: The Ghost of Resistance

Pishima, the elderly widow whose spirit refuses to leave the house after death, is at once a haunting figure and a fierce presence. She represents an older generation of Bengali women raised under the suffocating norms of colonial patriarchy. Pishima's existence was characterized by silence, deprivation, and denial; she was married off at a young age and became a widow even earlier. However, she becomes quite outspoken and forceful in death. In a world where she has lost everything else, her compulsive protection of her jewellery is a symbolic act of dominance over the only form of power that remains to her.

Her dialogues, often laced with sarcasm and scorn, reflect both bitterness and clarity. At one point, she scoffs, "*Ei poribaar ta chheleder hatey noshto hoye jabe!*" [transl. "This family will be ruined in the hands of these men!"] (Sen 2013). Such remarks not only reveal her distrust of patriarchal incompetence but also highlights how she desires to see a woman take charge. Her ghostly presence functions like a subversive voice from the past—a voice that was silenced throughout her lifetime but has power in the afterlife. In this way, Pishima aligns with what Gayatri Spivak calls the 'subaltern' woman whose voice has been historically buried but finds occasional ruptures to speak (Spivak 284). Moreover, her transformation throughout the film—from a possessive spirit to a mentor figure for Somlata—indicates that feminist resistance is not static at all.

Somlata: Subversion through Strategy

Somlata, the young bride married into Pishima's decaying aristocratic household, represents a quieter but no less effective kind of resistance. At first glance, she seems to accept her domestic role without protest. Yet when she discovers Pishima's hidden jewellery box, she does something unexpected: she uses it to secure capital to start a saree business. This act is quite revolutionary because it challenges economic dependency—a core mechanism of patriarchal control.

Somlata's story resonates with the kind of feminism that grows from within the domestic space. Scholars like Nandita Bhavnani argue that Indian women have often found subtle ways to resist patriarchy while maintaining the outward appearances of tradition (Bhavnani 47). Somlata fits into this mold—negotiating power without direct rebellion, ensuring survival while gradually shifting the family's gender dynamics. Her secret partnership with Pishima's ghost also symbolizes how past and present feminisms can co-exist and support each other. But Somlata is not without contradictions. She sometimes hesitates, defers to elders and maintains the façade of an obedient daughter-in-law. These moments reveal the complex tightrope that many Indian women walk balancing selfhood and social expectation. Her feminism is not framed in slogans but in quiet choices that gradually alter the foundation of her household. As Judith Butler might suggest, Somlata's gender performance evolves as she navigates and reshapes the social script written for her (Butler 191).

Chaitali: Radical Independence and Political Awakening

Chaitali, the youngest woman in the narrative, belongs to a generation no longer willing to compromise with tradition. She is modern, educated, politically aware and uninterested in the jewellery box that once symbolized power for her predecessors. Her romantic involvement with a Naxalite revolutionary signals her desire for political transformation alongside personal freedom.

Chaitali's feminism is strong and outspoken. She challenges family norms openly, chooses her own path and expresses her opinions without any hesitation and apology. Her indifference towards the generational jewellery box conveys her rejection of not just physical inheritance but the psychological inheritance of female subjugation. Her actions reflect what Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to as a feminism rooted in historical consciousness and resistant to traditional narratives of passive femininity (Mohanty 344). Yet, Chaitali is also a product of privilege. Unlike Pishima or Somlata, her freedom comes with access to education and mobility. The film subtly acknowledges that feminist freedom is never evenly distributed, and that class and generational shifts play a major role in shaping what kind of resistance is possible.

Through these three women, *Goynar Baksho* constructs a layered narrative of feminist evolution. Each character reflects a different mode of survival and agency, and together, they show the resistance against patriarchy.

The Jewellery Box as a Feminist Metaphor

The whole narrative of *Goynar Baksho* revolves around a jewellery box. Even though it seems to be merely a box containing gold and family treasures, it actually represents a complex and multifaceted metaphor for female agency, generational inheritance, and quiet rebellion. Aparna Sen uses this seemingly ordinary object not just as a plot device, but as a symbolic thread that weaves the stories of three women together, transforming the box into a site of memory, rebellion, and identity.

For Pishima, the jewellery box is her last refuge—a personal treasure that represents everything she was denied in life. As a young widow under colonial patriarchy, she lost her colour, adornment, sexuality, and voice. The *goynar baksho* becomes her only source of power in a world that silenced

her. In a world that silenced her, the *goynar baksho* became her only source of authority. Even after her death, she fiercely protects it, making it her emotional anchor. The box represents a safe space where all of her repressed wishes, frustrations, and assertiveness have been kept. Her possessive attitude is not driven by greed but by a refusal to relinquish control in a life where she was denied autonomy.

When Somlata finds the box, the symbolism becomes more profound. Unlike Pishima, who kept the jewellery box hidden, Somlata chooses to use it to free her family from financial collapse—not to adorn herself. She pawns the jewels and uses the money to open a saree business that establishes her own economic agency. Somlata's use of the box aligns with material feminist theory which emphasizes the importance of objects and the domestic sphere in women's negotiation with power. As Annette Kuhn observes in her study of feminist film theory, material objects in women's narratives often function as "containers of memory and social tension" (Kuhn 29). Here, the jewellery box becomes a vessel not only of memory, but of transformation—changing hands, changing meaning and changing lives.

But the true evolution of the symbol comes with Chaitali. To her, the jewellery box holds no charm. She adamantly rejects the jewellery when it is offered to her, saying that she has no interest in the trappings of inherited femininity. Her rejection of the box signals a generational shift from material assertion to ideological emancipation. At first glance, Chaitali's attitude might seem ungrateful or disrespectful, but it signals a significant turning point in the feminist path: the freedom to select what to inherit and what to reject. As cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai writes, "the social life of things… illuminates the human transactions and calculations that enliven objects" (Appadurai 5). In this case, the jewellery box carries the weight of three women's lives, each of whom negotiates its meaning differently based on her historical context.

Through this simple, ornate box, Sen captures the complexity of women's lives in a patriarchal society—their silences, their sacrifices, their adaptations and their dreams. The *goynar baksho* is more than an ordinary box; it is a metaphor for the intergenerational struggle for self-definition, autonomy, and voice.

Ghosts, Genre and Gender: Subversion through Storytelling

One of the most distinctive features of *Goynar Baksho* is its genre-bending narrative. Aparna Sen skilfully combines elements of ghost story, satire, period drama, and social critique to create a film that is both entertaining and politically charged. This blending of genres serves as a deliberate strategy to challenge dominant narratives about women, especially within the traditionally conservative structure of Bengali families. By using humour, supernatural elements and an intimate domestic setting, the film manages to speak boldly about patriarchy without becoming didactic or alienating.

The figure of Pishima's ghost is particularly important in this regard. In most cultural traditions, ghosts are associated with fear, unfinished business, or vengeance. However, the ghost of Pishima is not like the frightening spirits seen in horror movies. She is witty, sharp-tongued, unapologetically critical and at times hilariously blunt. Through her ghostly commentary, she reclaims a space in the narrative from which she had long been excluded. As film theorist Tania Modleski notes, "the female ghost often serves as a narrative device to voice what was repressed in life" (Modleski 71). In *Goynar Baksho*, Pishima becomes the literal voice of the repressed; she speaks what she was never allowed to say while alive. Her sarcastic observations on the uselessness of the men in the family, her secret approval of Somlata's independence and her disdain for social hypocrisy turn the ghost from a symbol of fear into a force of feminist subversion.

Aparna Sen's use of humour is just as revolutionary. Despite covering significant topics such as widowhood, economic catastrophe and political upheaval, the movie retains its light-hearted mood throughout. Humour becomes a feminist tool—it disarms, exposes, and questions. As feminist scholar Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues, "comedy provides a space where women can momentarily escape the constraints of decorum and decorous femininity" (Karlyn 128). In the film, Pishima's unfiltered speech and Somlata's sly manipulation of her in-laws serve precisely this purpose—they push against the boundaries of 'good' womanhood and offer alternatives that are both clever and liberating.

The home itself is another important area for rebellion in the film.

Historically, the home has been viewed as a place where women are confined. Inside these walls, women have been reduced to the roles of caretakers, nurturers, and passive custodians of tradition. But *Goynar Baksho* establishes the house as a place for feminist negotiation and action. This transformation of domestic space into political space recalls bell hooks' idea of the homeplace as a site of resistance. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks writes that "the homeplace [is] that space where Black women could affirm one another and create communities of resistance" (hooks 42). While her context is different, the idea resonates with *Goynar Baksho* as well. The home in the film is not just a background setting—it becomes a battleground where patriarchy is subtly but steadily challenged, and where new forms of solidarity and agency emerge.

Even the choice to set the story across decades—starting from the Partition era and ending in the late 1970s—adds another layer to Sen's storytelling strategy. The ghost's timeless presence bridges these periods, suggesting that the struggles women face may change in form but persist across generations. This historical sweep allows Sen to reflect on both continuity and change within Bengali society, while always keeping the focus on female experience. In *Goynar Baksho*, Sen does not preach feminism—she stages it through ghosts, jokes, whispered conversations, and everyday rebellion.

Domesticity, Language and Cultural Subversion

In *Goynar Baksho*, the domestic sphere is not merely a backdrop but a contested space where power is both asserted and negotiated, particularly through language and cultural performance. Through everyday objects and ordinary conversations, Aparna Sen brings out the quiet, persistent tension between tradition and agency, revealing how women manipulate and reinvent the very structures that once confined them.

The household in which most of the film is set is an old *zamindar* (landed aristocrat) mansion—decaying, cluttered, and symbolically stagnant. Within its crumbling walls, the women strictly maintain the routines shaped by generations of patriarchal rule: serving food to male members, observing rituals, and upholding the family's social standing. However, these apparently passive behaviours are frequently accompanied by irony and resistance. For example,

Somlata performs her duties dutifully, but once she gains access to Pishima's jewellery box, she begins to manipulate the same domestic system to her advantage. She uses the gold not to decorate herself, but to financially support the family on her own terms. Her dual role—dutiful daughter-in-law by appearance, entrepreneurial woman in practice — is a perfect example of how domesticity may be used as a guise for rebellion.

Sen's feminist storytelling is also deeply rooted in language, especially in how Bengali is used in the film. The women speak in everyday idioms, familial slang, and sometimes in bitter sarcasm. In particular, Pishima's ghost is infamous for her sharp words. She frequently employs a tone that combines authority and irritation, makes fun of the men in the home for their incompetence and uses dry humour to refer to her history.

This use of colloquial and regionally textured speech challenges the sanitized, hyper-literary dialogues often found in mainstream Indian cinema. As scholar M. Madhava Prasad has argued, Indian cinema has historically been dominated by nationalist and patriarchal ideologies, where the woman often functions as a symbol rather than a subject (Prasad 74). In *Goynar Baksho*, Sen resists this pattern. Her women speak with complexity—sometimes bitter, sometimes funny, often contradictory—and their words reflect real emotional and cultural conflicts, not just roles scripted for narrative function. Through these layers of domesticity and language, Aparna Sen gives us a narrative that is deeply embedded in Bengali culture but not bound by its conventions. As the movie softly argues, power may reside in silence as well as in speech, and occasionally in a single sarcastic remark made from beyond the grave.

Conclusion

In *Goynar Baksho*, Aparna Sen does not hand us a singular image of a 'liberated woman.' Instead, she presents a rich, ironic, and deeply situated narrative where female agency is found not in defiance alone, but also in inheritance, adaptation, and transformation. The jewellery box, once a symbol of possession and repression, becomes a narrative device through which the buried voices of women are retrieved and revalued. Sen's feminism is neither imported nor overtly ideological—it is lived, layered, and responsive to the

nuances of Bengali culture and history. Her ghost is not just a ghost; her widow is not merely mournful; her housewife is not merely obedient; and her modern girl is not simply rebellious. They are all, in their own ways, writing over the silences they have inherited.

Consequently, Aparna Sen's film is not just a story of three women—it is a meditation on feminist legacy. Who speaks for the silenced? Who inherits the weight of resistance? And what do we do with the box, once it's ours?

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