

independent thought, action, and a desire for fulfillment beyond prescribed roles. In most South Asian societies, jewellery has long had deeper meanings associated with money, control, tradition, and identity. It is frequently perceived as an accessory of feminine beauty. Jewellery is a powerful symbol that is often used in literary and cinematic narratives to either reinforce patriarchal ideas of femininity or to subversively reinterpret them. Using Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) and Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Monihara" (1891), this article examines their dual meaning. Although jewellery serves as a prominent narrative device in both pieces, its feminist implications and thematic trajectories differ significantly.

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, jewellery functions as a symbol of social passage and gender transition. As Orlando transforms from male to female, the character's relationship to clothing and adornment evolves as well, reflecting how jewellery becomes both a constraint and a means of navigating social expectations. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the absence of jewellery—particularly earrings or gold—signals the characters' dispossession during slavery. In this context, the lack of personal adornment becomes a marker of dehumanisation, while the recovery or wearing of jewellery can symbolise the reclaiming of agency and dignity. Tagore's "Monihara," presents jewellery as a symbol of psychological fixation, alienation, and ultimately, a woman's tragic end within a patriarchal structure. In "Monihara," the character Monimalika embodies both the allure and the destructive potential of unchecked desire and attachment. She represents a woman grappling with the consequences of her actions and her inability to find fulfillment within the confines of her world. Her story can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unbridled desire and the complexities of female agency in a patriarchal society. Sen's *Goynar Baksho*, a feminist adaptation rooted in postcolonial and contemporary sensibilities, reclaims the jewel box as a site of intergenerational resistance and empowerment. Through a comparative lens, this study examines how these texts interrogate the intersections of gender, class, and memory, and how the shifting symbolic meaning of jewellery—from a token of entrapment to an emblem of liberation—narrates the evolving status of women across time.

Jewellery as Psychological Substitution in “Monihara”

Tagore's “Monihara,” is a gothic tale narrated through a frame story, centering on Monimala, a woman whose obsession with jewellery supersedes all emotional and social bonds. In a colonial Bengali zamindar household, Monimala's life revolves around her jewels—a motif that Tagore uses to depict her spiritual barrenness and emotional fragility. Her husband, Phanibhushan, a benevolent figure, indulges her desires, unaware that the jewels have become a substitute for the emotional void she inhabits. The story's portrayal of jewellery aligns with patriarchal anxieties about female agency and materialism. Monimala's obsession is not depicted as an assertion of identity, but as a pathological dependency. Her alienation is compounded by the absence of children, further stigmatizing her as a failed woman within societal norms. As literary critic, Rimli Bhattacharya notes, “Monimala's fixation on the jewels stems from her lack of autonomy and the void of fulfillment within the constraints of her gendered existence” (Bhattacharya 212). Tagore crafts Monimala's demise as a cautionary tale: when threatened with the loss of her jewels during a financial downturn, she absconds with them, only to die mysteriously, her ghost returning to haunt the house. The spectral return of Monimala foregrounds the uncanny nature of possession—not merely of objects but of a woman's selfhood by societal expectations. Her ghost clinging to the jewels signifies a woman entrapped beyond death by the very things meant to ornament her life. Moreover, in diasporic contexts, jewellery often becomes a means of cultural survival and transmission. Immigrant women, especially from South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, frequently carry heirloom ornaments with them when migrating. These pieces function as both emotional anchors and financial safeguards. For many, jewellery is not simply an accessory but a portable archive of memory, culture, and resilience. It is passed down with stories, rituals, and values, reinforcing lineage, and feminine continuity. As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, “Jewellery, in such cases, becomes a narrative object—telling stories not just of beauty, but of belonging, loss, and endurance” (88). In academic feminist theory, jewellery also raises questions about bodily autonomy and self-expression. Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests that gender is constructed through repeated acts. Adornment, including the wearing of jewellery, can be seen as part of this performative act—a way

through which women present and negotiate their identities. However, when chosen freely, such performativity does not reinforce oppression but instead becomes a tool of self-articulation. A woman choosing to wear a nose ring or gold bangles may be asserting ethnic identity, feminine pride, or personal memory—not necessarily conforming to societal expectations. It is important, however, to distinguish between symbolic agency and actual empowerment. While jewellery may serve as a metaphor for autonomy, it cannot substitute for legal rights, bodily freedom, or structural change. The risk lies in romanticizing the symbolism while ignoring the material conditions of women's lives.

Tagore's narrative frame—told through layers of hearsay—creates epistemic distance from Monimala's interiority. We never access her fully articulated consciousness. This absence is crucial. Her attachment to jewels is narrated as pathology rather than strategy. The structural silencing of her voice mirrors the social silencing of women's dissatisfaction within marriage. Importantly, Tagore does not offer redemption or empowerment through the character. Phanibhushan is charged with the crime of allowing Monimala too much agency and spoiling her with jewellery, yearning for love he doesn't receive, making his wife bear the burden of their unhappy association through marriage. However, on further inspection, one notices that this may not entirely be the case. From the moment we see the female protagonist, she is distracted, lost in thought, and looking out through a window at the outside world. There are several instances between the spouses that range from affection to flirtation but never beyond that. At every hint of her husband getting uncomfortably close, Monimala shrinks back, often hiding discomfort at her husband's physical touch under the garb of being coy. There is deep disregard for her consent, concerns, or desires, even though their marriage has entered its tenth year. The narrative aestheticises her decline, yet embedded within it is a critique of marital entitlement. Phanibhushan expects love in exchange for provision—an expectation that reflects a broader patriarchal contract. The cinematic adaptation of "Monihara" within Ray's anthology film *Teen Kanya* adds another layer. Ray's post-independence framing critiques feudal marriage more explicitly, aligning subtly with Nehruvian visions of reform. His reinterpretation exposes the fragility of patriarchal companionship rather than simply condemning female

desire. The spectral return intensifies this critique. The ghost does not merely haunt the house; she haunts the ideology of possession. Monimala clings to jewels beyond death because they were the only domain she could claim as exclusively hers. Thus, jewellery in Tagore's story becomes a paradox: it is both the only property she controls and the very instrument of her narrative condemnation.

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*: Reclaiming the Feminine Legacy

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013), a Bengali-language film based on Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's short story of the same name, offers a powerful feminist reinterpretation of traditional familial narratives through the symbolic lens of a jewel box. Set across three historical periods—the 1940s during the Partition of Bengal, the 1960s, and the early 1970s—the film chronicles the lives of three generations of women connected through their relationship with a box of ancestral jewellery. At the center of the story is Pishima, a sharp-witted, widowed matriarch whose ghost continues to haunt the jewel box after her death, guiding her timid niece-in-law Somalata toward self-reliance and resistance. Blending elements of satire, the supernatural, and social critique, Sen's adaptation subverts the traditional association of jewellery with vanity and materialism, transforming it into a metaphor for legacy, autonomy, and intergenerational female solidarity. As a filmmaker and writer deeply committed to gender issues, Aparna Sen infuses *Goynar Baksho* with a postcolonial feminist sensibility that reclaims material culture as a space of memory, power, and transformation for women. Unlike Monimala's tragic attachment to her jewels, Pishima's relationship with the jewel box is strategic and protective. The jewels are not merely adornments but symbols of resistance. As a child widow who was denied agency and subjected to rigid social norms, Pishima clings to the box as her only source of power. She guards it fiercely in life and death, ensuring that it benefits future generations of women rather than the male heirs or in-laws.

Aparna Sen's cinematic adaptation of *Goynar Baksho* with the plot of a widow's ghost and her jewellery box interpreted itself as a tale of yearning and woe, of unfulfilled desires, and perhaps most prominently, of perennial victimhood. Sen's film stages jewellery as both a repository of trauma and a

conduit of empowerment. Through the spectral Pishima's interventions, Somalata gains courage, stands up to patriarchal impositions, and uses the jewels for acts of social subversion—helping a relative in love, starting a saree business, and supporting the Bangladesh Liberation War. The jewel box thus becomes an intergenerational link through which feminine wisdom, strength, and subversion are passed down. As Priya Kapoor observes, “Sen reimagines the heirloom not as a cursed possession but as a bequest of resistance—a reparation for generations of silenced women” (137). The film deftly moves beyond mere critique to an active reclamation, portraying female solidarity.

Both “Monihara,” and *Goynar Baksho* engage deeply with the theme of adornment, but their symbolic registers are starkly different. In “Monihara,” jewellery is isolating, obsessive, and destructive—a marker of a woman's inability to transcend material trappings. Objects, like the jewels in “Monihara,” are extremely crucial in critical analyses of narratives of desire. “Things and the preoccupation with them,” as Meenakshi Mukherjee indicates, point at greater complexities within characters and the stories themselves. But as this reading of the story and its approach to the narrative reveals, there is much more to the story than the cautionary tale of a woman's uncanny affection for objects. The horror is contextualised further by the deeper questions it poses tied to society and the sociopolitical environment within which the film was made and distributed. In contrast, *Goynar Baksho* transforms the same motif into a tool for agency and legacy. The class dimension also deserves attention. Monimala belongs to an elite zamindar class, where jewellery is abundant but devoid of meaning beyond vanity. Her life, insulated by privilege, becomes hollow. Somalata and Pishima, though also from a bhadralok family, face financial constraints and gendered oppression, and their relationship with the jewels is grounded in survival and justice rather than aesthetics. Further, the temporal shift between the two works—nineteenth-century colonial Bengal and postcolonial, post-Partition India—inflects their feminist visions. Tagore, despite his progressive ideas, writes within a framework where women's suffering is sublimated into spiritual pathos. Sen, operating in a different feminist and political landscape, gives her characters the tools to alter their circumstances. By refusing to portray women solely as tragic sufferers, Sen challenges the cultural expectation that female depth must be tied to suffering. The comic

mode allows for experimentation, risk, and rebellion. This tonal shift is not cosmetic—it redefines what feminist representation can look like. Agency does not always appear solemn; it can be mischievous, loud, and unapologetic.

The Partition trauma, which uprooted millions, is a pivotal backdrop in *Goynar Baksho*. Pishima's family loses their ancestral land in East Bengal, and the jewels become the only tangible link to that lost world. In this sense, the box becomes not only a feminist symbol but a postcolonial relic—carrying memories of displacement, violence, and survival. Moreover, Sen's use of comedy and satire as narrative strategies contrast with Tagore's tragic and moralistic tone. Pishima is hilarious, foul-mouthed, and unrepentant—a far cry from Monimala's haunted passivity. By giving her female characters humour and voice, Sen subverts the tragic female archetype and opens space for a new kind of heroine. Sen's *Goynar Baksho* also intersects with issues of economic autonomy. When Somalata uses the jewels to start a business, she reconfigures the traditionally private, domestic role of women into a public, entrepreneurial one. This act directly counters the notion of women as passive recipients of wealth; they become producers, investors, and decision-makers. One of the most striking contributions of *Goynar Baksho* is its portrayal of intergenerational feminist dialogue. Pishima, Somalata, and eventually the next generation of women—including Boshon, Somalata's daughter—each relate differently to the jewel box. What begins as hoarding transforms into giving, and finally, into letting go. When the final jewels are donated to support the war, the act signifies a culmination of feminist evolution—from possession to liberation. This progression critiques Tagore's static portrayal in "Monihara" where Monimala remains trapped in a cycle of yearning and loss. Sen's characters evolve, question, and grow. Where Monimalika remains trapped in symbolic stasis, Pishima evolves posthumously. The supernatural becomes an instrument of reclamation rather than punishment. They are not defined solely by their relationships with men but by their moral choices, solidarity, and courage. As Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, "The postcolonial feminist must engage not only with inherited patriarchy but also with inherited texts" (89). Sen's film exemplifies this engagement—it critiques, reclaims, and extends Tagore's legacy by re-visioning the jewel box as a dynamic site of female transformation.

Conclusion

Through the comparative study of “Monihara,” and *Goynar Baksho*, this article has demonstrated how a single motif—jewellery—can carry vastly different meanings across contexts. The most significant structural difference between the two works lies in movement. In “Monihara,” jewellery moves toward accumulation and fixation. In *Goynar Baksho*, jewellery moves toward redistribution and release. Monimalika dies clinging. Somalata lives by letting go. This contrast disrupts cyclical tragedy and introduces linear feminist progression. The jewel box in Sen’s film is not an endpoint but a transitional object. Its value lies in circulation, not hoarding. Thus, the evolution of the motif parallels the evolution of feminist consciousness—from possession as compensation to redistribution as empowerment.

In Tagore’s work, it embodies psychological entrapment and spiritual decay, reinforcing the tragedy of female disempowerment in a patriarchal world. Tagore subtly exposes how patriarchal systems can appear affectionate while erasing consent. Monimalika’s discomfort is never directly articulated, but it is repeatedly implied. Her interior unrest gestures toward a woman whose emotional needs are neither recognised nor validated. This complicates the reading of jewellery as mere vanity. If jewels are the only tangible asset she possesses, then her attachment signals a desire for autonomy within constraint. The tragedy, therefore, is not simply material obsession—it is the absence of alternative modes of self-assertion. Tagore’s initial interrogation of the arranged marriage system, “and the entrapment and enslavement of women as wives” is expounded upon more viscerally. Although caring “husbands provide shelter, security and sustenance” (Mondal, 2015), the women live in loveless marriages and, in some instances, like Moni’s, are driven to extremes to fill the void of their lonesome existence.

In Sen’s feminist reimagining, the jewel box becomes a legacy of resistance, a site of memory, and a catalyst for empowerment. Sen does not merely modernise Tagore’s tale; she transforms its core. Her *Goynar Baksho* is not just an adaptation but a dialogue—a reclamation of history through humour, agency, and solidarity. By turning adornment into assertion, and inheritance into empowerment, Sen offers a compelling feminist revision that speaks to the past and the future.

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Behind Closed Doors: A Feminist Re-reading of Class and Sexuality in Indian Anthology Cinema

Sadia Afreen

Abstract

This article examines the segments directed by Zoya Akhtar in *Lust Stories* (2018) and Konkona Sen Sharma in *Lust Stories 2* (2023), two anthology films, exploring their parallel portrayals of desire, class dynamics, and power relations through employer-maid narratives. Both directors challenge hegemonic constructions of femininity by centering female desire while navigating intersections of gender, class, and sexuality in contemporary India. Akhtar's segment revolves around housemaid Sudha and her employer Ajit, exposing how rigid social hierarchies redefine identity, desire, and agency across gender and class divides. Sharma's "The Mirror" focuses on maid Seema's sexual relationship with her husband, secretly watched by her employer Ishita, where the power dynamic shifts when Seema discovers she is being watched but deliberately continues.

The article investigates how these narratives subvert Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze by positioning female desire as subject rather than object. Employing Foucault's theory of sexuality and Butler's gender performativity, the study analyzes how women negotiate their sexual agency within hierarchical constraints. By analyzing the intersection of these theories, this article reveals a paradox: the sexual agency granted to working-class women is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the very class structures that produce it.

Keywords: Female identity; Sexual agency; Gender; Class; Performativity

Introduction

While mainstream Indian movies for a long period of time continued to perpetuate male-centered narratives, only objectifying women, *Lust Stories* and *Lust Stories 2* came as a breath of fresh air, centering women and granting them independent identities and sexual agency. As the name suggests, the

movie centers around the sexual identity and desire of different people from varied backgrounds. Both *Lust Stories* and *Lust Stories 2* were released on the popular OTT platform, Netflix, in 2018 and 2023, respectively. Both the movies are anthology films directed by renowned Bollywood directors centering on the themes of love, sex, and desire. This article focuses on Zoya Akhtar's segment from *Lust Stories* and Konkona Sen Sharma's segment, "The Mirror" from *Lust Stories 2*.

Even though mainstream Indian cinema has always reinforced patriarchal structures, positioning women as secondary characters who exist only in relation to male characters, functioning solely as objects of desire, the directors of these two segments have subverted this narrative by questioning hegemonic constructions of femininity, and by portraying female protagonists, with sexual autonomy. Both segments center on female identity and desire while navigating the intersections of gender, class, and sexuality in contemporary India.

The article investigates how these narratives subvert Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze by positioning women and female desire as subject rather than object. Furthermore, employing Foucault's theory of sexuality, it analyzes how power dynamics and class differences actually enable rather than prevent sexual agency. In addition, drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis examines how both female protagonists disrupt traditional gender roles and create possibilities for alternative gender identities through the repeated assertion of their sexual desires. It further analyzes how the *mise-en-scène* in both films—particularly through framing, lighting, and spatial composition—positions the viewer in alignment with the working-class protagonists' perspective.

Critically, the intersection of these theoretical frameworks exposes a fundamental paradox: the sexual agency granted to working-class women is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the very class structures that produce it. The article further examines how this paradox operates through cinema itself—the anthology format and OTT platform distribution that both enable progressive content and restrict its access to elite audiences. This article thus predominantly analyzes how women negotiate autonomy and identity within hierarchical constraints. Both directors construct representations of female sexuality that simultaneously challenge and acknowledge existing power

dynamics, contributing to evolving discourses on gender and class in contemporary Indian cinema.

The Two Segments from *Lust Stories* and *Lust Stories 2*

Zoya Akhtar's segment from *Lust Stories* appears second in the anthology and centers around the higher middle-class Ajit and the lower-class Sudha's relationship. Ajit is the employer, while Sudha is the maid of Ajit's house. The movie opens with their passionate sexual encounter, establishing their sexual relationship, and as the movie unfolds, it explores the themes of class disparity and power dynamics. The movie's plot shifts dramatically when Sudha almost immediately starts her maid duties after the sexual encounter. The detailed diligence with which Akhtar has portrayed Sudha's character is commendable. A typical working-class maid, Sudha, immediately after her sexual encounter, is seen wearing her worn-out clothes and squatting and moping the floor—a deliberatemise-en-scène choice that highlights her class identity. She prepares Ajit's breakfast, serves him his coffee, and does the rest of the chores like a typical house-help. Apart from the shower scene, in which they playfully call each other "a dirty bitch" and "a naked dog," reinforcing their sexuality, there are no other scenes in the film where they romantically engage with each other (*Lust Stories* 00:36:33–00:36:39). Ajit denies Sudha a public recognition of their relationship, reinforcing his class superiority. Yet, the movie centers around Sudha's emotions and desires, while Ajit's character becomes the secondary one. When Ajit's parents come to his house to fix his wedding, Sudha's role as a maid becomes exclusively prominent. They see her carrying their luggage, preparing their food, cleaning the toilet, and doing their laundry. Akhtar's focus on Sudha washing Ajit's underwear, him lifting his legs while she sweeps the floor, and his ordering her to keep the teacup aside to avoid touching each other creates a visual boundary between them, establishing the limitations of their intimacy—and Sudha's silent acceptance of that reality. The segment is particularly powerful because it portrays Sudha's sexual and emotional negotiation. Chakraborty, in her article "Empowered Women and SVOD Platforms in India: An Analysis of *Lust Stories*," comments, "Akhtar's portrayal of a working-class woman's right to transgress class barriers deserves commendation" (84).

Konkona Sen Sharma's segment of *Lust Stories 2*, titled "The Mirror," is also a story of a working-class maid, Seema, and her upper-class graphic designer employer, Ishita, who lives all alone in a luxurious apartment. Seema, who is an efficient maid, takes good care of Ishita's house. However, one afternoon when Ishita leaves work early and returns home, she walks in on Seema and her husband having a sexual encounter on her bed. Dismayed by the entire situation, Ishita runs out of the house and waits for them to finish and leave. Later, she returns to the house, changes her bedsheet, and tries to masturbate but ends up crying. This shows, even though quite rich, Ishita is extremely lonely and has an emotional and sexual void in her life. The next day, Ishita again reaches home early while Seema and her husband are again engaged in their sexual encounter. Ishita realizes this is a regular arrangement and decides to hide and watch them through a mirror that is placed in a way that gives her just the perfect reflection of what is happening in her bedroom. Realizing she enjoys being a voyeur, Ishita now regularly leaves work early, sits quietly in her house, and loosens her garments to touch herself while watching them through the mirror. Ishita's sexual void seems to be fulfilled to a certain extent, as she is seen masturbating successfully. However, one day when Ishita quietly gets ready to watch them, Seema spots her but decides to continue with her sexual counter. Doubtful whether she still has her job or not, Seema decides to skip it the next day, when Ishita calls her and tells her to come to her place immediately. Since Ishita doesn't confront Seema, the latter understands that Ishita does not have a problem with the situation and continues her work enthusiastically. Confident about not being confronted, Seema continues her sexual encounter and lets Ishita watch them secretly. The way Ishita realizes that she enjoys being a voyeur, Seema also realizes that she enjoys being watched. Both of them seem to derive pleasure from this arrangement without confronting each other. However, one afternoon, Ishita sees a lizard and screams, accidentally revealing herself. Forced to confront each other, Ishita now takes advantage of her employer privilege and her social class to accuse Seema of misusing her house. Even though a maid, Seema has a strong voice and boldly protests against Ishita's accusations when she is blamed. She mentions she is having sex with her husband, which is legal, and not doing anything unacceptable like Ishita, who derives pleasure by watching others. When Ishita calls Seema "disgusting," Seema gets resentful

and tells Ishita that she is so worthless that she needs Seema even to satisfy her sexual drive (*Lust Stories* 2 00:50:28–00:50:30).

Things get ugly between the employer-maid duo, and while Ishita fires Seema and threatens to ruin her reputation in the society, Seema threatens Ishita back, saying she will do the same. The following days, both the women are seen to be unsatisfied, and as Ishita keeps changing her maid, Seema too keeps changing her job—both realizing that they were perfect for each other. A few days later, both of them cross paths and apologize to each other, each sympathizing with the other's situation. Ishita hands over the keys to Seema, and Seema ultimately agrees to rejoin. In the final scene of the movie, as the clock strikes 3, the lift goes up, indicating that both Seema and Ishita might have gone back to their old arrangement.

Visual Elements and Emotional Alignment: The Role of Mise-en-scène

The directors' choice of mise-en-scène in both films is highly significant, as it is not just used to ornament the setting but rather to create emotional affinity with the audience. Akhtar's portrayal of Sudha with her worn out, dull clothes, her old pair of slippers, her typical working-class gesture of wrapping her dupatta around her waist or pulling up her pajamas before squatting to mop the floor—reinforces her identity as a working-class woman. She is also denied any central space in the film, and always appears at the margins of the frame like kitchen corners and doorways. Ajit, the upper-middle-class man, with his ironed shirt and laptop, in contrast appears at the centre of the frame marking his social hierarchy. Yet the camera's repeated focus on Sudha's face, her silent heartbreak and her sad smiles become prominent in the narrative and the audience aligns with her emotional world, instead of Ajit's class position.

In Sharma's segment the audience's emotions are divided between both Ishita and Seema. The most remarkable mise-en-scène in Sharma's segment is the placement of the mirror on the wall of the common area, which directly reflects the bed in the bedroom. By this meticulous placement, Sharma turns the bedroom into a stage, where Seema and her husband perform while Ishita continues to be their audience, creating the identities of a performer and a voyeur respectively. As the title suggests, the mirror isn't just a prop or an aesthetic detail but a vital cinematic device because it captures the desires of

both women. Even though Seema's use of Ishita's bedroom to have sex goes against work ethics, the camera's focus on the lack of space in Seema's own house, renders an emotional angle to the situation, and the viewers understand the reason behind Seema's actions. Again, the camera's close-up shots of Ishita's face, her eyes heavy with longing, make the audience feel for her despite her class privilege, and the audience feels ready to forgive her voyeuristic attitude, especially after Seema's deliberate choice to continue having sex knowingly. Unlike Akhtar, Sharma doesn't focus heavily on labour or clothes, rather uses the spatial arrangement to portray the helplessness of both the women. However, the audience's emotional alignment shifts toward Seema once Ishita uses her class privilege to insult and sack her.

From Object to Subject: Challenging Mulvey's Visual Pleasure Theory

Laura Mulvey's remarkable essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," established a foundational framework in understanding how conventional cinema reinforces patriarchal ideologies by portraying men as the subject while women are represented only as objects of visual pleasure. Mulvey argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" where cinema is used as a tool of patriarchy, fulfilling the desires of a male gaze (19). Mulvey further argues that within this patriarchal structure, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" and therefore is not positioned as an object of visual pleasure (20). Consequently, the spectator engages in "direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy)" (21). This underpins the concept of objectification and sexualization of women in mainstream films, positioning them as objects without any agency of their own. Mulvey states, "In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously to be looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). Although Mulvey's original thesis centered on the idea of classical Hollywood cinema, its implication can be extended in mainstream Bollywood films as well, since films in general have traditionally displayed women mainly "as erotic objects of desire for the characters within the screen story and as erotic objects of desire for the spectator within the auditorium" (19).

However, both Akhtar and Sharma's narratives challenge the idea of women existing solely as passive images "to be looked at" by portraying them instead as active agents who negotiate for and reclaim their emotional and sexual autonomy (19). Both the segments focus on the desire of the female protagonists, who drive the plot of the films, consciously excluding dominant male characters and the typical male gaze, which usually controls the narrative in mainstream cinema. In both segments, it is the women who look, desire, and take action—challenging and subverting Mulvey's notion of women as passive objects of male pleasure. Instead, the films reinforce female autonomy by asserting women's sexual agency and redefining desire from a distinctly female perspective.

This dynamic becomes evident in Akhtar's segment when the narrative turns toward his impending marriage to Aparna, a girl from his class. During this period, Ajit happily participates with his family while banishing Sudha from his intimate space. Even though Sudha is sidelined in the story, she remains the protagonist because it is her emotional turmoil that is focused on in the movie. When Ajit's mother orders Sudha to prepare tea for his would-be in-laws, the camera focuses on her emotional turmoil—the pain in her eyes as she learns about the wedding date, her shaky hands with the tea tray as she anticipates seeing Ajit and Aparna together—making her the subject who drives the narrative and reinforces her subjectivity. The final scene of the movie is particularly effective in capturing Sudha's extreme emotional turmoil, as the next-door maid unknowingly comments on her seemingly "good day," prompting Sudha to sigh, smile, and nod—ironically confirming the opposite (*Lust Stories* 00:52:47–00:52:50). Even though Mulvey argues that women's "visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line" or "to freeze the flow of actions" Sudha's character, however, solely escalates the narrative (19).

Sharma's segment pushes this subversion further by removing the male figure altogether. With both the employer and the maid being women, Sharma constructs a space where female desire exists entirely outside the male gaze, fundamentally destabilizing Mulvey's framework. Since Seema lives in a small house, where she does not have any privacy, she chooses to have her regular sexual encounters with her husband in her employer Ishita's empty house.

Like Sudha, Seema doesn't hesitate to express her sexual desire despite being doubly marginalized by gender and class, establishing her sexual agency through her passionate relationship with her husband—portrayed through beach dates and late-night intimate conversations. As seen earlier, despite being socially superior, Ishita lacks the emotional and sexual fulfillment that Seema has—her breakdown after watching Seema's sexual encounter makes this clear. Sharma thus complicates class hierarchy by empowering working-class Seema more than upper-class Ishita. Ishita gains sexual agency through voyeurism, and when both women sigh “ah” with pleasure at climax in the same frame, their sexual agency across class boundaries is powerfully affirmed (*Lust Stories* 2 00:42:33–00:42:39).

Sharma's segment, however, gets complicated once Seema learns that she is being watched and yet chooses to continue her sexual encounters with her husband at Ishita's house. Until Seema was unaware of Ishita's watching, Ishita gained pleasure through something similar to what Mulvey would term a male gaze. However, the observation of a woman subverts Mulvey's male gaze, establishing a female gaze instead. Even though Seema is objectified through Ishita's gaze, the movie moves forward, centering the women's desire and pleasure, making it completely female-centered.

Nevertheless, this narrative gets further complicated through multiple layers of scopophilia. Ishita's voyeuristic observation of Seema mirrors the audience's voyeuristic consumption of cinema, where scopophilia, or secret watching, provides pleasure. But when Seema becomes aware of being watched and starts to derive pleasure from it, the power dynamic instantly shifts. Seema transforms from Mulvey's passive “to-be-looked-at” object into an active participant who derives power from performance, reestablishing her sexual agency (19). At this point, Sharma blurs the class difference between these two women by giving power and agency to a lower-class woman over an upper-class one. Sharma's brilliancy lies in this customized setting where both the women continue to satisfy their respective sexual needs without disrupting each other's world. The narrative takes a dramatic turn when they accidentally confront each other leading to accusations and mutual dismissal. Female sexuality is further recognized when Seema's husband realizes that both women knew about the arrangement, while only he remained unaware. In a moment