



Between Ritual and Refusal: Reimagining Gendered Scripts in South Asian Film

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Abstract

This analysis looks at how the films *Mrs. (India)* and *Utshob* (Bangladesh) portray gender as something built and policed within the home. Instead of treating femininity as an inherent trait, both movies show it as a series of repetitive chores and physical habits. I use Judith Butler's ideas on performativity to show how these everyday gestures create a sense of identity, while drawing on Foucault and Bordo to look at the strict discipline found in household routines. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality helps explain how class and family ties change the way these women can push back. Meanwhile, Sara Ahmed's affect theory provides a lens for seeing silence and hesitation as actual political choices. By looking closely at the camera work and pacing, I argue that these films find agency in small, quiet moments. Rather than loud rebellion, *Mrs.* and *Utshob* turn the kitchen and the living room into spaces where women can finally redefine themselves.

Keywords: gender performativity; South Asian cinema; feminist film theory; domestic labor.



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Introduction:

South Asian movies have not completely escaped the shadow of patriarchy, but the way women appear on screen has changed a lot over the last fifty years. In Indian and Bengali cinema, especially, we have moved past the old tropes where women were just ornaments or sacrificial figures. Dicke and Durah (2010) claim that early popular films usually gave women zero autonomy, casting them as obedient mothers or wives without much of an inner life. That started to shift in the 1970s with parallel cinema. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray began focusing on what women actually thought and felt. Daya (2017) argues that by showing female characters with their own doubts and desires, these Bengali films were making an early feminist move that the mainstream world was ignoring. Banerjee (2018) even suggests that in more recent Bengali films, female characters act as sites of dissent, turning the story itself into a space for resistance. In Bollywood, things are messier. It has been a slow, often contradictory transition. Ayushi (2021) notes that while women's roles have shifted from victimhood toward empowerment since the 50s, objectification has not gone away. There is still a lot of "gender policing" in commercial hits. If a female lead sticks to the "ideal" version of femininity, she is rewarded; if she does not, the plot usually punishes her. But the post-liberalization era has at least made these tensions more visible, allowing for more critical stories. Rather than seeing gender as something natural or fixed, modern South Asian films often treat it as a performance. In *Mrs.* (India) and *Utsab* (Bangladesh), gender is built through chores, physical discipline, and the heavy weight of social expectations. I am adopting the ideas of Butler, Foucault, Bordo, Crenshaw, and Ahmed to see how characters push back against patriarchal rules in small ways, like a repeated gesture, some long silences, or just an emotional refusal. Both films use framing and mise-en-scène to suggest that resistance does not always need to be loud. The home is not just where women follow a script; it is where they quietly rewrite it.

Background and context of the films:

Arati Kadav's *Mrs.* (2024) appeared in the context of modern Hindi cinema at a time when gendered labor and emotional care in middle-class Indian households were being reexamined. The movie centers on Richa, an educated dancer whose artistic career is cut short after she marries a doctor in an arranged marriage. Despite the fact that her father-in-law works as a doctor, which might otherwise indicate a family accustomed to contemporary gender norms, this union effectively confines her to a traditional patriarchal model of domesticity. This restrictive

dynamic is best illustrated by the mother-in-law who has a doctorate in economics but has seen her intellectual life completely subordinated to household maintenance. The erasure of female identity in favor of patriarchal respectability is symbolized by the frequent depictions of her in the kitchen or doing chores, such as shining her husband's shoes. The movie shows Richa's increasing internal conflict and weariness despite her initial attempts to adjust to this domestic setting. She starts to wonder if marriage is worth the loss of her independence as she oversees household duties and stifles her artistic aspirations. The story ends without the usual melodrama when Richa finally decides to end the marriage. Rather, her exit is portrayed as a composed and determined attempt to recover her unique identity.

Kadav's style has been recognized by film scholars as part of a post-2010 trend in Hindi cinema toward interiority-centered feminist narratives that highlight the common experiences of women that mainstream Bollywood frequently ignores (Gopal, 2011; Thomas, 2014). Comparable to *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Thappad*, *Mrs.* steers clear of cinematic spectacle in favor of developing its critique through the portrayal of tedious household tasks. Scholarly studies on Indian domestic cinema suggest that these depictions of physical fatigue are visual techniques employed to highlight the emotional burdens of patriarchal marriage (Sridhar, 2019; Chakravarty, 2020). Richa's experiences seem to support Susan Bordo's (1993) theory of the disciplined female body, which is shaped by internalized expectations of subservience. In this way, the domestic settings in the movie function as what Patricia Uberoi (1990) refers to as the intimate theater of patriarchy, where gender roles are both performed and enforced. However, *Mrs.* concentrates on a personal story of rejection while Tanim Noor's *Utsbob* (2025) offers a more comprehensive examination of gendered constraints in Bengali society.

Even though the movie is set around an extended family get-together, the main emotional conflict concerns a young Bangladeshi couple whose marriage starts to fall apart when the husband tries to stop his wife from enrolling in a prestigious university. Her ultimate choice to file for divorce highlights the conflict between female ambition and traditional marital expectations and places her rejection within a conservative cultural framework. This story seems to fit the characteristics of post-parallel Bengali cinema, which often makes use of ensemble structures to explore the breakdown of kinship and emotional disillusionment in contemporary South Asian families (Ghosh, 2010; Vasudevan, 2011). By depicting women as the symbolic guardians of family honor, feminist film critics have observed that these films frequently put women at the center of domestic crises (Sarkar, 2001; Bose, 2012). *Utsbob* highlights this dynamic

by illustrating how each woman's choices are impacted by a mix of social expectations, financial considerations, and marital responsibilities, mirroring the intersectional pressures outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.

While *Mrs.* examines how multiple women negotiate gendered roles in a shared space, *Utsbob* (2024) follows a single protagonist navigating domestic expectations. Feminist interpretations of South Asian art cinema that highlight the cinematic expression of unspoken female interiority are in line with Dasgupta's formal techniques, such as lingering shots and overlapping dialogue (Geetha, 2002). In this context, quiet and fleeting looks take on political significance, revealing the underlying tensions about female autonomy that surface during family rituals. Together, *Mrs.*, an important advancement in South Asian feminist film, is represented in *Utsbob*. Idealized portrayals of domestic harmony are being replaced by more nuanced depictions of female agency and resistance. These films challenge the gendered stereotypes that have historically defined South Asian womanhood through their narrative structures and visual forms.

Arati Kadav's *Mrs.* and Buddhadeb DasGupta's *Utsbob* provide an important starting point for examining poststructuralist and feminist discussions about power, gender, and subjectivity. The analytical frameworks required to comprehend how these films both create and contest gendered identities have been made available by research situated at the nexus of these theories. The rejection of women as a single or pre-constituted subject is a major theme in this scholarship. According to Jana Sawicki, feminist theory needs to take into consideration the material distinctions among women, such as caste, class, sexual orientation, and cultural background. She contends that rather than being obstacles to unity, these are creative tools for a politics of difference. Drawing from Audre Lorde's writings, Sawicki argues that the systemic erasure and silencing of differences is what causes fragmentation within feminism rather than differences themselves. She proposes, in line with Foucault, that the pursuit of a single revolutionary subject should be abandoned in feminist politics. Rather, it is argued that theory ought to look at the everyday intimate and domestic power dynamics that underlie resistance and subordination.

The subject of feminism is further complicated by Judith Butler's criticism. Butler shows in *Gender Trouble* that legal and representational systems actively create gendered subjects rather than just describing them. Only regulatory norms—such as legal, cultural, and linguistic frameworks—that specify which gendered bodies are identifiable make categories like women seem stable and exclusive. By contending that sex is a discursive construct shaped by the same

norms that govern gender and desire, Butler challenges the conventional division between sex and gender. This change is essential to her theory of performance, which views gender as a series of repeated actions that give the appearance of stability rather than a fixed identity. This viewpoint is essential to understanding Richa's monotonous domestic work in *Mrs.* and the organized family dynamics in *Utsbob*, where gender only seems consistent because it is carried out continuously. The examination of power by Michel Foucault offers an additional theoretical framework for this research. His criticism of the juridico-discursive model casts doubts on the idea that power is possessed or centralized. Rather, he views contemporary power as relational, productive, and ingrained in daily activities.

In addition to formal institutions, disciplinary power also operates through self-regulation, normalization, and surveillance. Feminist theorists who study how diffuse and frequently imperceptible forms of regulation shape women's physical presence, emotional labor, and household routines will find this reconceptualization helpful. The stories of both *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* revolve around these components, where the subtle demands of their surroundings shape the lives of the characters. Building on Foucault, academics like Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo contend that disciplinary measures that condition women's bodies to be submissive create femininity. Bartky famously asks why the particular behaviors that produce women's docile bodies are often ignored in conventional narratives of discipline.

In a similar vein, Bordo explains how women were socialized to occupy little emotional and physical space through dietary regimens, self-monitoring, and physical discipline. *Mrs.* can greatly benefit from these analyses, where Richa's quiet, monotonous movements in the kitchen accentuate her inferior status. They also apply to *Utsbob*, where the female characters' postures and body language convey their restricted independence within the family unit. This investigation is extended into the affective domain by Sara Ahmed. According to Ahmed's arguments in *The Promise of Happiness* and her discussions on the feminist killjoy, women who refuse to uphold domestic harmony by recognizing sexism or refraining from their emotional labor are frequently blamed for unhappiness.

This framework makes *Mrs.*'s emotional dynamics more understandable, in which Richa's tiredness and silence serve as forms of resistance rather than as signs of weakness. Similar to this, in *Utsbob*, women's emotional conflicts—which manifest as hesitations, glances, or silent rejections—become important sites of feminist disruption where the status quo is quietly challenged. These customs are used by feminist film scholarship to analyze how women's

representation has changed in South Asian cinema. Traditional Indian cinema frequently depicted women as virtuous, sacrificial, or merely decorative, which suppressed female desire while stabilizing patriarchal themes. More recent critiques indicate a change toward more complex depictions of agency, ambivalence, and refusal, particularly in movies that emphasize women's daily hardships and labor. Through gesture, silence, and framing, Bengali art and parallel cinema have historically provided more nuanced viewpoints on women's interiority, exploring their challenges with patriarchal boundaries. Women's lives are situated at the intersection of class, kinship, and modern pressures according to research on filmmakers, such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. Theory gives us a fresh perspective on these movies.

Domestic labor is a key location of cinematic politics, according to modern feminist criticism. Female labor is treated as something futile or worthless in the film *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Cooking and cleaning reflect how patriarchy controls women's activities. Males view these kitchen chores as inherent. Nepali movies, such as *Saino*, have normalized women's chores. At the start of the movie, Anu, the main female character, is seen working around the house with her mother while her father is seated on a floor mat, drinking his local wine and placing an order. He is depicted as both the commander and the head of the family (Sherma,2025). In a similar vein, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* both highlight physical and emotional labor as outward manifestations of gendered oppression while staging refusal moments that upend patriarchal cycles. However, South Asian women's experiences differ greatly by caste, religion, class, and geography according to intersectional feminist scholars. Unmarried daughters, middle-class wives, and rural women face different limitations and have different access to agency. This supports Crenshaw's claim that gender analysis is inextricably linked to other axes of power and difference. When combined, these theoretical perspectives offer three frameworks for examining *Mrs.* and *Utsob*, each of which is crucial to comprehending the development of feminist politics in South Asian cinema.

Gender must first be viewed as disciplined, affective, and performative. Drawing from Butler, Foucault, Bordo, and Ahmed, this viewpoint demonstrates that gender is a collection of repeated behaviors, emotional commitments, and physical disciplines rather than a stable identity. Acknowledging this makes it possible for feminist politics to develop by demonstrating how patriarchal expectations shape women and where instances of disruption or rejection take place. Because they challenge gender norms from within the protagonists' gestures, silences, and affective withdrawals in both movies take on political significance. Second, South Asian cinema

is an essential visual archive for depicting the emotional lives, labor, and subtle forms of resistance of women. The micro-practices of gendered labor that are concealed in prevailing narratives, such as cooking, caring for others, waiting, and controlling emotions, can be made visible through film, unlike written texts. By emphasizing these customs, *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* turn routine household tasks into feminist criticisms of patriarchy. Thus, feminist politics manifests not only in overt acts of rebellion but also in the visual expression of weariness, discontent, and subdued defiance. Third, feminist analysis needs to consider how gender interacts with kinship class and cultural context. The unequal distribution of agency in both movies is highlighted by intersectionality: middle-class wives, financially dependent daughters-in-law, and single women face very different limitations and opportunities. By demonstrating that patriarchy functions differently across social positions and that resistance cannot be comprehended independently of these structural conditions, this intersectional lens strengthens feminist politics.

Feminist politics, as demonstrated by *Mrs.* and *Utsbob*, is not universally applicable; rather, it is shaped by the lived realities of women situated within familial, economic, and cultural systems. It is feasible to interpret both movies as political interventions when these three pillars are taken together. They show how narrative and cinematic form combine to reveal gendered power, question patriarchal conventions, and envision different ways of being and resisting in South Asian society.

Whose Agency Is Centered, Erased, or Reframed?

In order to comprehend feminist politics in *Mrs.* and *Utsbob*, one must look at how agency is framed, distributed, or withheld in the movies, as well as which characters oppose patriarchal systems. According to feminist academics, agency is the ability to inhabit and negotiate conditions that are not of one's own choosing rather than just the ability to act (Mahmood, 2005). In this way, both movies subvert oversimplified liberation narratives by portraying agency as a range of actions, rejections, and agreements influenced by social context. Richa's agency is crucial and limited in *Mrsdot*. Her embodied routines—cooking, cleaning, and quiet endurance—tell her story almost entirely, allowing viewers to read her interiority through gestures rather than words. The movie highlights her capacity to refuse to comply while also making the psychological and physical costs of domestic work visible. What Sara Ahmed refers to as non-existence that expects happiness is made up of little things like her hesitancy before going into the kitchen, her eyes lingering on her abandoned dance shoes, or her refusal to smile when expected (Ahmed, 2010).

Rather than being presented as a victorious rebellion, Richa's decision to end the marriage is the result of a series of micro-refusals that gradually undermine the gendered script she has been expected to follow. But the movie also highlights the boundaries of agency. The mother-in-law is portrayed as someone whose potential has been completely consumed by domestic duties, even though she holds a doctorate in economics. The world of the movie erases her intellectual labor in the same way that the home erases it. In contrast, Richa's husband is portrayed as an agent with unquestioned personal and professional autonomy. As a result, *Mrs.* criticizes both individual men and patriarchal systems that marginalize female agency in the home and elevate male agency as the norm. According to *Utsob*, agency is distributed more widely. Wives, sisters, daughters, and in-laws make up its ensemble of women, which emphasizes how unequal women's autonomy is in extended family structures. While some characters quietly rebel against oppressive expectations, others internalize or submit to them. The young wife who chooses to end her marriage is a prime example of agency based on aspirations for education and self-assertion. Her refusal to compromise her academic prospects for her husband's insecurity is consistent with what Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to as intersectional bargaining, in which women are required to balance their choices against a variety of constraints (Crenshaw, 1991).

But *Utsob* also shows how social surveillance and familial responsibilities can eradicate agency. There is little room for refusal for older women daughters-in-law who are financially dependent or people who are obligated to stay at home. Often their desires only come to the surface when they steal looks, hold back words, or withdraw emotionally. Such silences can be expressions of agency that endure despite the impossibility of voice according to Bengali film scholars (Sarkar, 2001). By emphasizing several types of agency, including relational, quite assertive, and confined, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* broaden feminist interpretations of resistance. They demonstrate that women's agency involves more than just escaping oppressive circumstances; it also involves enduring, negotiating, or quietly challenging the circumstances that mold their lives.

The Digital Afterlife of *Mrs.* and *Utsob*: Social Media, Humor, and Feminist Publics:

Outside of their movie theaters, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* have created lively afterlives on South Asian social media sites where audiences—especially women—reinterpret, discuss, and share the film's feminist themes. This digital interaction is important because, according to media scholar Nancy Baym, online platforms allow marginalized voices to reframe dominant narratives (Baym, 2010). As a result, social media turns personal grievances into group criticism, extending feminist politics. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have been inundated with short videos frequently

with humor and satire that reenact scenes from *Mrs.* and *Utsob* in both Bangladesh and India. Following *Mrs.*, Indian women shared videos that imitate Richa's household responsibilities, such as never-ending cooking chore lists and emotional support, along with captions like the modern Indian wife's daily struggle or why we are tired. Instead of trivializing the movie's message, these humorous reenactments carry out what Sara Ahmed refers to as feminist reorientation, drawing attention to the systems that deplete women's mental and physical resources (Ahmed, 2017).

Humor turns into a survival and critique strategy, a way to identify patriarchal fatigue without worrying about social repercussions. Similar to this, *Utsob* generated a lot of discussion on Facebook in Bangladesh, where people applauded the female protagonist's choice to end the marriage and ridiculed the domineering male characters. Many comments celebrated the woman's refusal as proof that women today can think for themselves while framing the male characters as relics of antiquated masculinity, saying things like, in real life, these men are not men. These responses exemplify counter-public feminist discourse as defined by feminist media (Ray, 2009) in which women utilize digital platforms to challenge patriarchal norms and rethink female agency. Social media responses frequently have a tone that combines humor and criticism with what Jill Dolan refers to as the utopian performative, which are instances where cultural texts evoke sentiments of hope and collective recognition (Dolan, 2005).

Viewers create transient feminist communities that validate frustration, anger, and refusal by making fun of patriarchal characters and acting out scenes of domestic labor. These exchanges reveal a common awareness of domestic inequality, turning what is normally experienced in private into a public discourse. Importantly, these online responses also show how South Asian audiences' perceptions of women's agency have changed across generations. Younger viewers, in particular, praised Richa and *Utsob's* female lead for putting her own needs ahead of those of her spouse. Our mothers suffered silently, but we will not, said a popular comment from Bangladesh. Such claims are consistent with feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who contends that when individual experiences of oppression are connected to larger sociopolitical structures, feminist consciousness arises (Mohanty, 2003). These online reactions alter the film's cultural circulation rather than being merely incidental commentary. Social media interpretations allow women to express their own readings of refusal, agency, and feminist politics while challenging traditional gatekeepers of meaning (critics, academics, and family elders). By using humor criticism and group storytelling, they turn the reception of *Mrs.* and *Utsob* into a democratic interactive process where viewers actively renegotiate gender

norms. In the end, these movies' digital legacies show that feminist politics are not limited to the screen. Women reclaim interpretive power through memes, reels, reenactments, and commentary, transforming commonplace digital spaces into spaces for resistance. Social media amplifies the film's critique of domestic patriarchy, promotes solidarity, and imagines new possibilities for South Asian womanhood, making it not only a site of reaction but also an essential part of feminist reception.

Conclusion:

Both *Mrs* and *Utsbob* demonstrate how gendered identities can be reinterpreted in South Asian film today. By emphasizing the everyday ways that gender is performed, upheld, or contested, these films depart from idealized portrayals of domesticity. Through their depictions of domestic duties and emotional compromise, both stories show how patriarchal structures are associated with everyday action. They show how women manage or change these systemic conditions through quiet persistence and day-to-day navigation. This analysis uses a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, Bordo's work on the body, Ahmed's affective refusal, and Crenshaw's intersectionality to examine how these cinematic representations interact with sociocultural systems. These frameworks contend that gender is the product of repetition and regulation rather than an innate trait. In both films, agency often manifests as quiet or subtle emotional changes that subvert domestic patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, the online reactions to these films indicate that feminist involvement extends well beyond the cinema. Scenes from *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* have been used by social media users in Bangladesh and India to criticize traditional masculinity and draw attention to domestic injustices. These conversations constitute what Sangeeta Ray calls counterpublic feminist discourse in which prevailing cultural norms are questioned by group reinterpretation through humor and shared experience. As a result, rather than being solely determined by their creators, the significance of these films is continuously changed by the audience members who engage with them. Ultimately, *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* make us reconsider the definition of resistance. They demonstrate that feminist action need not be limited to overt rebellion or public confrontation; it can also take the form of subdued refusals to pursue education or disruptive household routines.

By refusing to display typical emotional states like happiness for the benefit of others, the protagonists change the domestic environment. Instead of being depicted as a private sphere cut

off from politics, this area is seen as a significant site for work negotiation and potential social change. *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* adhere to a feminist cinematic tradition that highlights the visibility of female agency and desire by depicting women's inner lives and their battles against patriarchal structures. When combined, their visual aesthetics and narrative frameworks offer new insights into South Asian womanhood while challenging the enduring gender norms. By actively contributing to the transformation of current social conditions rather than merely reflecting them, these films demonstrate how cinema can be both a feminist medium and a vehicle for more significant cultural changes.

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