



From Silence to Assertion: A Comparative Study of Sexual Autonomy in Rihaee (1988) and Lust Stories (2018)

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Abstract

Contrary to the popular perception shaped by colonial morality and Western cinematic influence, Indian culture has historically embraced a liberal and holistic view of sexuality. Ancient texts like the Kamasutra and the intricate carvings at Khajuraho temples reflect a cultural ethos where sexual autonomy was neither sinful nor silenced but seen as a legitimate part of human expression. However, colonial rule imposed a repressive moral code that labeled indigenous expressions as “vernacular” and obscured their sophistication. This paper investigates how Indian cinema, though long hesitant to depict women’s sexual autonomy, is gradually reclaiming this legacy. Focusing on Rihaee (1988) and Lust Stories (2018), the study explores how cinematic narratives engage with women’s desires and agency across rural and urban backdrops. By employing a feminist theoretical framework and close visual-textual analysis, the study explores how Indian cinema navigates the continuum from sexual repression to sexual self-realization. The methodology includes comparative film analysis, feminist critique, and contextual reading through Indian cultural history. It argues that the current cinematic reclamation of female sexual autonomy is not a radical departure, but a return to an Indian tradition that always knew the body was sacred, expressive, and political—one that was always embedded within India’s own cultural fabric.

Keywords: sexual autonomy, Indian cinema, feminist critique, patriarchy, rural vs urban sexuality

Introduction

Set within the confines of a traditional Indian village, Rihaee (1988) is a compelling examination of rural women’s struggle with sexual liberty and cultural restraint. The film, which was directed by Aruna Raje, is about Taku (Hema Malini), a lady who gets pregnant out of wedlock. She faces harsh judgement from the society but fights to claim her rights to bodily autonomy. Though subtle, the film’s portrayal of women’s sexuality is groundbreaking for its era, offering a nuanced critique of patriarchal norms. The film challenges the normative frameworks of rural society by portraying Taku’s pregnancy not as a mark of shame, but as a personal choice that defies patriarchal expectations.”

Whereas Lust Stories (2018) adopts a candid approach to women’s sexual liberation within the

framework of modern Indian society. The four short stories in this Netflix series, which was co-directed by Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Anurag Kashyap, and Dibakar Banerjee, all center on the themes of women’s sexuality, desire, and liberation. Among these, Karan Johar’s segment where Megha’s unapologetic pursuit of personal pleasure challenges the often repressive attitudes toward female desire in Indian households.” Lust stories is notable for its groundbreaking depiction of female sexual agency.

Sexuality and Repression

The idea of sexual autonomy in Rihaee is mostly characterized by the themes of suppressing desire and societal judgement. The movie takes place in rural India, where women’s sexuality is strongly linked to ideas of honor and shame. Taku’s pregnancy

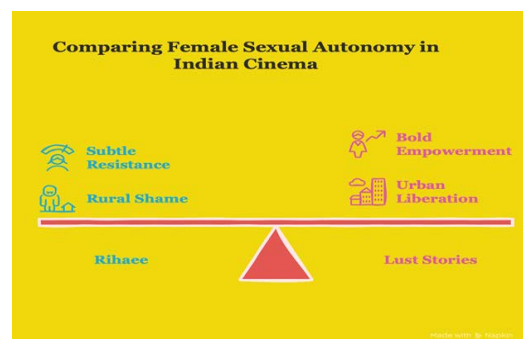


becomes a symbol of defiance against this deeply rooted patriarchal environment. Rihaee explores sexual autonomy through a nuanced resistance, where Taku's acceptance of her pregnancy subtly challenges the patriarchal norms while remaining rooted in the village's traditional values. A deeper level of resilience is highlighted by Taku's choice to accept her pregnancy in spite of the social stigma. Taku's decision is personal, driven by her desire for a child and her refusal to abort, even if the village sees her as a source of shame. Even with these defiances, Taku is unable to completely free herself from patriarchal authority. She continues to make compromises on her path to independence. She ultimately has to come to terms with the fact that her aspirations, while genuine and legitimate, are a result of the intricate interplay between personal choice and social pressures. Because of this nuance, the film's message is both sorrowful and powerful, reflecting the very real problems of women who frequently have to choose between survival and autonomy. The dialogue from Rihaee "Aurat mard ka peechha kare to besharam, aur mard aurat ka peechha kare to soorma" (If a woman pursues a man, she is shameless; if a man pursues a woman, he is a hero), further exposes the entrenched gender biases in society. This line shows the problematic viewpoint that men are glorified for displaying desire and actively pursuing women, while women who do the same are labeled immoral. In Rihaee, this double standard becomes evident when Taku, who openly expresses her need for companionship, is ostracized, while the men, who have affairs while working away from the village, face no such backlash.

In contrast to Rihaee, which portrays sexual autonomy as a subdued defiance, Lust Stories prominently and unapologetically centers its narrative around women's sexual desires. In Johar's segment, Megha's story depicts a woman who is not only aware of her needs but also actively tries to satisfy her sexual cravings, even if it means stepping outside the bounds of a traditional marriage. Megha uses a vibrator to take charge of her own sexual satisfaction after discovering that her husband is unable to meet her needs. In sharp contrast to the moralizing tones that defined previous Bollywood films, this act of self-pleasure is portrayed with no shame or

condemnation. The movie makes a bold statement on women's right to put their own pleasure and well-being ahead of a partner's expectations. When Megha says "Agar tumhe farq nahi padta toh mujhe bhi nahi padta" (If it doesn't matter to you, it doesn't matter to me). This dialogue represents a shift toward a more liberated understanding of sexual autonomy where she is aware of her sexual desires and the need to fulfil her desires without coming under any pressure. Through this Netflix series, Women are encouraged to express their wants and take charge of their sexual experiences in this conversation, which marks a move toward a more emancipated notion of sexual autonomy. The segment's unrepentant tone is a direct response to repressive sexual narratives. While Taku's acceptance of her pregnancy in Rihaee leads to social alienation, Megha's pursuit of sexual satisfaction in Lust Stories is framed as an act of empowerment, highlighting the contrast between rural shame and urban liberation."

The primary difference between each film is their approach towards sexual autonomy. In Rihaee, sexual autonomy is an act of silent resistance inside a culture that condemns any deviation from established norms. Taku's journey is a struggle against cultural norms and personal pleasures. Her struggle is not for freedom but for survival. In contrast, Lust Stories depicts a society in which women are free to identify and explore their sexual desires without having to worry about criticism or repercussions. Megha's decision to use a vibrator for her intercourse, without consulting her spouse, is a bold assertion of sexual independence that is unmatched in Rihaee. The movie implies that autonomy, particularly in terms of sexual pleasure, is not something to be ashamed of, but rather something to be celebrated.





Theoretical Framework: Sexuality and Feminist Literary Criticism

The exploration of female sexual agency in Indian cinema has been a slow and complex evolution, particularly in the terrain that lies between *Rihaee* (1988) and *Lust Stories* (2018). *Rihaee* foregrounded the rural woman's desire, autonomy, and rebellion against the moral hypocrisy of a patriarchal village society. It dared to show that women, too, experience loneliness, longing, and sexual need—a radical proposition in its time.

However, *Rihaee* was not an isolated text in this regard. Nearly a decade later, *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta extended this conversation further, marking a significant departure in its bold portrayal of same-sex female desire within the institution of marriage. The characters of Radha and Sita, trapped in emotionally barren marriages, create an alternate space of intimacy that resists the normative codes of heterosexuality. As Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests, the film destabilizes fixed categories of gender and desire by allowing its protagonists to reinvent themselves outside the heteronormative script. Radha's statement, "There is no word in our language for what we are," encapsulates the systemic erasure of female queer identity and desire from the socio-cultural lexicon. Like *Rihaee*, *Fire* too faced severe backlash, revealing how volatile and policed the expression of female sexuality remains in Indian society.

In the years that followed, cinematic representations of female desire continued to emerge in intermittent bursts, often cloaked in metaphor or suppressed through narrative punishment. It was not until *Lust Stories* (2018) that female pleasure—especially masturbation and sexual entitlement—was shown with unapologetic clarity in mainstream Hindi cinema. The segment directed by Zoya Akhtar, in particular, brought to screen a moment of solitary female pleasure that becomes both revolutionary and contentious. The character Megha's arc is emblematic of the continued stigma and denial of female sexual autonomy, even within urban, upper-middle-class settings.

Bridging the thematic gap between *Rihaee* and *Lust Stories*, Leena Yadav's *Parched* (2015) stands out as a powerful intermediary text. Set in

the parched landscapes of rural Rajasthan, the film tells the intertwined stories of three women—Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli—each of whom confronts gendered oppression in different forms. What makes *Parched* particularly significant is its refusal to relegate female sexuality to the realm of sin or punishment. Instead, it treats sexual awakening as healing, joyful, and deeply personal, especially in the narrative of Lajjo, who discovers her body not as a site of pain but of potential. Through the lens of bell hooks' liberatory love and feminist sisterhood, *Parched* echoes *Rihaee* in rural setting and struggle, while also prefiguring the urban assertion of bodily autonomy found in *Lust Stories*.

Together, these films—*Rihaee*, *Fire*, *Parched*, and *Lust Stories*—form a cultural continuum that charts the transformation of female desire in Indian cinema from repressed longing to explicit articulation, from collective silencing to personal agency. Their progression mirrors shifts in feminist theory itself: from the early focus on sexual repression (Freud, Beauvoir), particularly the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Michel Foucault, can reveal the deeper implications of sexual autonomy and repression. De Beauvoir's foundational claim in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" finds echoes in Taku's journey. Her identity is shaped not only by her personal experiences but also by the socio-cultural expectations of womanhood in her village. Taku challenges this passive construction by choosing motherhood on her own terms, embodying what Beauvoir would term an existential assertion of freedom within a hostile structure. Luce Irigaray, in her writings on sexual difference, critiques the masculine structuring of desire, arguing that female sexuality is often defined only in relation to male desire. Taku's and Megha's stories resist this narrative—each woman defines her sexuality on her own terms. Megha's act of masturbation is a literal enactment of Irigaray's call for the reclamation of female pleasure and language. This is not mere rebellion, but a reshaping of how female bodies are allowed to exist in both cinematic and cultural discourses. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* offers another relevant framework. He argues that power is not only repressive but also productive—it shapes discourses, identities, and



norms. In *Rihaae*, the village's shame culture is a manifestation of power that regulates and disciplines female sexuality. Yet, in resisting this surveillance, Taku simultaneously becomes a site of counter-discourse. In contrast, *Lust Stories* operates in a post-Foucauldian society where female sexual expression can disrupt hegemonic scripts. Megha's sexual independence represents the self as a "subject-in-process," continuously reshaped by and resisting discursive norms.

Conclusion: Rewriting Female Desire Across Decades

The two films, though separated by three decades, trace the arc of how women's sexuality has been cinematically represented and culturally received in India. *Rihaae* subtly lays the groundwork for resistance by humanizing the female desire for companionship and motherhood in a morally stringent setting. It illustrates how women must often navigate autonomy through a labyrinth of survival, shame, and negotiation. On the other hand, *Lust Stories* boldly articulates a modern, urban reimaging of sexual freedom. Here, autonomy is not a subtext but the central theme. Megha's character represents a new literary and cinematic archetype: the unapologetic, self-aware woman who refuses to mediate her desires through the gaze of patriarchy. Together, *Rihaae* and *Lust Stories* provide a valuable continuum of feminist discourse in Indian storytelling—one that transitions from muted defiance to outspoken reclamation. Analyzing them through English literary theory not only underscores the changing contours of female agency but also helps in understanding how Indian narratives are evolving to encompass the full spectrum of womanhood—one that includes desire, dignity, resistance, and self-love.

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