

Servants, Selfhood, and the Limits of Love: Caste, Class, and the Cinematic Politics of Domestic Labor in Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018)

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ABSTRACT: Paid domestic work is one of the largest sectors of women's employment in urban India, yet it remains one of the least visible in popular Hindi cinema, where servants tend to occupy episodic, decorative roles, and the structural conditions of their labor are seldom interrogated. This article examines Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018), an internationally circulated, woman-directed independent film that places a live-in domestic worker at the center of its narrative and uses the conventions of cross-class romance to stage a careful argument about the politics of servitude. The analysis is built on a qualitative film study that combines close textual reading of the complete dialogue transcript with reflexive thematic analysis of representative sequences and reads the resulting themes through two complementary lenses: Bourdieu's theory of capital and habitus, and the intersectional framework associated with Crenshaw. Findings show that the film maps the master–servant relation through tightly interlocking spatial, embodied, and linguistic boundaries that polite employer behaviour does not dissolve; that it traces the intersecting effects of class, gender, widowhood, and migration on the worker's aspiration without collapsing them into a single grievance; and that it engages the unlikely-couple tradition only to refuse its standard romantic resolution and to relocate the worker's mobility outside the employer's gift. The article contributes to media and social-science scholarship by showing how an arthouse Indian film can politicize the silence around domestic labor, by extending the conversation on cross-class romance as social criticism, and by offering a model for reading representation alongside the empirical literature on paid care work.

KEYWORDS: Indian Cinema, Domestic Workers, Caste, Class, Intersectionality, Habitus

Introduction

In the opening minutes of *Sir*, a young woman steps off an overnight train and lets herself into an empty Mumbai apartment with the key she carries as a live-in domestic worker. The man whose home she keeps is not there to receive her. He is, the film soon reveals, sitting alone on a wedding day that never happened. From this small inversion, the worker arriving, the employer absent, Rohena Gera's quiet feature builds an unusually attentive study of one of the most ordinary and least examined relationships in urban Indian life: the one between an upper-middle-class employer and the woman who cleans his rooms, cooks his food, and is in his house from the moment he wakes until the

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moment he sleeps. The film was selected for the Critics' Week at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, won the Gan Foundation Award there, opened theatrically in India in late 2020, and entered global streaming circulation through Netflix and other platforms shortly afterward. Its critical reception has consistently noticed two things: the restraint of its filmmaking and the difficulty of the social terrain it walks into.

That difficulty is the subject of this paper. Paid domestic work is one of the largest, oldest, and most stratified sectors of Indian women's employment, and it is built directly on the home, the private space that middle-class Indians most readily insist is not political. Behind the closed door, caste, class, gender, religion, region, and the legal vulnerabilities of widowhood and migration meet with little public oversight (Frøystad, 2003). Yet popular Hindi cinema has historically allowed domestic workers to appear only as shadows at the edge of more important plots; the maid serves the chai, opens the door, and leaves the frame (Vanina, 2023). *Sir* is one of a small group of recent independent Hindi-language films that puts the domestic worker at the center of the story and refuses to either sentimentalize her or punish her for her ambition.

Reading *Sir* as a serious cultural text matters for media and social-science scholarship for three connected reasons. First, films do not simply mirror social relations; they help reproduce, contest, and rework the categories through which people in a society see one another, and that is especially consequential when the categories at stake, caste, servitude, “decent” womanhood, are also legal, economic, and bodily categories that govern actual lives (Gupta, 2018; Singh & Abdul Azeez, 2021). Second, the small but rich body of scholarship on cinematic representations of Indian domestic servitude has noted that mainstream cinema tends to keep silent on caste hierarchy even as it stages the master–servant relation, treating servitude as a matter of personal niceness rather than structural inequality (Singh & Abdul Azeez, 2021; Vanina, 2023). *Sir* offers an opportunity to ask what changes when an arthouse, woman-directed, transnationally circulated film tries to dramatize that same relation differently. Third, because the film travels both inside India and abroad, it shapes how viewers in very different positions imagine the domestic worker's interior life, her aspirations, and the limits of her freedom.

This study therefore approaches *Sir* not as a romance to be evaluated by the criterion of whether the lovers end up together, but as a cinematic argument about labor, dignity, and the conditions under which a young widow from a Maharashtrian village can become, in her own words, “anything”. To read the film carefully, the analysis combines a close textual reading of the full dialogue transcript with a thematic analysis of representative sequences and interprets the resulting themes through two theoretical lenses chosen for their explanatory power and their fit with the film's preoccupations. The first is Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) account of how social space is organized by the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital, and by the embodied dispositions, the habitus, that the social order quietly inscribes in individuals (Reay, 2018). The second is the intersectional framework first articulated by Crenshaw (1991), which insists that the lived experience of a Dalit or low-caste, migrant, widowed, working-class woman cannot be reconstructed by adding gender, class, and caste together; they act on her simultaneously and inseparably (Arora, 2023).

Literature Review

Paid Domestic Work in India: A Hidden Workplace

Paid domestic work is among the largest occupational categories for women in urban India, and one of the most poorly protected (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Recent surveys of urban employment estimate that several million women, predominantly migrants from poorer regions, sustain elite and middle-class household life through cooking, cleaning, childcare, and elder care (Jisha et al., 2026). Across this scholarship, three features recur. First, the sector is shaped by long histories of personalized service that predate independence and that have been continuously reorganized under colonial, post-colonial, and neoliberal-urban conditions (Wilks, 2020). Second, it is the site at

which gender, caste, class, religion, and region most intimately intersect, because the home is the space where employers most aggressively police the boundary between themselves and their workers (Raghuram, 2001; Wilks, 2020). Third, even today, the sector is characterized by widespread informality, weak legal protection, and a documented pattern of long hours, low wages, arbitrary dismissal, and frequent violations of dignity (Bhan et al., 2022; Thakkar, 2024).

The classic sociological account of how caste organizes this work argues that paid domestic labor in India is not simply a class relation that has accidentally acquired caste overtones; rather, it is a relation in which caste is actively reproduced through the gendered division of household tasks (Raghuram, 2001). Employers commonly assign “polluting” tasks such as sweeping, mopping, and bathroom cleaning to women drawn from historically subordinated castes, while reserving tasks adjacent to cooked food and the puja space either for upper-caste workers or for the woman of the house. Frøystad's (2003) ethnographic work makes a closely related claim: master–servant relations matter for the everyday domestic reproduction of caste because employers avoid defiling substances, hire workers by caste specialization, and maintain spatial and ritual distance from those they consider untouchable, all the while socializing their children into a worldview in which inequality is presented as natural. The home, in other words, is a school of caste.

Newer work pushes the picture further. Sharma (2016) re-reads the categories of purity and pollution from the workers' point of view and shows that domestic workers are not the passive recipients of upper-caste anxieties; they read the apartment, the employer, and the task list through their own sensibilities of dignity, refuse certain tasks where they can, and develop fine-grained mappings of which households are “good” and which are humiliating. Studies of Dalit women domestic workers describe the cumulative weight of caste-class-gender oppression on the body and on the sense of self and show how the pandemic deepened the older logics of avoidance and distancing rather than displacing them (Arora, 2023; Banerjee & Wilks, 2022). Comparative work that places Indian and U.S. domestic-work regimes side by side suggests that the undervaluation of this labor is sustained not by the eccentricities of a single national culture but by interlocking systems of patriarchy, neoliberal labor market design, caste, and race (Nair & Hofman, 2022). The political-sociological history of attempts to give domestic workers legal recognition in India argues that their continued exclusion from the protections of the labor code reflects deliberate ideological maneuvering by the state and elite, not just the weakness of worker organization (Sharma, 2022).

These studies converge on three propositions that matter for any reading of *Sir*. The first is that the apartment door is not the edge of the labor market but its inner frontier: it is where the formal economy meets caste-class-gender hierarchies most intimately. The second is that what looks like personal kindness in an employer is often an ideological cover for unchanged structural relations, because workers continue to be excluded from family bathrooms, from holy spaces, and from the legal protections enjoyed by other workers even in households that describe them as “part of the family” (Banerjee & Wilks, 2022). The third is that the workers themselves are agents with aspirations, strategies, and ethical positions of their own, not the passive victims that an older literature was inclined to depict (Grover et al., 2018). Each proposition raises a question about how cinema renders, sustains, or disturbs these realities.

Servants on Screen: Cinema's Long Silence

Within the still small but growing field of cinema studies focused on Indian domestic labor, the central finding is one of strategic invisibility. Across Hindi commercial cinema, servants tend to occupy episodic roles, glimpsed like shadows, and even when they do appear at the center of a story, the underlying problem of caste hierarchy is largely silenced (Vanina, 2023). Analyses of contemporary Bollywood lead characters and surnames find that the majority

embody dominant-caste positions, that the portrayal of work tracks traditional caste-based occupations, and that subaltern characters are either marginal or absent (Singh & Abdul Azeez, 2021). Even the historical archive of colonial Hindi print culture has been shown to oscillate, in its depiction of servants, between idealization and anxiety, with the threats supposedly posed by lower-caste and Muslim servants giving the upper-caste household a way to dramatize its own respectability (Gupta, 2018).

Against this backdrop, *Sir* is unusual in centering a domestic worker, naming her clearly, giving her interiority through speech and looks, and refusing to play her work for comedy or pity. But unusual is not the same as exceptional. Scholarship on caste-crossing romance in New Bollywood points out that even progressive contemporary films very often dramatize inter-caste or inter-class love only to interrupt it, contain it, or sublimate it into an ending that protects the existing social order (Anwer & Arora, 2022). Public commentary on *Sir* has expressed both admiration for its restraint and unease that, by foregrounding class while letting caste linger only as a structuring absence, it risks reproducing the very invisibilisation it appears to critique (Dasgupta, 2021). These tensions make the film an unusually productive object for close analysis. This leads to the first research question (RQ1): How does *Sir* (2018) represent the spatial, embodied, and symbolic boundaries that organize the master-servant relation inside the urban Indian home?

Aspiration, Widowhood, and Intersectional Disadvantage

Ratna's story in *Sir* is not only the story of a worker; it is the story of a young widow from a village who is using paid migration to author a different future for herself and for her sister. This kind of trajectory has become a major theme of recent ethnographic and feminist work on Indian domestic labor. Studies of women's paid domestic care work in contemporary India increasingly insist on agency, dignity, and aspiration as central analytic categories, and read workers' biographies as projects of self-making against structural odds rather than as mere effects of poverty (Chatterjee, 2026; Grover et al., 2018). Aspirational learning trajectories, like Ratna's effort to become a tailor and then a fashion designer, are documented across the empirical literature, and they intersect closely with workers' use of remittances to educate younger female relatives (Chatterjee, 2026).

The constraints on these trajectories are deeply intersectional. The Indian widow occupies a particularly burdened social position: in many rural communities, she is denied bangles and ornaments, blamed for her husband's death, and made to inhabit a half-life of mourning that limits her economic and erotic future, and migration into paid domestic work in the city is often the only available route out of that confinement (Thakkar, 2024). Migrant women carry these constraints with them to the city, where they meet a new set of disadvantages produced by class, employer surveillance, and the criminalization of domestic workers' mobility (Thakkar, 2024). The intersectional framework first developed by Crenshaw (1991), and now widely applied in South Asian feminist scholarship, makes it possible to see why a single-axis reading, "she is a woman", "she is poor", necessarily misreads the situation: each axis modifies the others, and disadvantage is not additive but compositional (Dey & Orton, 2016). Recent Indian work on Dalit women's domestic labor and on the intersection of caste and gender in the organization of paid care work has demonstrated how this framework illuminates both the obstacles workers face and the strategies they develop (Arora, 2023; Raghuram, 2001).

A second theoretical resource is useful here. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) account of the social world distinguishes economic capital (money, property) from cultural capital (educational credentials, refined taste, embodied competence) and social capital (networks of useful connection), and argues that the relative weight of these capitals, combined with the durable bodily dispositions he calls *habitus*, defines a person's position in social space (Reay, 2018). The framework has been used productively to read class inequality in films from a number of national cinemas, with the cross-class household serving as a particularly compact theatre of capital and *habitus* in action

(Cochrane, 2013; Öksüz Karademir & Kaya, 2020). In *Sir*, the differentials are visible in every scene: in the way each character holds the body, eats, speaks English, addresses a parent, dresses, and uses or refuses domestic space. This brings the analysis to the second research question (RQ2): In what ways does the film negotiate the intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and widowhood to shape Ratna's aspiration and agency?

The Cross-Class Romance and Its Discontents

The cross-class love story is one of the oldest formulas in world cinema, and Hindi cinema has practiced it relentlessly, from the early reformist melodramas to the new Bollywood of the last two decades. A long line of cinema scholarship reads the unlikely-couple film as a vehicle for social criticism: when the love object is wrong by the prevailing rules of class, race, or caste, the film can use the romance to expose the cruelty of those rules without losing its mass audience (Wartenberg, 1999). Historical work on cross-class romance in Hollywood of the 1930s argues that such films staged the dilemma between wealth and disinterested love in a way that was usually resolved by the female partner redeeming the male and restoring proper gendered hierarchy (Sharot, 2013). Scholarship on caste and couple formation in New Bollywood, by contrast, finds that contemporary Hindi cinema often forecloses the union: the lovers are interrupted by family, by community, or by death, and the structural relation is left intact (Anwer & Arora, 2022). The “happy ending” is therefore not innocent: where it is granted, it usually re-secures the existing social order, and where it is withheld, it can either critique that order or quietly affirm its inevitability.

Sir engages this genre directly. Ashwin is wealthy, English-speaking, foreign-returned, and the inheritor of a Mumbai construction business. Ratna is a Marathi-speaking widow with limited formal education who lives in his service quarters. The film clearly evokes the unlikely-couple template and then refuses several of its standard moves. There is no glamorizing makeover, no transformation of Ratna into someone “presentable” for Ashwin's mother, no spectacular elopement, and crucially no scene in which love is shown to be enough on its own. The most piercing line in the film, Ratna telling Ashwin that no matter what he feels, she is still his servant, directly names the structural relation that romance is usually used to wish away.

These features make *Sir* useful for testing what cross-class romance can do when it refuses the genre's most reassuring conventions. Recent critical writing on the film has read its ending in opposing ways: some critics see Ratna's eventual telephone call as a hopeful opening, others see it as a fantasy that lets the film and its viewers off the hook of the class question (Nath, 2021). The discrepancy is itself a finding about how cross-class love stories function in the contemporary Indian public sphere. The literature converges, then, on a third research question (RQ3): How does *Sir*'s cross-class romance plot depart from, or quietly reproduce, the conventions of the Hindi cinematic unlikely couple, and what does this tell us about the political work that romance is asked to do in contemporary Indian cinema?

Theoretical Framework

Two complementary theories anchor the interpretive work that follows. The first is Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theory of capital and habitus, which equips the analysis to read the apartment in *Sir* as a structured social space in which differences of economic, cultural, and social capital appear in posture, taste, language, food, and the everyday choreography of moving from room to room (Reay, 2018). Habitus is helpful here precisely because it names the way social inequality is borne by the body, the way a person speaks, eats, sits, dresses, and addresses superiors, and makes it possible to read Ratna's careful avoidance of certain rooms, her standing while others sit, and her shift to silence in elite company as the visible signature of unequal capital, not as personal shyness.

The second is intersectionality, which gives the analysis the conceptual grammar to refuse single-axis explanations of Ratna's situation. As a widow, migrant, working-class woman, and worker without legal protection, she occupies a position that none of these descriptors taken alone can capture (Crenshaw, 1991; Dey & Orton, 2016). Intersectionality is also the right frame for understanding why the film's silences around caste are themselves a finding, not a gap: in the empirical literature, the caste of the domestic worker is rarely incidental to her position, and any cinematic refusal to name it is itself an act of representation with consequences (Dasgupta, 2021; Singh & Abdul Azeez, 2021).

The two frameworks complement each other. Bourdieu provides a vocabulary for the visible architecture of class inequality inside the home; intersectionality keeps the analysis from collapsing that architecture into a simple class story when caste, gender, and widowhood are also doing structuring work. Together they let the film be read as both a representation of one woman's life and a diagnostic of a wider social order.

Method

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative, theory-driven film analysis built around a single primary text. *Sir* (Gera, 2018) was selected because it places a domestic worker at the center of a sustained narrative, because it has traveled widely across international and Indian audiences, and because its restrained aesthetic invites the kind of close reading on which qualitative film analysis depends. The design follows a case-study logic: depth of interpretation is privileged over breadth of sampling, and the goal is theoretical generativity rather than statistical generalization. The two research traditions that anchor the design are textual analysis and reflexive thematic analysis, used in sequence to move from close description to theory-informed interpretation.

Corpus and Materials

The corpus consisted of two parallel artifacts of the same film. The first was the 99-minute audiovisual text, viewed in full on multiple occasions to attend to non-verbal cues such as framing, posture, eye-line, spatial blocking, costume, and the use of off-screen voice. The second was the complete English dialogue transcript drawn from the official subtitle track, totaling approximately 4,470 words. The transcript was treated as a primary document and read repeatedly, scene by scene, with timestamps, while the film itself was used to register the visual and aural texture that the transcript alone could not capture. Secondary materials, director interviews, festival reception notes, and published critical commentary on the film were consulted during interpretation but were not coded as primary data.

Analytic Procedure

The analytic procedure combined two established qualitative traditions. The first is textual analysis, understood as a method of educated guessing at the most likely interpretations a text invites in a given cultural setting; this approach treats meaning as something produced in the encounter between text and reader, and treats the analyst's task as one of careful situated reading rather than recovery of authorial intent (McKee, 2003). The second is reflexive thematic analysis, which moves from familiarisation, through inductive open coding, to the construction of higher-order themes, and finally to interpretation in light of theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three coding passes were carried out. In the first, codes were generated inductively from the transcript and viewing notes. In the second, codes were refined, clustered, and tested against additional scenes. In the third, codes and themes were read against the two theoretical frameworks of Bourdieusian capital and habitus and intersectionality, and were re-organized to support a theory-driven interpretation.

Coding Scheme and Theme Construction

Coding was conducted by a single analyst using a simple two-column code book in which each entry recorded a label in plain language alongside the scene and timestamp from which it was drawn. Representative codes included "spatial exclusion from the master bedroom," "linguistic capital, English as marker," "widow's bangles and reclaiming the body," "name asymmetry, Sir/Ratna," and "off-screen voice as voicelessness." From the transcript, 38 scenes were initially identified as analytically rich and re-watched in detail; of these, 12 emerged in the second pass as carrying the bulk of the film's argument and were re-transcribed against the screen to capture stage directions, pauses, and the framing of bodies in space. After the first round, codes were clustered into eight candidate themes; these were then aggregated into three theme families corresponding loosely to the three research questions.

Analytic Rigour

Analytic rigor was supported by four practices. First, every interpretive claim was grounded in a specific moment of the film that could be cited by timestamp and quoted from the transcript, so that the reasoning could be re-traced by another reader. Second, codes were reviewed against the existing empirical scholarship on Indian domestic workers to test whether the on-screen behaviour described corresponds to documented off-screen practice; for example, the film's depiction of avoidance of the master bedroom, of the worker eating apart and on the floor, and of the language of "Sir" and "madam" was checked against ethnographic accounts of master–servant relations (Frøystad, 2003; Sharma, 2016). Third, the analysis treated absences as findings as well as presences: silences in the film, especially around caste, were registered explicitly rather than read away. Fourth, the two theoretical frameworks were applied in dialogue with each other, so that Bourdieusian readings of capital and habitus did not erase the intersectional layering of caste, gender, and widowhood that the empirical literature has shown to be irreducible.

Results

Spatial, Embodied, and Symbolic Boundaries in the Apartment (RQ1)

The film organizes its central relationship through three layered systems of boundary work, each of which appears in nearly every scene. The first is spatial. Ratna inhabits the kitchen, the corridor, and her own narrow service room at the back of the apartment, while Ashwin moves freely between the living room, his bedroom, the terrace, and his father's office. The few times Ratna enters Ashwin's bedroom or the master bath, she is explicitly framed as crossing a line, and she names this herself, telling him that she does not enter his room except to clean. The threshold of his door is held throughout the film as an unspoken but unmissable boundary. The terrace, when they finally use it together, is offered as the one space inside the building that belongs to neither of them and that allows their relation to be momentarily horizontal.

The second is embodied. Ratna stands while Ashwin sits, walks behind him, holds her body small, and does not eat at his table. When she does eat in the apartment, she eats on the kitchen floor; when food is served to Ashwin's friends, she serves and clears, and the camera registers her hands without dwelling on her face. Her clothing is plain, often a sari; his is the loose cotton of a foreign-returned professional. When she designs and stitches a garment as a birthday gift for him, the act is doubly transgressive — she is making something for him from her own labor, and she is doing so with the artisanal capital of a tailor rather than the manual capital of a maid. The film consistently uses small bodily details to render large structural facts.

The third is symbolic and linguistic. He calls her by her first name; she calls him "Sir," and the title is so saturated in the film that it becomes the title of the work itself. When she begins to use his name, he marks it; when she returns from her sister's wedding, and he asks her to call him by his name, she resists in a way that makes the request itself feel like another demand. English is used in the apartment as a marker of class: Ashwin and his friends speak it freely,

family conversations between Ratna and her sister are in Hindi, and there is one scene in which Ashwin's friend insults Ratna in English, knowing she does not fully follow, until Ratna's controlled response, a slap recounted by another worker in a parallel scene, discloses how clearly the workers do understand the contempt being articulated above their heads. Naming, language, and spatial use together produce a textured map of the boundary.

What is notable about the film's representation is that none of these boundaries is broken by Ashwin's good manners. He thanks Ratna for tea, listens to her plans, encourages her tailoring, and buys her a sewing machine. None of this dissolves the architecture of inequality. The film insists, gently but insistently, that polite employers can keep the same structural arrangement intact as rude ones, and it shows this by leaving the spatial, embodied, and linguistic patterns of the home untouched even at the peak of their intimacy. The most charged moment of the film is the conversation in which Ratna tells Ashwin that no matter what he feels for her, she is still his servant. This is not presented as her self-deprecation but as her clearest statement of fact.

A further finding is that caste, in the strictly named sense, is largely absent from the dialogue. The film talks about widows, villages, mothers-in-law, English, and money. It does not place a *jati* on Ratna or on Ashwin. The absence is itself a feature of the representation, and it operates in two ways simultaneously: it allows the film to focus the audience's attention on class as the most legible axis of inequality, and it lets the question of caste hover in the background, available to viewers who carry that lens, invisible to those who do not.

Aspiration, Widowhood, and the Intersectional Life of Ratna (RQ2)

The film's second pattern is its careful, layered account of Ratna's intersecting positions and of the way she negotiates them. She is a widow, and the film makes this central rather than incidental. Early in the film, she explains to Ashwin that her husband died two months after the wedding, that she was nineteen, and that in the village widowhood is treated as the effective end of a woman's life. The bangles she has begun to wear in the city, contrary to village custom, are presented as a small but symbolically charged act of self-reclamation, and the moment in which she tells her sister that the bangles let her feel "this is my life, I can be what I want" is one of the film's clearest articulations of agency.

She is also a migrant, sending part of her wages back to her in-laws and supporting her younger sister Choti's education. The film stages this in the negotiations around her sister's marriage and exams, and shows how the patriarchal calculus of dowry interrupts the educational trajectory Ratna had been trying to construct. When the family decides to spend the exam fees on a wedding, Ratna's first reaction is anger and then a kind of mourning for the future she had hoped to engineer; she absorbs the loss and continues her own plan. The film makes clear that her aspiration is not a vague dream but a concrete strategy: take a tailoring course in Mumbai, build skills, change jobs, become a designer.

She is also a worker in a sector with almost no legal protection, dependent on the goodwill of an employer whose family she does not know. The film stages her vulnerability in two ways. One is the constant background presence of Ashwin's mother and friends, whose casual contempt is registered in small remarks about vegetarianism, about how a Bollywood maid should know her place, about the impossibility of bringing her to a family dinner. The other is the watchman Jeetu's threat at the end of the film to spread the rumor that she has stolen, which would end her ability to work in any home in the building. Even the kindness of Ashwin's male friend, who pulls him aside to argue against the romance, is recognizably an act of care for Ashwin and an act of dismissal of Ratna; he says explicitly that her future would be one of being marked permanently as Ashwin's maid, and the film does not contradict him.

What the film does is hold these intersecting pressures together without resolving them into a single story. Ratna is not portrayed as helpless, but she is not portrayed as triumphant either. Her aspirational arc is built through small, accumulating steps: the tailoring course, the design she stitches herself, the placement with a designer that closes the

film, and the audience is invited to understand that this arc is being constructed against, not within, the social order that produced her widowhood, her migration, and her servant role.

A particularly important finding is that the film locates Ratna's agency not in her romantic choice but in her refusal of the romantic resolution on the terms her employer first imagines it. When Ashwin offers, after she has decided to leave the household, to "do something" for her, she refuses. When his friend tells him to leave her alone if he really cares, the film treats this as a partial truth rather than a villainous betrayal. The integrity of Ratna's project depends on the romance not being granted on Ashwin's terms.

The Cross-Class Romance and Its Genre Conventions (RQ3)

The third pattern concerns how *Sir* engages and reworks the conventions of the cross-class love story. The film is recognizable as belonging to the unlikely-couple tradition: the wealthy, foreign-returned heir and the village widow who keeps his house meet, slowly recognize each other, and eventually exchange names. But the film withholds almost every classical resolution. There is no scene of public revelation in which their love is presented to a hostile family and triumphs over it. There is no scene in which Ratna is taught to use a fork and knife or dressed up to attend a function. There is no scene of escape, no elopement, and no marriage. The film's only point of tactile romantic contact is a single brief kiss the night Ratna returns from her sister's wedding, and even that scene is followed not by escalation but by Ratna's clear-eyed statement of the structural impossibility she perceives.

The film's geographic resolution also rejects the standard template. Ashwin returns to New York, alone, and tells his mother that he has been in love with his maid without claiming that this love can be made into a marriage. Ratna leaves the household and takes up an apprenticeship with a designer at the other end of the city. The story ends with a long-distance phone call across continents, in which Ratna addresses Ashwin by his first name for the first time. The film does not show them together; it does not promise that they will be together; it only shows that something has changed in the way she addresses him.

The film also takes seriously the secondary characters who articulate the genre's typical objections. Ashwin's friend Vicky is the conventional figure who voices the social impossibility of the union, but the film grants his speech significant weight rather than presenting it as straightforwardly snobbish. His warning that Ratna will never be allowed to forget she is "his maid" is left standing as a serious observation, not a comic relief. Ratna's own friend Laxmi, by contrast, urges Ratna to be cautious about Ashwin and to invest in her own course; her practical advice mirrors the film's overall ethic. The film thus stages the genre's standard objections not to dismiss them but to give them their proper weight in Ratna's calculus.

The cumulative effect is a film that uses the form of the cross-class romance to question whether romance is the right form for the situation. It refuses the genre's standard equation, that love, by itself, can dissolve structural inequality, and substitutes a different proposition: that a domestic worker can build a different future, but only by separating that project from the romantic plot her employer is most likely to offer her.

Discussion

Boundaries, Capital, and the Architecture of the Polite Home

The first finding, that the film maps the master–servant relation through tightly interlocking spatial, embodied, and linguistic boundaries, confirms and extends a long ethnographic tradition. Master–servant relations in middle-class Indian households are characterized by the avoidance of defiling tasks, by spatial segregation of workers from sacred and intimate spaces, and by the everyday socialization of children into a worldview where caste and inequality are

taken for granted (Frøystad, 2003). Empirical interviews with domestic workers show that practices of purity, pollution, and avoidance continue to operate inside ostensibly modern apartments and that workers experience them as humiliating even when their employers describe them as innocuous routine (Sharma, 2016). Bourdieu's (1984) framework provides a useful way to integrate these findings: what the camera in *Sir* records is the visible exterior of a social space in which economic, cultural, and embodied capital are unevenly distributed, and habitus is the medium through which those differences appear on the body of each character without being announced (Öksüz Karademir & Kaya, 2020; Reay, 2018).

The film's specific contribution is its insistence that politeness does not redistribute capital. Ashwin's kindness is real, and the film does not parody it, but his thank-yous coexist with a complete absence of any redistributive act. He buys Ratna a sewing machine; he does not pay her enough to make that purchase superfluous. He encourages her to learn; he does not change the room in which she sleeps. He speaks to her with care; he keeps his bedroom off limits. The film therefore makes a strong implicit argument that the architecture of domestic servitude is upheld not only by hostility but also by an unexamined politeness that protects the structure even as it softens its surface. This is consistent with recent critical writing on the film, which has objected that *Sir* invisibilizes caste precisely by replacing it with a "nice" class story (Dasgupta, 2021). The film's silence on caste, in this reading, is not an oversight; it is the structural absence around which the polite home is organized.

This finding also dialogues with the political-sociological work that argues that Indian domestic workers' continued exclusion from labor rights is sustained by ideological maneuvers that frame the worker as quasi-kin, "part of the family", and therefore not in need of contractual protection (Sharma, 2022). *Sir* shows this ideology in motion. Ashwin's friend's warning is not only about social impossibility; it implicitly assumes that what Ratna is owed is to be "left alone," not to be paid more, to be named differently, or to be housed elsewhere. The film stages the limits of the quasi-kin script without ever pronouncing them.

The Intersectional Life of the Worker–Widow–Migrant

The second finding, that the film carries the weight of Ratna's intersecting positions without collapsing them, engages directly with the intersectional feminist literature on Indian women's labor. Studies of paid domestic-care labor in India increasingly read women workers as agents whose lives are shaped by overlapping structures of patriarchy, caste, class, and migration, and who develop fine-grained strategies of self-making in spite of them (Grover et al., 2018). Ethnographic work on women's paid domestic labor shows that the social vulnerability of the widowed or otherwise stigmatized village migrant is reproduced inside the employer's home through humiliation, harassment, and the constant possibility of dismissal, and that migration to the city functions as a partial escape from rural patriarchal control while creating new urban dependencies (Thakkar, 2024). *Sir* fits this pattern with unusual precision: the bangles, the conversations with the sister, the careful management of remittances, and the studied refusal to be "looked after" by Ashwin all read as the cinematic equivalent of strategies the empirical literature has documented in the field.

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework explains why no single-axis reading of Ratna can be sustained. To call her a "woman" without specifying her widowhood is to under-describe her exposure to the patriarchal control of her in-laws; to call her a "worker" without specifying her gender is to miss the disciplinary use of rumour by male watchmen; to call her a "migrant" without specifying her class is to misread her education project for her sister (Dey & Orton, 2016). The film is faithful to the intersectional position by letting each axis show itself in turn rather than by trying to compress them into a single grievance. This is also the analytical point made in the recent literature on Dalit and lower-caste women domestic workers, where the cumulative weight of caste-class-gender oppression is described as compositional rather than additive (Arora, 2023).

The film's most useful intervention here is to give the worker an aspirational arc that is not a love story. By the closing scene, Ratna's life has moved because of an apprenticeship she has earned through her own work, not because of Ashwin's intervention. This both honors the documented agency of women domestic workers in the ethnographic record and breaks with the cinematic convention that imagines the worker's mobility as the gift of an enlightened patron. The film's refusal to grant the romantic resolution is therefore not a failure of the love story but a successful intersectional argument: Ratna's freedom requires the romance not to be granted on the terms she is being offered.

A further point bears emphasis. The film handles caste not by foregrounding it but by leaving it as a structuring absence. The empirical literature is clear that caste is rarely incidental to who does paid domestic work in India and to which tasks they are assigned (Raghuram, 2001). The film's decision to focus on widowhood, region, and class without naming caste is therefore best read not as evidence that caste is irrelevant to Ratna's life but as a strategic narrative choice with costs as well as benefits. The cost is that viewers without independent knowledge of caste hierarchy can mistake the story for a pure class story; the benefit is that the film travels well across an international and pan-Indian audience that might otherwise reject the more uncomfortable claim. The trade-off is itself a cultural document and reading it as such is more productive than treating it as either an error or a triumph.

Romance as Critique: When the Genre Refuses Its Own Ending

The third finding, that *Sir* uses the cross-class romance template in order to refuse its standard resolution, locates the film in a wider debate about what romance is asked to do in popular cinema. The unlikely-couple tradition has long been understood as a vehicle for social criticism in which the dilemma between wealth and disinterested love is used to expose, or sometimes to wish away, structural inequalities of class, race, and gender (Sharot, 2013; Wartenberg, 1999). Work on caste and couple formation in New Bollywood argues that contemporary Hindi cinema tends, in its caste-crossing plots, to interrupt rather than complete the union, leaving the lovers separated, dead, or in exile, and the underlying social order intact (Anwer & Arora, 2022). *Sir* departs from this pattern in an instructive way: the film neither punishes the lovers nor sanctifies the union. It instead suspends the romance, hands Ratna a non-romantic professional opening, and leaves the future of the relationship to a single transcontinental phone call.

This narrative choice does important political work. By refusing the standard reconciliation, the film withholds the genre's most common ideological reassurance, that love can dissolve class. By also refusing to kill or expel the lovers, it withholds the inverse reassurance that the social order is so fixed that even a small disturbance can be punished out of existence. The film leaves the viewer with the more difficult proposition that structural inequality is real, that romantic feeling across it is also real, and that the responsible thing to do may be neither to celebrate that feeling nor to deny it, but to ensure that the worker's life is not made dependent on it. This is consistent with the ethic of agency and aspiration that recent ethnographic work has identified as central to women domestic workers' own self-understanding (Chatterjee, 2026; Grover et al., 2018).

Critical reception of the film has divided over precisely this point. One strand of commentary reads the closing phone call as a hopeful crack in the wall, a sign that conversation across class is possible. Another reads the ending as a quiet endorsement of the rich-man-loves-poor-girl fantasy, in which the film flatters its middle-class viewer by offering the pleasure of cross-class feeling without the discomfort of cross-class redistribution (Nath, 2021). The fact that both readings are sustainable is itself a finding: the cross-class romance, even when handled with unusual care, is a form whose work is hard to fully control, because its long generic history pulls at every scene. The most one can ask of a film working in this form is that it stages the genre's conventions with full awareness of their political stakes. By that standard, *Sir* is a serious, if imperfect, intervention.

A final point concerns what the film says about the broader Indian media imagination. The strategic invisibility of servants in mainstream Hindi cinema has been documented across genres and decades and is consistent with the persistent silencing of caste in commercial narratives (Singh & Abdul Azeez, 2021; Vanina, 2023). *Sir* belongs to a smaller, growing body of work that puts the worker at the center, gives her an interior life, and refuses to use her as a comic or sentimental device. Reading the film this way matters for the future of Indian media studies because it suggests that there are aesthetic strategies- long takes, sparse score, careful framing, restrained dialogue- that can be deployed to bring the laboring body into representation without converting it into spectacle. Whether those strategies travel into commercial cinema remains an open question.

Conclusion

Sir is most often described as a film about whether love can cross the gulf between an employer and his maid. The closer reading offered here suggests that the film is in fact about something both narrower and larger: the conditions under which a young widow from a Maharashtrian village, working in a Mumbai apartment, can come to own her own future. Read with Bourdieu, the film is an unusually precise document of how the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and bodily capital is sustained inside the polite home, even when nobody is being cruel. Read with intersectionality, the film is a careful account of how widowhood, migration, class, gender, and the unnamed but ever-present axis of caste shape what Ratna can want and what she can do. Read as a contribution to the long history of cross-class romance, it is a film that uses the genre against itself, refusing the resolution that would otherwise allow the audience to feel that the structure has been solved.

The implications for media and social-science scholarship are threefold. First, the film offers an aesthetic vocabulary, boundary work, restrained dialogue, and the politicized silence through which cinema can represent paid domestic labor without sentimentalizing it; this vocabulary deserves systematic comparison with the strategies used in other recent independent Indian films centered on workers. Second, the film's strategic silence on caste, while making it more legible to international audiences, should be read as a cost as well as a choice, and future cinema studies of Indian films about domestic labor would benefit from making caste a primary analytic category rather than a residual one. Third, the film's refusal of the romantic resolution is a useful test case for theories of the unlikely couple, and suggests that the most politically responsible version of the cross-class romance may be one that explicitly separates the worker's self-making from her employer's affection.

The study is limited by its single-text design and by the situated position of the reader. Comparative work that places *Sir* alongside films such as *The Lunchbox*, *Photograph*, and *Is Love Enough?* *Sir*'s contemporaries in regional cinemas, and global counterparts such as *Roma* would extend these findings considerably. Audience-reception work, examining how viewers in different class, caste, and national positions interpret the ending, would test whether the film's careful suspension survives contact with the readings its viewers bring to it. For now, the contribution of this paper is to suggest that *Sir* deserves a more demanding kind of attention than the romance label allows, and that taking it seriously can sharpen the conversation about how Indian cinema imagines, represents, and sometimes refuses the politics of domestic labor.

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