

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2026.v8n1.25>

The Politics of Intimacy: An Intersectional Analysis of Social Hierarchy in *Geeli Puchhi* and *The Mirror*

Manju S Bharghavi

Research Scholar,

Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur.

Affiliated with the University of Calicut, Kerala

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0311-0677>

Abstract

This paper examines the politics of intimacy and how intimate relationships operate through social hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and sexuality in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Puchhi* (2021) and Konkana Sen Sharma's *The Mirror* (2023). Intimacy is often understood as a private discourse, insulated from political and social structures. Feminist scholarship has challenged this public/private dichotomy, arguing that the personal is always political. This paper examines how intimacy functions for characters who occupy the intersections of caste, class, gender, and sexuality and how those intersectional hierarchies control and regulate the terms and conditions of their intimacies. Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Sharmila Rege's framework of caste and gender as co-constitutive in the Indian context, and Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotion, the paper argues that intimacy in both films is not a space outside social hierarchy but one of its primary sites of operation, where the reproduction of inequality is always structural.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Geeli Puchhi, The Mirror, Sara Ahmed

Introduction

In Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Puchhi* (2021), there is a scene in which Priya Sharma nurses Bharti Mondal's bleeding nose after a provoked fight in the workplace with a bullying male colleague. This can be read as women's solidarity, where one woman cares for another, taking her side and is also a moment of undeniable tenderness and warmth. Yet, in a while, when Priya strategically asks for Bharti's surname and then Bharti lies, introduces herself as Bharti Banerjee. Bharti was coerced into concealing her Dalit identity as she understood that the earlier tenderness would vanish into thin air once her Dalit identity was known to Priya Sharma. Here, the care is real, but is only permissible under certain structural conditions.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

In Konkana Sen Sharma's *The Mirror* (2023), a more nuanced kind of intimacy is shown between Ishitha, an architect living alone in a Mumbai apartment, and Seema, her domestic worker. Ishitha was shocked to discover that Seema uses her apartment and bedroom for sexual encounters with her husband. This kind of arrangement would be the only practical solution to Seema and her husband, as having a private space of one's own is a luxury to the majority in a city like Mumbai. Later on, an unspoken arrangement emerges between Ishitha and Seema, in which Ishitha watches Seema and her husband's intimacy through a mirror. Both Seema and Ishitha enjoy a voyeuristic pleasure. But their intimacy is also structured entirely by disparities of class, caste, and space.

This paper argues that both the films *Geeli Puchhi* and *The Mirror* reveal that intimacy or proximity between the characters is not devoid of the social hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and sexuality. These intersecting structural barriers constrain their relationship maturity, and the intimacy is only sustainable as long as those hierarchies remain unspoken. The moment the hierarchy enters language, this intimacy or proximity ruptures. So, the proximity that is shown in these films is not an ideal symbol of solidarity, but rather reminds us of systemic inequality and historical injustice.

The study here makes use of the theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality, Sharmila Rege's Dalit Feminist Scholarship, and Sara Ahmed's arguments in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) to analyse the politics of intimacy in the films through the close reading of the texts and dialogues. The study attempts to find patterns by observing dialogues- what is said and silences- what is deliberately left unsaid. The paper proceeds through five major arguments: intimacy is always initiated by the one who holds more structural power, intimacy coerces the less-privileged to negate their social identity, silence is the primary site where hierarchy exercises its power; the rupture of intimacy happens when hierarchy enters speech, and in these two films, the marginalised women exercise a form of strategic agency within their limited conditions.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework draws on three important theoretical stances. Intersectionality, as proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw, Sharmila Rege's Feminist Dalit scholarship and Sara Ahmed's arguments on the Cultural Politics of Emotion.

Tracing the exact origin of intersectionality is conjectural, as some scholars locate it with Kimberle Crenshaw, the critical legal scholar, while others credit the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977. It emerges from the everyday lives of black women and the double discrimination they often experience. It was Crenshaw who coined the term 'intersectionality' and also detailed the root metaphor of intersections:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)

To interpret Crenshaw, we must begin from a single axial categorical understanding of different power structures such as race, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, geography, etc. These power structures are often deemed to be distinctive and mutually exclusive. But these systems of oppression overlap and intersect at various junctures, generating a complex and complicated exercise of power. The comprehension of these structural and political overlaps is essential for resisting and challenging the power establishments.

Sharmila Rege, along with the other Dalit feminist scholars, draws on this aspect of intersectionality and establishes that in the Indian context, caste and gender are not mutually exclusive parallel systems of oppression but are intersecting and enabling in their power operation. Dalit women's bodies are regulated simultaneously through the purity norms of caste and the subordination norms of gender.

To critically examine the politics of intimacy, the study makes use of Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed dismisses the argument that emotions are internal, private psychological states - the 'inside out' model. Instead, she theorises that "emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices" (9). She extends her argument, saying that emotions are produced through a circulation of signs and objects between bodies.

Hence, the study looks at the intimacy between Priya and Bharti, and Ishitha and Seema through the lens offered by these three theoretical stances and argues that the structural barriers of caste, gender, class and sexuality operate on one's body and surroundings simultaneously, not as parallel exclusive structures. Even in the realm of intimacy, these structures hold more power over the bodies, as detailed as follows:

***Geeli Puchhi*: Where Caste dictates the politics of Intimacy**

From the first scene in *Geeli Puchhi*, Neeraj Ghaywan establishes Bharti's character as doubly marginalised. In the factory space where she is working, she is excluded and mocked for her gender expression as she does not conform to the patriarchy's expected femininity. She is strong, masculine, and wears masculine attire. She is also marginalised from the office space because of her caste, where she is denied the promotion to the data operator job, even after proving herself to be meritorious. It is at this juncture that Priya Sharma arrives as the new data operator, a position that is denied to Bharti Mandal. In the film, Priya is introduced by showing her descending from the office space to the factory floor. This spatial movement is significant to this analysis. Every act of intimacy that follows replicates this direction – from the centre to the margins.

It is Priya who initiates the first conversation, offers Bharti food, acts comforting and caring. Priya is the one who initiates flirting with Bharti, telling her that her eyes look beautiful, and she takes Bharti out for dahi vada. She confesses love first and initiates kisses. The pattern

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

of initiation is not incidental. Priya can afford to initiate because of her structural privileges. She is more secure and less vulnerable. Priya's warmth, tenderness and curiosity come from a position of caste security, whereas Bharti receiving Priya's intimacy entails risk and danger. For Bharti, initiation of intimacy comes with a multitude of structural barriers; even her receipt of the same is conditional on what Bharti is willing to conceal.

The next observation argues that intimacy coerces the less-privileged to negate their social identity. The nose-bleeding scene and the conversation afterwards can be discussed here. Priya nurses Bharti's wound with genuine care, and she also stands by her side when the manager probes about the situation. Following that, Priya asks Bharti for her name. She replies, "Bharti". Then, Priya repeats Bharti's name with a pause, which is actually a lead-in question to understand her surname. Priya didn't ask for the surname directly. This "asking of caste without asking" is so rampant in the highly caste-informed Indian society. The question comes to Priya so naturally, and it is like administering an entrance test to decide the potential of their future relationship. Priya gets the privilege of choice here. Bharti lies immediately, calling herself Bharti Banerjee instead of Bharti Mandal. This lie is Bharti's survival strategy, and as is evident, that moment Bharti's Dalit identity comes out, the terms of intimacy would change.

The intimacy that Bharti and Priya share is not of solidarity in terms of their sexuality, nor is resistive of caste. The proximity between them operates on a different mechanism, i.e., conditional inclusion. Bharti is only welcomed in Priya's intimate world as long as she conceals her Dalit identity. The intimacy is traded for Bharti's social identity as a Dalit, thus reproducing the structure of domination in their relationship. This pattern extends throughout the film. Bharti restricts herself and her anger towards injustice to get access to Priya's intimate circle. Bharti is coerced into this silence. The silence is more structurally produced than a personal preference.

This structural barrier is clearly evident in the film when Bharti reveals her Dalit identity. The rupture of their intimacy is not violent, but is precisely quiet. When Bharti reveals her Dalit identity to Priya, Priya immediately withdraws her hand. The withdrawal of the hand is a small gesture, but the meaning it carries is nuanced and layered. When this severance happened, Priya and Bharti were having a highly vulnerable and intimate conversation about how one should accept the truth of their sexuality. Priya was harbouring on Bharti for the support she needed. Yet, all that warmth, closeness and vulnerability stops at that moment. The intimacy they shared was only conditional. Priya does not shout or accuse Bharti of lying. Priya withdraws quietly. The body enacts what the social structure has always held in reserve.

Later on, Priya's body language shifts. At the birthday party, Bharti suddenly becomes unwelcome, and her social presence becomes a burden to Priya. Priya couldn't accommodate Bharti's Dalit identity in the society's presence, and she gets sidelined to the margins. The moment the naming of caste happened between them, the hierarchical conditions became visible, and intimacy was shattered. It was only the silence, or what is deliberately left out, that enabled the intimacy, in the first place.

Neeraj Ghaywan employs utmost consideration to not portray Bharti as just a victim.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

Bharti uses this intimacy to her advantage when she realises that the intimacy they shared was not of unconditional solidarity, but of conditional silences. Bharti advises Priya to become a mother so that she will be able to get closer to her husband Shiv. This advice was not just out of spite, but a strategic operation of her constrained agency. Bharti understood that Priya becoming a mother and retreating to the domestic space would create a vacancy for her in the office. Even though the structure remains unchanged, she makes advantage of it. This is not liberation, but it is strategic agency within the confines of the structure.

The Mirror: Class, Space and Politics of Intimacy

In Konkana Sen Sharma's *The Mirror*, the structural imbalance is made strongly visible with the ownership of space/land. The film itself opens with the desirable interiors of Ishitha's apartment – private, quiet, spacious, and sophisticated. The reason why Seema uses Ishitha's bedroom for sexual intimacy with her husband is that Seema does not have possession to private space. This spatial possession and non-possession mark the structural difference between them owing to class, caste and other socio-economic factors. Seema is coerced into using Ishitha's bedroom, as she isn't allowed a space of her own. As in the case of Bharti, this non-possession of space is structurally produced, not an individual convenience decision.

The silently acknowledged arrangement of voyeuristic pleasure that follows is initiated by Ishitha, as she can afford to indulge in that. She is in a less vulnerable position than Seema because of her class and economic privileges. But the same arrangement is only made possible because of Seema's material condition. Their relationship is built on Seema's non-possession of a private space. The intimacy that is initiated by Ishitha does not originate in authentic personal feelings but under the conditions of the economic and spatial conditions that bring a domestic worker into the interior of her employer's home. That private space of the apartment is already a site of class power before any intimate exchange happens between them.

Both Seema and Ishitha call each other *Didi*, meaning elder sister. In Hindi-speaking communities, addressing a domestic worker as *Didi* is a common practice, which is more of a performative practice. Calling a domestic worker *Didi* softens the employer-employee relationship. It creates an illusion of a familial relationship by using the language of family. This form of address, under the guise of warmth and care, erases the structural exploitation. By calling Seema *Didi*, Ishitha practices the same, whereas Seema addressing Ishitha as *Didi* comes from a place of submissiveness, and believing the earlier said familial illusion.

But, at the moment of encounter, when Seema talks about the care and work she does for Ishitha, Ishitha makes it clear that all these are exchanged services for a salary. So, calling Seema *Didi* or the voyeuristic pleasure they share is not devoid of hierarchy. It's the language of closeness that renders the hierarchy invisible, at least for some time. Ishitha's intimacy towards Seema, like Priya's warmth toward Bharti, is not false or fake, but this usage of personal register makes both Seema and Bharti complacent to the needs of the power-holders.

The voyeuristic intimacy between the characters is initiated and sustained through untold conversations. When Ishitha changes the bedsheet, Seema notices, but they never

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

encounter each other. The entire negotiation takes place in the register of silence, which is deliberately untold. The arrangement is not sanctified by language, but is dealt through a shared, deliberate silence.

The silence here is not an absence of communication; it is the communication through the strategic avoidance of speech, through which intimacy is made possible. If they were to have negotiated in speech, they would have to address the hierarchy explicitly - the power and ownership over Ishitha's space and the non-possession of Seema's own private space, Ishitha's sexual desperation, the employer-employee relationship between them, and Seema's sexual desires' expression is only permitted under the conditions that Ishitha puts forward. Then the structural imbalance would have to be named. But with the strategic use of silence, the act is seen as mutual and consensual. But it is the hierarchy's convenience for Ishitha, and a survival strategy for Seema.

However, when the arrangement was eventually named and acknowledged, the rupture of intimacy happened violently, in contrast to the quiet withdrawal by Priya. What follows is a heated exchange between Seema and Ishitha, where Seema calls Ishitha a pervert, and Ishitha calls Seema disgusting. The strategically avoided terms of power surface the very moment of rupture and confrontation. Ishitha suddenly becomes the owner of the space and the employer of Seema. Ishitha harbours in her power-holding positions and reveals that the intimacy they shared was only conditional.

The word disgusting is more than a personal insult here. In the Indian context, a labourer's body has historically been marked as impure, dirty and unclean. Brahmanical insistence on caste purity renders other bodies as impure and disgusting. It is a way of othering and strips the labourers of their dignity. In the current world, this notion of impurity gets translated into terms of hygienity. So, Ishitha calling Seema disgusting comes from her casteist and classist alignment. She uses the vocabulary of bodily pollution that is inseparable from the class-caste positioning of domestic workers in the Indian social scenario.

As in *Geeli Pucchi*, here also the intimacy gets severed when strategic silence is replaced with speech. The moment silence ceases to exist, the hierarchy behind the warmth becomes visible. The hierarchy does not enter the relationship at the moment of encounter, but it was operating throughout. In both films, intimacy survives on the silence and suppression of the less-privileged.

Seema, like Bharti, also exercises her constrained agency throughout the film. When Seema makes a noise, and Ishitha hides in the kitchen, the spatial logic of the apartment temporarily inverts, the employer retreats into domestic invisibility while the domestic worker occupies the space of power. Seema gets hold of power over Ishitha there. She uses it to her advantage; the agency is real, but only facilitated by the deliberate silence.

The film ends with Seema asking Ishitha whether she should come back the next day. Even though Seema found two jobs, as cheap domestic labour is always in demand among the urban elite in India. Yet Seema is the one who initiates the question of return. There could be so many factors that add to Seema's want here - her need for a safe workspace, longing for the

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

warmth and pleasure they shared, and better economic opportunities. It could also be the possession of space; Seema's access to a private space might not be permitted elsewhere. Hence, she initiates the question of return. Thus, exercising her constrained agency within the structural limitations she holds. In short, what looks like choice is always also constrained, and what looks like constraint can also be, within its limits, a form of agency.

Discussion

Firstly, both the films bring in the element of intersectionality, introducing these intersecting axes of power like caste, class, gender and sexuality. The ownership of space, which is an entangled space of all these axes, provides us with a more layered and nuanced understanding of how these axes work in lived realities. Even when the characters found axes of similarity, such as homosexual desire in the case of Bharti and Priya, and unconventional sexual desires in the case of Ishitha and Seema, their alliance was never resistant towards the other axes that separated them. Those who held and enjoyed the power continued in the systems of oppression with the help of deliberate silence.

Both *Geeli Pucchi* and *The Mirror* portray that intimacy can be authentic and hierarchical at the same time. Priya's warmth toward Bharti and Ishitha's proximity with Seema is not false or fake; it is genuine and authentic. But it is conditional and structurally produced. Therefore, what feels personal is simultaneously political, as Sara propounds in her theoretical stance in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

This becomes more legible when we inspect the aspect of disgust as theorised by Sara Ahmed. Ahmed argues that to name something as disgusting is performative. She explains, "The speech act, 'That's disgusting!' can work as a form of vomiting, as an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating." (94) This stance can be exemplified in the case of Seema and Ishitha. When Ishitha calls Seema 'disgusting', this is what operates there. She is performing to make herself safe and retreat from the intimacy that she shared with Seema. At the moment of rupture, when the speech enters the deliberate silence, and they are forced to address the structural axes of domination, Ishitha chose the axis of domination over the solidarity of intimacy.

Additionally, in both films, neither Priya nor Ishitha holds accountability for what they have done, even though they have understood and realised it well. Here, solidarity without taking accountability fails both Bharti and Seema. Interestingly enough, Bharti holds on to her Dali identity with more assertiveness, and Seema confesses her voyeuristic pleasure from the act. Both Bharti and Seema stay more authentic towards their desires and identities, while Ishitha and Priya struggle miserably to navigate against this matrix of domination.

Conclusion

In both the films *Geeli Pucchi* and *The Mirror*, the mechanism is identical: intimacy is initiated from above; the subordinated women's silence sustains the intimacy; the rupture happens when hierarchy enters speech, and both less-privileged women exercise constrained agency from within the structure rather than outside it. Bharti taking Priya's place in the office,

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

and Seema asking whether she could return – these are not liberations or triumphant endings. However, those women have understood the structure they are living within and found an agency, a quiet, partial, ongoing navigation.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004.
- Carastathis, Anna. "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory." *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, Apr. 2014, pp. 304–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12129>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989, Article 8.
- Geeli Pucchi*. Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, Streamed, Netflix, 2021.
- Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*. Zubaan, 2014.
- The Mirror*. Directed by Konkana Sen Sharma, Streamed, Netflix, 2023.