

Body, Morality, and Gender Surveillance in the Netflix Series *Lady's Companion* and the Film *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal how the female body is constructed, moralized, and surveilled through the figure of the chaperone in Western culture and the gowok in Javanese tradition. Employing a comparative literature approach and a qualitative descriptive method, this research analyzes two cultural texts: the Netflix series *Lady's Companion* (2025) and the film *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* (2025). The theoretical framework draws on Michel Foucault's concept of the politics of the body, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity. The findings indicate that in Western society the female body is repressed through public morality and norms of decorum, while in Javanese culture it is exploited through patriarchal spirituality that positions women as instruments of masculine knowledge and initiation. In *Lady's Companion*, the character Elena Bianda functions as a moral agent who supervises the conduct and bodily comportment of young noblewomen to preserve family reputation. In contrast, *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* presents Nyai Gowok as a spiritual teacher whose body becomes a symbolic site of knowledge and discipline, yet remains embedded within the patriarchal logic of Javanese court culture. Both figures demonstrate distinct yet interconnected mechanisms of gender surveillance, rooted in the same patriarchal logic that controls the female body through moral and spiritual institutions. By juxtaposing these two cultural frameworks, this study contributes to cross-cultural discourse on gender, morality, and embodiment, showing how literature and film reflect and reproduce the politics of the female body.

Keywords: female body, morality, gender surveillance, chaperone, gowok, comparative literature

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INTRODUCTION

In literary and cultural studies, the female body has consistently been a contested discursive space where morality, power, and social identity intersect. Michel Foucault (1978) conceptualizes the body as a site where power operates through discipline, regulation, and surveillance mechanisms. The body is not merely biological but ideological; it represents the social systems that regulate behavior and morality. Within this framework, literature and film function not only as entertainment but also as ideological mirrors that shape perceptions of the body and gender.

Two cultural figures that are particularly significant in this context are the chaperone in Western culture and the gowok in Javanese tradition. Both figures represent patriarchal systems that instrumentalize the female body for moral and social purposes, albeit with different functions: the chaperone preserves female purity, while the gowok facilitates erotic instruction for young men. These figures have been revitalized in contemporary popular culture through the Netflix series *Lady's Companion* (2025) and the film *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* (2025).

Lady's Companion portrays the life of a middle-aged woman working as a social chaperone for daughters of a modern British aristocratic family. The series explores the tension between moral surveillance and sexual freedom within a post-feminist society. Through its protagonist, the series highlights how decorum, reputation, and control over women's bodies continue to be governed by long-standing social values. As noted by Armstrong (1987) and Poovey (1984), the chaperone figure

in nineteenth-century English literature represents “feminine morality” that regulates young women’s social conduct. This series recontextualizes that figure within a modern setting, illustrating that surveillance of the female body has not disappeared but rather transformed into subtler forms through media, class, and public morality.

Conversely, *Gowdk: Kamasutra Java* (2025) revives the traditional figure of the gowok within an erotic yet spiritual cinematic framework. The film narrates the relationship between adult women and adolescent boys in Javanese tradition, generating debate around culture, sexuality, and power relations. According to Koentjaraningrat (1985), the gowok functions as a “male instructor,” preparing prospective husbands for physical and spiritual maturity. However, in this film, the gowok is positioned ambivalently: she is both a bearer of traditional knowledge (*nglmu rasa*, the harmony between body and soul) and an objectified body serving masculine learning. This aligns with Spivak’s (1988) argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, which asserts that women in patriarchal systems are often acknowledged yet silenced.

Through the method of juxtaposition, this study reads *Lady’s Companion* and *Gowdk: Kamasutra Java* as cross-cultural representations that reveal how the female body is controlled through morality and tradition. The chaperone regulates young women’s behavior to conform to norms of propriety, while the gowok regulates male experience through the female body. Both operate within the same patriarchal logic: one enforces purity, the other legitimizes masculine experience, albeit through contrasting cultural modes.

The theoretical framework integrates Foucault’s (1978) politics of the body, Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, and Spivak’s (1988) concept of subalternity. Butler argues that gender identity is not essential but socially produced through repeated performances. Thus, both the chaperone and the gowok function as performative roles that regulate bodily conduct according to cultural norms.

Previous studies on chaperones primarily focus on social history and feminine ethics (Poovey, 1984; Davidoff, 1973), while studies on gowok are largely confined to cultural anthropology and Javanese eroticism (Septiningsih, 2010; Kurniawan Putra, 2025). To date, no research has examined both figures within a comparative literary framework using juxtaposition. This research gap is significant because it allows for a new reading of how Western and Javanese cultural systems similarly naturalize power relations through the female body, albeit with different symbols and narratives.

Thus, this study not only contributes to gender studies and comparative literature but also opens new discourse on how contemporary popular culture renegotiates traditional figures in a global context. Both *Lady’s Companion* and *Gowdk: Kamasutra Java* demonstrate that the female body remains a site of moral negotiation and identity politics that is continually reproduced in modern literary and cinematic discourse.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach oriented toward comparative literature and gender studies. The approach is chosen because the research does not aim to measure or statistically test variables, but rather to interpret meanings related to representations of the body, morality, and gender surveillance in two visual cultural texts: the Western Netflix series *Lady’s Companion* (2025) and the Javanese film *Gowdk: Kamasutra Java* (2025).

Within comparative literature, the method of juxtaposition is used as the primary technique, placing two works from different cultural contexts side by side to identify intersections, contrasts, and ideological relations. The objective is not merely to compare narrative forms or characterization, but to uncover how both texts represent power relations between body, morality, and gender within patriarchal systems.

The research was conducted in Surabaya from June to October 2025. Analysis was carried out through textual study and symbolic interpretation of narratives, dialogues, and visual representations in both works. *Lady’s Companion* was analyzed via official Netflix screenings, while

Gowok: Kamasutra Java was accessed through national film distribution channels and official online archives.

Primary data consist of scenes, dialogues, narratives, gestures, and symbolic visuals that convey meanings related to body and morality. Data were collected through visual text observation and close reading of episodes and key scenes relevant to the research focus. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, theoretical books on literature and gender, media articles, and previous studies discussing chaperones, gowok, or body politics in cultural contexts.

Data collection involved three stages: (1) identification and delimitation of data, selecting scenes that explicitly or implicitly depict moral surveillance and bodily representation; (2) thematic coding, grouping data into three main categories body, morality, and gender surveillance; and (3) symbolic interpretation, analyzing each scene using gender theory and power discourse.

The theoretical framework includes Foucault's (1978) concept of the politics of the body, which views the body as a site of social discipline; Butler's (1990) gender performativity, which explains gender as socially regulated action; and Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern, which helps interpret the gowok as a woman whose presence is acknowledged yet silenced within patriarchal narratives.

Analysis was conducted intertextually and interpretatively. Each text was read as a cultural representation embedded with ideology. Close reading focused on the visualization of the female body, the role of supervisory figures, and moral discourse attached to characters. Scenes depicting power relations between men and women were interpreted in relation to their social and historical contexts.

The final stage involved juxtaposition between the two works. *Lady's Companion* portrays the chaperone as a guardian of young women's morality within a nineteenth-century British social system recontextualized in modern aristocratic culture. In contrast, *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* depicts the gowok as a caretaker of young men who mediates sexual experience in traditional Javanese culture. Through this comparison, the study reveals a shared patriarchal logic operating differently: in the West, the female body is controlled through decorum; in Java, it is utilized to construct masculine identity.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) model: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The study is interpretative, reflective, and contextual, emphasizing meaning derived from the relationship between text, culture, and power structures.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach oriented toward comparative literature and gender studies. This approach is chosen because the research does not aim to measure or statistically test variables, but rather to understand and interpret the meanings of representations of the body, morality, and gender surveillance found in two visual cultural texts: the series *Lady's Companion* (Netflix, 2025) from the Western tradition and the film *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* (2025) from the Javanese tradition.

Within the context of comparative literary studies, this research applies juxtaposition as the primary analytical technique, namely comparing two works from different cultural contexts by placing them side by side to identify points of convergence, contrast, and ideological relations between them. The objective is not merely to identify differences in narrative form or characterization, but to reveal how both works similarly represent power relations among the body, morality, and gender within patriarchal systems.

The research was conducted in Surabaya between June and October 2025. The analytical process involved textual analysis and symbolic interpretation of narratives, dialogues, and visual representations in both works. The series *Lady's Companion* was analyzed through official screenings on the Netflix platform, while *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* was accessed through national film distribution channels and official online archives.

The primary data consist of scenes, dialogues, narratives, gestures, and symbolic visuals that convey meanings related to the body and morality. These data were obtained through visual text observation and intensive note-taking (close reading) of each episode and key scene relevant to the research focus. In addition, secondary data were collected from various sources, including academic journals, theoretical books on literature and gender, media articles, and previous studies discussing the chaperone figure, the gowok, or themes of body politics in cultural contexts.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First was the data identification and delimitation stage, which involved selecting scenes and narrative segments that explicitly or implicitly demonstrate practices of moral surveillance and bodily representation. Second was the thematic coding stage, in which data were categorized into three main themes: body, morality, and gender surveillance. Third was the symbolic interpretation stage, where each scene or dialogue was analyzed using gender theory and power discourse.

The theoretical framework employed in this study includes Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of the politics of the body, which views the body as a site of power and social discipline; Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which explains gender as constituted through socially regulated actions; and Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern, which assists in interpreting the figure of the gowok as a woman who is present yet silenced within patriarchal narratives. These three theories provide the foundation for understanding that morality and the body in both works are not neutral, but rather products and instruments of cultural power.

The analysis was conducted through intertextual and interpretative reading. Each text, both the series and the film, was examined as a cultural representation embedded with ideology. The researcher carried out close readings of visual representations of the female body, the roles of companions or supervisory figures, and moral discourses attached to the characters. Scenes that depict power relations between men and women were interpreted by linking them to the social and historical contexts in which the works were produced.

The next stage involved juxtaposition between the two works. *Lady's Companion* depicts the chaperone as a guardian of young women's morality within a nineteenth-century British social system that is reanimated within a framework of aristocratic modernity. Meanwhile, *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* presents the figure of the gowok as a female caretaker of young men who functions as a mediator of sexual experience within traditional Javanese culture. Through this comparative reading, the study reveals a patriarchal logic operating in different ways: in the West, the female body is controlled through norms of propriety, while in Javanese culture, the female body is utilized to construct masculine identity.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, only scenes and narratives relevant to the themes of the body, morality, and gender surveillance were retained. In the data display stage, analytical findings were organized in the form of narrative descriptions and comparative matrices between the two texts. The final stage involved drawing conclusions that focused on identifying ideological patterns and the social implications of both representations.

Thus, this study is interpretative, reflective, and contextual, in which meaning is sought not only within the texts themselves but also in the relationships among text, culture, and surrounding power structures. Through this descriptive qualitative method, the research seeks to demonstrate how the female body becomes a locus of moral surveillance and an ideological symbol that continues to transform across Western and Javanese cultural contexts.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis indicate that in both the Netflix series *Lady's Companion* and the film *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa*, the female body functions as a site of power and morality a space where social values, ethics, and gender domination operate and are continuously negotiated. The body is not merely present as a biological entity, but also as an ideological arena in which power is legitimized and contested through moral discourse.

1. The Female Body as a Site of Power and Morality

In the Netflix series *Lady's Companion*, the character Elena Bianda, a chaperone, is employed by Don Pedro Menca to supervise his three daughters Cristina, Sara, and Carlota in order to preserve the reputation of their aristocratic family. Elena's supervisory role is not merely administrative, but also moral and symbolic. She ensures that the bodies of the three young women remain "presentable" in the public eye, in accordance with the standards of nineteenth-century aristocratic decorum.

Foucault (1978) describes this phenomenon as the politics of the body, wherein the body becomes a site of discipline through which power operates subtly via morality and surveillance. In *Lady's Companion*, morality is no longer solely a personal matter, but a social instrument designed to maintain class and gender order. Thus, the chaperone is not simply a caregiver, but a representation of the "patriarchal gaze" that internalizes control over the female body.

The bodies of Cristina, Sara, and Carlota do not fully belong to themselves; every bodily movement, facial expression, and even manner of dress must conform to the moral representation of aristocratic family values. Consequently, the female body functions as a social text it is written, read, and monitored by prevailing social norms. Morality becomes a "soft" yet effective instrument of control that sustains upper-class patriarchal structures.

In several scenes, Elena Bianda demonstrates a growing critical awareness of this system. She begins to question values that restrict the freedom of young women, particularly when she observes Cristina's secret desire to learn how to read and write love letters, Sara's aspiration to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor, and Carlota's wish to develop her personal interests. This awareness marks the emergence of moral resistance, where surveillance transforms into empathy and control evolves into solidarity.

In contrast to the European context, which emphasizes restraint and propriety, *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* presents the body as part of Javanese male spiritual knowledge and morality. The female body is not repressed through public morality, but rather exploited through patriarchal spirituality. The character Nyai Gowok, a middle-aged woman believed to possess *nglmu rasa* (inner spiritual knowledge), is tasked with educating young aristocratic men in matters of sexuality prior to marriage. The film portrays a paradoxical relationship: women appear powerful as teachers and sources of erotic knowledge, yet symbolically remain objects within the system of Javanese masculinity. The character Mbok Sari, a *gowok*, functions as both a sensual instructor and a spiritual guide for young aristocratic men preparing for marriage.

In the film's opening scenes, Nyai Gowok is depicted teaching *nglmu rasa* to her male student, Raden Bagus Jatmiko, based on the philosophy that "the body is a bridge to spiritual consciousness." However, within the broader narrative, Nyai Gowok's position as a spiritual teacher remains embedded in a framework that normalizes women's roles as facilitators of male maturity. Her body is no longer controlled, but rather offered as a spiritual medium through which men attain "perfection of *rasa*."

Despite appearing empowered through her knowledge, Mbok Sari's position remains circumscribed by Javanese patriarchal structures. Her body becomes a medium for men's moral education, yet she herself does not gain autonomy over her own body. In Gayatri Spivak's (1988) terms, Mbok Sari represents the subaltern woman: she speaks through male discourse, yet her own voice is never truly heard.

These analyses reveal epistemological differences between Western and Javanese cultures in constructing the female body. In Western culture, as depicted in *Lady's Companion*, the body is repressed to preserve public morality, whereas in Javanese culture, as shown in *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* (2025), the body is sacralized yet simultaneously exploited for male spiritual purposes. Both operate within the same patriarchal logic that subordinates the female body under male authority whether through moral discipline or mystical legitimation.

Thus, morality in this context does not function as a form of liberation, but as an instrument of power that normalizes hierarchical relations between teacher (woman) and student (man). Mbok Sari's body becomes a representation of knowledge and sacrifice, while simultaneously serving as evidence that patriarchal power can operate through symbolic reverence.

2. Morality and Spirituality as Instruments of Discipline

In *Lady's Companion*, morality functions as a cultural strategy through which gender boundaries are produced, reinforced, and normalized. The ideal woman is consistently portrayed as one who understands her social position, moderates her speech, and suppresses personal desire in favor of social harmony. Femininity is constructed not through overt instruction but through repetition and exemplification—what is shown to be “proper” becomes what is expected to be embodied. In one episode, Elena Bianda tells Sara, “The world sees us through our silence.” This statement is emblematic of the moral logic governing the series: silence, restraint, and emotional self-erasure are elevated as virtues, while expression and desire are framed as potential threats to social order.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this moral framework operates as a form of disciplinary power that produces compliant subjects without the need for physical coercion (Foucault, 1978). Morality in *Lady's Companion* does not function as an external set of prohibitions alone, but as an internalized code that shapes how women perceive themselves and their bodies. The young women under Elena's supervision gradually learn to self-regulate—adjusting posture, gaze, and speech even when they are not directly observed. In this way, the chaperone becomes a moral technology that transforms external surveillance into internal discipline.

Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity further illuminates this process. Gender identity in the series is produced through the repeated enactment of socially sanctioned behaviors: obedience, modesty, emotional control, and self-sacrifice. These acts do not merely express femininity; they constitute it. To be recognized as a “good woman” is to perform morality convincingly and continuously. Importantly, deviation from these norms is not punished solely through explicit sanctions, but through the threat of social discredit and moral shame.

Elena Bianda herself becomes a compelling illustration of how deeply this moral discipline is internalized. Although she occupies a position of authority as a chaperone, her authority is conditional upon her own moral impeccability. When she develops romantic feelings for a married aristocrat, she is forced into silence and renunciation. Her personal desire must be erased to preserve the moral order she enforces upon others. This narrative arc reveals a central paradox of patriarchal morality: women are tasked with upholding moral standards that ultimately constrain and negate their own subjectivity. Morality thus operates as a self-sustaining system, reproduced by women who have been trained to monitor and discipline themselves.

In contrast, *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* presents a markedly different yet ideologically related mechanism of discipline. Here, spirituality replaces public morality as the primary regulatory framework. Sexuality is not framed as sinful or shameful; instead, it is presented as a form of sacred knowledge that must be transmitted responsibly. The *gowok* teaches *nglmu rasa* a philosophy emphasizing balance, harmony, and emotional maturity positioning sexuality as a pathway to spiritual refinement rather than moral transgression.

However, this apparent openness does not translate into female liberation. Rather, spirituality functions as a disguised form of morality that reconfigures, rather than dismantles, patriarchal power. While men are positioned as subjects who undergo transformation and attain enlightenment, women are relegated to the role of facilitators of that transformation. The female body becomes a ritual medium through which male subjectivity is formed. In Foucauldian terms, spirituality here constitutes a distinct modality of disciplinary power one that operates not through repression, but through sacralization and instrumentalization.

The film carefully illustrates how gender surveillance in Javanese culture is embedded within mythological narratives and cultural ethics rather than codified social rules. The *gowok* is revered, yet her reverence is contingent upon her usefulness within a male-centered cosmology. Her body is respected symbolically, but never owned autonomously. This condition reflects what Spivak (1988) identifies as the paradox of the subaltern woman: she may appear central to cultural practice, yet her voice and agency remain circumscribed by dominant discourse.

By framing the female body as a medium of male transcendence, *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* constructs a moral universe in which inequality is rendered natural, even beautiful. The rhetoric of harmony and spiritual balance obscures the asymmetry of power at work. Unlike the explicit restraints placed upon women in *Lady's Companion*, the discipline in *Gowok* is subtle and affectively embedded in reverence, tradition, and cultural legitimacy. Yet both systems ultimately converge in their effect: women are denied full bodily autonomy and positioned as custodians of moral or spiritual order for the benefit of men.

Through this comparative lens, morality and spirituality emerge not as opposing ethical systems, but as culturally specific instruments of discipline. Whether through silence and restraint or through ritual and sacralization, both frameworks regulate female bodies and desires in ways that sustain patriarchal structures. The contrast between repression and instrumentalization reveals the adaptability of gendered power: it does not require uniform methods to achieve consistent outcomes. In both narratives, discipline succeeds not because women are forced to comply, but because compliance is framed as virtue, duty, or destiny.

3. Gender Surveillance and the Internalization of Power

Both Elena Bianda and Nyai Gowok are female figures who internalize patriarchal systems and subsequently become agents of gender surveillance over their own gender. Importantly, neither character is constructed as a villain or antagonist. Instead, they represent women who operate within deeply entrenched power structures that both enable and constrain their agency. Their authority is not inherent but delegated, conditional, and always tethered to patriarchal legitimacy. Through their roles, the texts illustrate how power sustains itself not solely through male dominance, but through the participation of women who have learned to embody and reproduce normative gender values.

In *Lady's Companion*, Elena's role as a chaperone places her at the intersection of care and control. She is entrusted with supervising the behavior, appearance, and emotional conduct of young aristocratic women in order to preserve family honor and social reputation. Elena's authority derives not from institutional power or legal mandate, but from her moral credibility. Her effectiveness as a chaperone depends on her ability to exemplify the very virtues she enforces: modesty, restraint, and self-denial. As a result, surveillance becomes reciprocal, Elena watches others while simultaneously watching herself. This double bind illustrates what Foucault (1978) describes as the internalization of disciplinary power, whereby subjects become both the object and the instrument of surveillance.

Similarly, in *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa*, Nyai Gowok occupies a position of cultural authority as a spiritual and sensual instructor. Her role is to guide young men in understanding the body and achieving *ngemu rasa*, a form of embodied wisdom essential to masculine maturity. While her position appears authoritative, her authority is fundamentally instrumental. She exists within a system that values her knowledge only insofar as it serves male development. Unlike Elena, who surveils women directly, Nyai Gowok surveils the gender order indirectly by ensuring that male sexuality is properly formed through female mediation. In both cases, power flows in different directions, Elena toward women, Nyai Gowok toward men but ultimately converges on the regulation and utilization of the female body.

Crucially, neither text allows women to emerge as fully autonomous subjects. Instead, women function as intermediaries: moral regulators, cultural translators, or custodians of social order. Their bodies and voices are mobilized to stabilize patriarchal norms rather than to challenge them. Even when Elena expresses doubt or emotional conflict, and even when Nyai Gowok

articulates ethical teachings, their speech remains bounded by the ideological framework that authorizes their roles. They may speak, but they do not redefine the terms of discourse.

This condition aligns closely with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern. The subaltern is not simply silenced; rather, she is permitted to speak only in ways that do not disrupt dominant structures of power. Both Elena and Nyai Gowok are audible within their respective narratives, yet their voices are filtered through patriarchal expectations. Elena's moral guidance is valued only when it reinforces female propriety, while Nyai Gowok's wisdom is legitimized only when it serves masculine enlightenment. Neither is allowed to articulate desire, refusal, or alternative subjectivities without narrative consequence.

Furthermore, the internalization of surveillance in both figures reveals how patriarchy sustains itself through affective and ethical labor. Elena's emotional labor her patience, empathy, and self-sacrifice renders moral control palatable and even compassionate. Nyai Gowok's spiritual labor her calm authority and ritual knowledge renders gender hierarchy sacred and culturally respectable. In both cases, surveillance is not experienced as oppression, but as duty, care, or wisdom. This transformation of control into virtue is what makes gender surveillance particularly resilient.

Through a comparative lens, the texts demonstrate that patriarchal power does not require women to be passive victims. On the contrary, it relies on their active participation as moral and cultural intermediaries. Yet this participation does not equate to liberation. Instead, it reinforces a system in which women are entrusted with responsibility but denied sovereignty. Their bodies are monitored, mobilized, and moralized, but never fully owned.

Ultimately, *Lady's Companion* and *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* expose a shared logic of gender surveillance across cultural contexts: power is most effective when it is internalized, normalized, and enacted by those it subordinates. By portraying Elena and Nyai Gowok as complex, empathetic, and morally invested figures, both narratives reveal how deeply patriarchal control is woven into the everyday practices of care, teaching, and moral guidance. The female body thus remains a central site where power is not only imposed, but also reproduced.

4. The Chaperone as a Moral Technology

In *Lady's Companion*, Elena Bianda functions as what Foucault (1978) would term a technology of power a mechanism through which moral discipline is enacted without direct coercion. Her authority does not stem from legal power, but from moral legitimacy. She watches, corrects, advises, and most importantly, normalizes surveillance. Elena's presence transforms the domestic space into a disciplinary arena. The young women internalize her gaze, learning to regulate themselves even in her absence. This reflects Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, whereby femininity is produced through repeated acts of compliance, silence, and restraint. Importantly, the series complicates Elena's role by portraying her emotional conflict. Her personal desires clash with the moral code she enforces, revealing how patriarchy sustains itself by recruiting women as its agents. This internal contradiction exposes morality not as ethical truth, but as social performance.

5. The Gowok and the Sacralization of Exploitation

Unlike the figure of the chaperone, whose authority is grounded in public morality and social surveillance, the gowok in *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* operates within a spiritual and cosmological framework. Sexuality in this narrative is not framed as a moral transgression to be suppressed, but as a sacred knowledge to be transmitted. The act of sexual initiation is ritualized, embedded within Javanese philosophical concepts such as *nglmu* rasa, balance, and inner harmony. However, this sacralization does not produce gender equality or female empowerment. On the contrary, it functions as a cultural mechanism that masks deeply unequal power relations beneath the language of wisdom, tradition, and spiritual refinement.

Ritualization, in this context, transforms sexuality into a moral obligation rather than a personal choice. Nyai Gowok's body becomes a pedagogical instrument a living archive of knowledge through which masculine identity is cultivated. The male initiate is positioned as a

subject undergoing transformation, while the gowok herself is fixed as a means to that end. Her body is not celebrated for its autonomy, but for its utility within a patriarchal cosmology that prioritizes male maturation and authority. Thus, what appears as reverence is, in practice, a form of instrumentalization that renders female embodiment valuable only insofar as it serves male development.

Although Nyai Gowok appears authoritative possessing knowledge, experience, and spiritual insight her authority is conditional and structurally limited. She is respected not as an autonomous subject, but as a functional role within a male-centered system. Her legitimacy depends on her willingness to embody sacrifice, discipline, and emotional restraint. In this sense, her authority is inseparable from her disposability. Once her pedagogical function is fulfilled, she recedes into narrative marginality, while the male subject advances toward social and symbolic adulthood. This asymmetry reveals the exploitative logic underlying the ritual: women facilitate transformation but are not transformed themselves.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) formulation of the subaltern provides a critical lens for understanding this paradox. The gowok may speak, teach, and advise, yet her speech is always mediated by dominant discourse. She articulates wisdom within the parameters of patriarchy and tradition, never beyond them. Her voice does not disrupt the system that authorizes her role; instead, it stabilizes it. The appearance of agency thus conceals a deeper form of epistemic silencing, where alternative female subjectivities remain unthinkable within the narrative frame.

Cinematically, the film reinforces this hierarchy through visual and narrative strategies. The camera consistently privileges the male initiate's emotional and spiritual journey, lingering on his confusion, awakening, and eventual composure. By contrast, Nyai Gowok's interiority is rarely explored. Her sacrifices emotional, bodily, and ethical are normalized rather than problematized. She is framed as calm, composed, and selfless, a visual trope that aestheticizes endurance and renders exploitation culturally acceptable. The absence of narrative rupture or consequence further naturalizes this gendered asymmetry.

Spirituality, therefore, functions as an ideological veil that legitimizes gender inequality. By embedding sexual exploitation within a sacred cosmology, the film transforms power imbalance into cultural destiny. The rhetoric of harmony and balance obscures the fact that equilibrium is achieved at the expense of female autonomy. In Foucauldian terms, this represents a form of productive power one that does not prohibit desire, but organizes it in ways that sustain hierarchical relations (Foucault, 1978).

Importantly, the sacralization of exploitation complicates conventional feminist critiques that focus solely on repression. In *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa*, women are not forbidden from sexuality; rather, they are overburdened with its moral and spiritual responsibility. This burden is presented as honor, yet it functions as discipline. The female body becomes a site where culture, morality, and masculinity intersect, transforming exploitation into obligation and inequality into tradition.

Through this lens, the gowok emerges not as a relic of cultural exoticism, but as a critical figure for understanding how patriarchy adapts to local epistemologies. The film demonstrates that gendered domination does not require overt violence or prohibition. It can also be sustained through reverence, ritual, and the symbolic elevation of women whose sacrifice remains unquestioned.

6. Comparative Synthesis: Two Faces of Patriarchal Control

When read through the method of juxtaposition, *Lady's Companion* and *Gowok: Kamasutra Jawa* reveal two culturally distinct yet structurally convergent strategies of governing the same object: the female body. Rather than presenting a binary opposition between repression and liberation, the comparison demonstrates how patriarchal power adapts itself to local moral, spiritual, and pedagogical frameworks. In both Western and Javanese traditions, the regulation of gender is not incidental but systematic, and it is the female body that becomes the primary site where social order is negotiated and enforced.

In *Lady's Companion*, patriarchal control operates through moral repression and public surveillance. Female virtue is equated with silence, modesty, and emotional restraint, and these

values are internalized through continuous observation. The chaperone functions as a moral intermediary who ensures that young women conform to social expectations without the need for overt coercion. Desire is not merely prohibited; it is rendered unspeakable. The female body is disciplined through absence, absence of movement, absence of voice, absence of visible desire. Morality, in this context, operates as a regulatory technology that produces compliant femininity while presenting itself as protection and respectability.

By contrast, *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* represents a system in which the female body is not silenced but symbolically utilized. Sexuality is acknowledged and ritualized, yet this recognition does not translate into autonomy. Instead, the female body becomes a medium through which male subjectivity is formed. The *gowok*'s sexuality is not her own; it is pedagogical, sacrificial, and instrumental. While Western morality disciplines women through repression, Javanese spirituality disciplines them through obligation. In both cases, women are burdened with moral responsibility either to preserve purity or to facilitate masculine enlightenment.

Despite these cultural differences, the outcomes are strikingly similar. Both systems deny women full bodily sovereignty and relegate them to relational roles defined by service, care, and moral labor. Women are positioned as guardians of morality in the West and custodians of harmony in the Javanese context, yet in neither framework are they recognized as autonomous subjects with the right to desire, refuse, or redefine norms. The responsibility for social order is feminized, while authority and self-actualization remain masculinized.

This convergence underscores a crucial insight: patriarchy is not a fixed or monolithic structure but an adaptive system capable of embedding itself within diverse cultural logics. As this study demonstrates, patriarchal power can manifest through prohibition or permission, silence or ritual, repression or reverence. What unites these strategies is their effect: the normalization of gender hierarchy and the naturalization of women's subordination. Whether framed as moral duty or spiritual calling, control over the female body is presented as inevitable, beneficial, and culturally legitimate.

From a theoretical standpoint, this synthesis reinforces Foucault's (1978) notion of power as productive rather than merely repressive. Power does not simply restrict female bodies; it produces specific forms of femininity deemed appropriate within each cultural context. Simultaneously, Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity illuminates how these norms are sustained through repeated acts of modesty, sacrifice, and obedience that appear voluntary but are socially enforced. Spivak's (1988) intervention further clarifies why these women, though visible and functional within the system, remain epistemically marginalized.

By placing these two cultural texts side by side, this study challenges the assumption that Western repression and non-Western spirituality represent fundamentally different moral regimes. Instead, it reveals how both participate in a shared patriarchal logic that disciplines women in culturally specific yet structurally analogous ways. The female body emerges as a contested terrain where morality, tradition, and power intersect, making gender control appear natural rather than political. This comparative synthesis ultimately strengthens the argument that meaningful gender justice cannot be achieved through cultural celebration or moral reform alone. As long as women's bodies remain sites of moral obligation rather than self-determination, patriarchy will continue to reproduce itself whether through silence or ritual, discipline or devotion.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the figures of the chaperone and the *gowok* as two culturally distinct yet structurally analogous mechanisms of gender regulation in *Lady's Companion* (Netflix, 2025) and *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* (2025). Through a comparative literature approach using the method of juxtaposition, the analysis demonstrates that although these figures emerge from different historical, moral, and epistemological traditions, both function within a shared patriarchal logic that governs the female body through moralization, surveillance, and instrumentalization.

The central finding of this research is that patriarchy operates not as a rigid or uniform system, but as an adaptive structure capable of embedding itself within diverse cultural frameworks.

In *Lady's Companion*, patriarchal control is enacted through moral repression and public surveillance. The chaperone figure, represented by Elena Bianda, enforces norms of propriety, silence, and restraint upon young women, transforming morality into a disciplinary technology. Female virtue is produced through continuous monitoring, both external and internal, until women learn to regulate themselves. Desire is not simply prohibited; it is rendered invisible and unspeakable. The female body, in this context, is disciplined through absence of voice, of agency, and of autonomous desire. Conversely, *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* presents a cultural system in which sexuality is not suppressed but sacralized. The gowok operates within a spiritual framework that frames sexual initiation as sacred knowledge essential to masculine maturity. However, this sacralization does not dismantle gender hierarchy. Instead, it legitimizes exploitation by masking unequal power relations beneath narratives of tradition, harmony, and wisdom. Nyai Gowok's body becomes a pedagogical instrument through which male identity is formed, while her own subjectivity remains secondary and conditional. The film reveals that permission does not necessarily equate to freedom; sexuality can be ritualized and yet remain profoundly unequal.

Despite their contrasting moral logics repression in the Western context and symbolic utilization in the Javanese context, both systems converge in their effects. Women are denied bodily autonomy, burdened with moral responsibility, and positioned as intermediaries rather than sovereign subjects. In both narratives, women are entrusted with maintaining social order: as guardians of virtue in *Lady's Companion* and as custodians of masculine harmony in *Gowok: Kamasutra Java*. Yet this responsibility does not translate into authority over their own bodies. Instead, it reinforces a gender hierarchy in which women are accountable without being empowered.

The analysis further demonstrates that gender surveillance is most effective when it is internalized and enacted by women themselves. Both Elena and Nyai Gowok exemplify how patriarchal power relies on female participation for its continuity. Neither character is portrayed as an antagonist; rather, they are empathetic figures whose moral labor renders control palatable and culturally legitimate. This finding aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which operates not primarily through coercion but through normalization and self-regulation. Power, in these texts, is productive: it produces compliant femininity and disciplined masculinity while appearing benevolent and necessary.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further clarifies how these systems are sustained through repetition. Acts of obedience, sacrifice, silence, and moral guidance are repeated until they appear natural rather than imposed. Gender identity, in both cultural contexts, is not an innate essence but a continuous performance regulated by social expectations. The chaperone and the gowok thus function as regulators of gender performance, ensuring that deviations are corrected before they threaten the social order.

At the same time, this study acknowledges moments of ambiguity and micro-resistance within both texts. Elena's emotional conflict and Nyai Gowok's ethical insistence on balance and responsibility reveal cracks within the patriarchal framework. These moments, however, remain individualized and non-structural. They do not dismantle the system but expose its fragility and contradictions. In this regard, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern is particularly illuminating. Both figures are allowed to speak, teach, and guide, yet their voices are mediated by dominant discourse. Their speech stabilizes rather than disrupts patriarchy, confirming that visibility does not necessarily entail liberation.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in challenging the assumption that Western repression and non-Western spirituality represent fundamentally different or oppositional gender regimes. By placing these texts in dialogue, the research demonstrates that patriarchy can function through silence or ritual, prohibition or reverence, morality or spirituality. What unites these strategies is their effect: the normalization of women's subordination and the naturalization of gender hierarchy. This comparative synthesis avoids cultural hierarchization and instead foregrounds structural similarity across difference.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, this study contributes to gender studies by reinforcing the argument that control over the female body is a central mechanism through which power operates across cultures. It also extends

comparative literature by demonstrating the value of juxtaposition as a method for uncovering shared logics beneath culturally specific narratives. Methodologically, the research underscores the importance of analyzing contemporary media texts such as streaming series and film as sites where traditional gender ideologies are reproduced, renegotiated, and aestheticized.

In conclusion, *Lady's Companion* and *Gowok: Kamasutra Java* reveal that patriarchy does not depend solely on repression or violence to sustain itself. It can also operate through care, morality, spirituality, and education domains often perceived as benign or even empowering. As long as women's bodies remain sites of moral obligation rather than self-determination, gender inequality will continue to be reproduced, regardless of cultural context. This study thus calls for a critical re-examination of moral and spiritual narratives that appear to honor women while simultaneously denying them bodily sovereignty.

Future research may extend this comparative framework to other cultural texts or explore how contemporary feminist interventions challenge or reconfigure these enduring structures of control. By exposing the subtle and adaptive nature of patriarchal power, this study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of gender, culture, and the politics of the body.

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