

Article

Divine Rizia R V

## Love, Labour, and Market Value: A Cultural Reading of *Materialists* (2025)



### Introduction

There's a particular kind of disappointment that follows a film you expect to move you, but doesn't. *Materialists* (2025), directed by Celine Song, is one such film. Set in New York and centred around a woman choosing between love and financial security, it sets out to explore the entanglements of romance, class, and desire in the modern world. On paper, it promises a layered conversation on how relationships function under capitalism. But in practice, it only skims the surface.

The film tries to show how contemporary love often feels like a

transaction less about finding emotional connection and more about checking boxes. Lucy (played by Dakota Johnson) is caught between two men: one, a hedge fund manager who offers stability and status; the other, a struggling actor who offers sincerity. It's a familiar setup, but what makes *Materialists* relevant is not the plot itself, but the world it quietly reveals a world where intimacy is filtered through financial logic, and where the language of love is increasingly shaped by the language of market value.

This is not a new phenomenon. From dating apps that categorise potential partners

by height, salary, and education, to the structured logic of arranged marriages in many cultures, relationships today are often framed as negotiations. Love, in this formulation, becomes something to be managed, optimised, and weighed against material outcomes. *Materialists* gestures at these truths, but hesitates to fully explore them. The result is a film that is visually polished, emotionally guarded, and ultimately unsure of what it wants to say about the nature of modern connection.

Yet, the questions it raises linger: What does it mean to love in a time when worth is so closely tied to wealth? How do we separate desire from expectation, or affection from ambition? This piece is an attempt to sit with those questions and to read *Materialists* not just as a film, but as a cultural text that reflects the anxieties of a generation navigating love, class, and the search for authenticity in a commodified world.

### **The Market Logic of Modern Relationships**

In *Materialists*, romance unfolds less as an act of emotional discovery and more as a process of elimination. The characters, especially Lucy, seem caught in an ongoing evaluation of risks, returns, and trade-offs. Her struggle to choose between two men isn't just about love; it's about lifestyle, status, and social security. This framework mirrors how many people now approach relationships: not simply as emotional journeys, but as calculated decisions shaped by material and social expectations.

The parallels between dating and economic behaviour are not accidental. Dating apps, matchmaking services, even

casual conversations about “relationship goals” are often infused with a logic of optimisation. Preferences become filters. People become profiles. The idea of a “perfect match” is no longer about serendipity. It's about strategy. Algorithms predict compatibility; social media curates desirability. It's not uncommon to hear someone speak of a partner in terms of “value” what they bring to the table, how much emotional bandwidth they consume, whether they “fit” into one's long-term plan. Relationships begin to resemble mergers, complete with negotiations, red flags, and exit strategies.

In this context, *Materialists* feels oddly familiar. The tension between love and stability that drives its narrative is a daily reality for many. The cultural script that asks people, especially women to choose between financial security and emotional connection isn't new. In India, it is perhaps most visible in the institution of arranged marriage, where personal preferences are often subordinate to caste, community, salary, family background, and appearance. But even outside that structure, the pressure to find a partner who “checks all the boxes” persists. Whether through family, dating platforms, or peer pressure, the search for love is often entangled with deeply rooted social hierarchies and market logic.

What the film leaves largely unexplored, however, is the emotional toll of this system. The more we try to optimise for the “right” partner, the harder it becomes to recognise and sit with vulnerability. When relationships are treated like investments, there is little room for uncertainty, growth, or the messy, imperfect nature of love. One of

the more telling moments in the film comes when Lucy asks John (played by Chris Evans) why he loves her, and he simply says, “I just do.” It could have been a deeply human moment. Instead, it feels hollow. Less like a confession and more like a line delivered in a script where the emotional arc was never fully written.

Still, the scene lingers. It points to the difficulty of expressing love in a world that demands clarity, proof, and reason. In such a world, feelings are often not enough. They need to be explained, justified, or made legible within existing systems of value. Love becomes something that needs a rationale. Something that can be defended under scrutiny.

### **Emotional Authenticity and the Crisis of Connection**

The film moves through its scenes with a glossy elegance, but rarely allows its characters to unravel. The dialogue is measured, the decisions are clean, and even the moments of supposed vulnerability are restrained. What should feel like tension often comes across as detachment. Lucy and John, the central couple, seem to share a narrative arc but not a pulse. This reflects a broader cultural discomfort with emotional messiness. In an age that prizes control, clarity, and self-presentation, intimacy often takes a backseat to image. Social media trains us to curate our lives, not to express them. Emotional openness is encouraged, but only if it's articulate, digestible, and packaged neatly. There is little room for confusion, contradiction, or the kind of raw, inarticulate vulnerability that real connection often requires.

This is where *Materialists* falter. It wants to explore the conflicts between love and money, passion and predictability, but it does so without letting its characters fall apart. The film seems reluctant to show what happens when people say the wrong thing, make mistakes, or hurt each other in ways they don't fully understand. These are the moments that make love believable—not because they are romantic, but because they are recognisably human.

By avoiding emotional depth, the film mirrors the very condition it seeks to critique. If love today feels scripted or transactional, it's not just because of dating platforms or social pressures. It's also because vulnerability has become risky personally, socially, even economically. To feel too much, to say too much, or to depend too deeply on another person is often read as weakness or instability. The ideal is to be emotionally available but not overwhelmed, committed but not dependent, expressive but always in control. It's a balancing act that leaves little space for genuine intimacy.

### **Materialism, Desire, and the Politics of 'The Ideal Partner'**

The most striking insight *Materialists* offer is how thoroughly desire today is shaped by market logic. The film's title itself gestures toward this, not only pointing to material wealth as a central theme, but also to how human relationships are increasingly defined by what can be seen, counted, and exchanged. The ideal partner is no longer simply someone with whom one shares emotional resonance, but someone who performs desirability in socially approved ways through physical

appearance, financial success, social background, and emotional fluency.

This is not a new idea, but it has become more sharply visible in an era of algorithmic matchmaking and lifestyle branding. In the film, Lucy's dilemma of choosing between a man who offers comfort and one who offers sincerity is not just romantic, it's socio-economic. It mirrors the daily choices many people face when negotiating between what they want emotionally and what they are taught to value materially. The tension between the heart and the checklist is not just personal—it is structural.

Karl Marx argued that in a capitalist society, social relations are increasingly mediated by things, that is, human interactions are transformed into relationships between commodities. The same logic can be applied to modern relationships, where individuals are often appraised based on their “exchange value” in the dating market. Traits like financial stability, educational pedigree, physical attractiveness, and family background become symbolic capital. Compatibility is assessed not just emotionally, but economically and socially. Love becomes a site where cultural capital is performed and exchanged.

In arranged marriage systems particularly visible in a country like India, this commodification is formalised. Prospective partners are often presented with biodata sheets, photographs, salary details, and horoscopes, each serving as an index of eligibility. Even when individuals claim to be choosing “freely” outside such systems, the underlying criteria often remain the same. The performance of independence is layered

over inherited structures of class, caste, and respectability. *Materialists* does not explicitly name this, but its narrative runs parallel to it.

There's also an emotional consequence to this system. When desire is structured by the logic of acquisition, intimacy becomes cautious. People begin to second-guess not just who they love, but why. Is this love or convenience? Is this comfort or compromise? In many ways, *Materialists* captures this indecision, the slow erosion of spontaneity, the subtle pressure to make the “smart” choice, the way romance becomes a reflection of social aspiration rather than emotional truth.

By casting love as a decision between options, rather than a process of discovery, the film reveals the narrowing of emotional possibilities in a market-oriented world. It shows, without quite confronting, how deeply embedded materialism is—not just in how we live, but in how we feel, desire, and connect.



### **What Makes Us Feel: Between Reflection and Missed Potential**

*Materialists* may not land with the emotional weight it aspires to, but it still serves as a mirror. It captures the awkward intersection of desire, class, and insecurity with a quiet restraint. One of the film's strengths lies in its premise: the attempt to explore how love is

shaped, and often compromised, by economic reality. It raises important questions about emotional labour, social mobility, and the quiet pressure to “settle” for someone who offers stability over passion.

There are moments that linger. A few lines such as “dating is trial and error, but love is easy” feel pulled from the honest confusion of real relationships. The film does not pretend that choosing love is simple. It acknowledges that, for many, love comes wrapped in class tension, ambition, past wounds, and future fears. It also portrays, albeit gently, the way even the most personal decisions are embedded in structural anxieties.

But *Materialists* also stumbled where it most needed to be bold. The lack of chemistry between Lucy and John weakens the emotional core. When love is supposed to be the answer, we never fully believe the question. The performances feel muted, the dialogue often glides over difficult emotional terrain rather than sitting with it. The film avoids mess, and in doing so, sacrifices sincerity. It gestures at the complexity of modern relationships, but shies away from truly inhabiting it.

### References:

*Materialists* (2025): Directed by Celine Song, starring Dakota Johnson and Chris Evans, Black Bear Pictures.

Marx, Karl (1867/1990): *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books.

**Divine Rizia R V teaches Visual Communication at Loyola College, Chennai, exploring intersections of media, culture, and contemporary lived experience.**

Perhaps that is also the point. Emotional clarity has become difficult to access. In an era that trains people to curate themselves, love too has become a performance—measured, managed, and polished. What *Materialists* inadvertently reflects is the very thing it fails to express fully: the emotional flatness that can accompany relationships shaped by the metrics of compatibility and capital.

Still, there’s value in what the film attempts. It does not romanticise the past, nor offer easy resolutions. Instead, it leaves viewers unsettled forced to ask what makes a relationship feel real, and what makes love worth choosing when everything else seems to advise caution. In that sense, *Materialists* is more honest than it appears. It doesn’t offer a grand statement about love under capitalism, but it does hold up a mirror to how entangled the two have become.

A good film, some say, is one that makes you feel. *Materialists* doesn’t quite make you feel, but it does make you think and perhaps that’s enough to start the conversation.