Subversive Storytelling and Feminist Agency in the Films of Aruna Raje: Reclaiming Women's Narratives Beyond the Male Gaze

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Abstract

In the discourse of Indian feminist films, Aruna Raje's works despite their radical reworkings of gendered themes stays at the periphery. This essay examines how Raje's cinematic language used female subjectivity, autonomy, and resiliency to challenge patriarchal frameworks. In her filmography, she explores the limitations imposed by society's expectations while presenting women's agency and liberty. Raje's cinematic vocabulary goes beyond overtly didactic feminism to create multi-layered female protagonists who complicate the dichotomies of oppression and freedom by negotiating power via everyday resistance. In Indian film, Raje's work serves as a kind of feminist mapping wherein her experience as an editor before becoming a filmmaker further shapes her approach, providing a distinct viewpoint on storytelling and cinema form, enabling a non-linear, emotionally complex expression of feminist consciousness. Through the application of feminist film theories, the article contends that Raje challenges traditional visual economics by emphasising and reorienting the intricacies of female desire, subjectivity, labour, and decision-making in relation to prevailing cinematic codes. The article contends that Raje's films not only serve as counter-cinema but also foreshadow current feminist discussions on sexuality, coalitional feminism, and the reconceptualisation of family structures.

Keywords : Aruna Raje; Feminist cartography; Feminist film theory; Feminist agency; Gendered authorship

Introduction

In her autobiographical book, *Freedom: My Story* (2022), Aruna Raje Patil writes, "Art cannot exist in a formula or stereotype—it is about expression and needs to grow, develop, and go beyond old boundaries and paradigms." (Patil 14). Living on this ideal, Aruna Raje captures the essence of her creative and feminist spirit and announces her opposition to aesthetic conformity and gendered restrictions, claiming artistic liberty and feminist authorship. Raje, a

National Award-winning director, editor, and storyteller, has continually challenged the limiting conventions that govern Indian cinema, whether in terms of aesthetics, subject matter, or gender-based authorship. Despite her contributions to a distinct cinematic lexicon that emphasises female subjectivity, sexuality, desire, affect, and ethical complexity, she remains on the fringes of Indian film debate, partly because her work defies easy categorization—straddling art and commercial filmmaking, fiction, and documentary, politics, and emotion—and female film histories in India have also frequently favoured more visible or institutionally supported artists. This article tries to highlight Aruna Raje not just as a pioneering female director but also as a navigator of feminist cinematic space—one who tracks new ways of seeing, feeling, and articulating women's experiences in India and on Indian screens.

Drawing on Raje's memoir and three films—*Rihaee* (1988), *Bhairavi* (1996), and *Tum: A Dangerous Obsession* (2004)—this article investigates how her cinema engages in what we might call feminist mapping: the practice of disrupting dominant narrative, spatial, and emotional orders and replacing them with non-linear, affectively charged, and ethically orientated modes of storytelling. Aruna Raje's films provide feminist cartographies of emotion, space, gender, and resistance, pushing beyond victimhood to portray women as ethically complex and emotionally dynamic. Her films reject patriarchal stereotypes not by simply inverting gender roles, but by reimagining the core structure of cinematic temporality, voice, and space. Raje's work, thus, connects with Sara Ahmed's concept of "orientation," defined as the practice of inhabiting disorienting environments in order to establish new lines of connection and resistance (Ahmed 68). Although it does not directly relate to film or film theory, Sara Ahmed's feminist orientation concept—which rejects normative alignments and emphasises the subjective and political stakes of how bodies use space—offers effective tools for reconsidering cinematic spatiality, spectatorship, and gendered presence. Additionally, Raje's practice of cinematic narrative also parallels Rosi Braidotti's concept of the 'nomadic subject,' who is never rooted in identity or territory but is continually on the move, seeking new ways of becoming. Braidotti's nomadic subject is highly influenced by the poststructuralist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in particular their theories of deterritorialisation and affective assemblage. Braidotti's feminist rethinking of nomadism as an embodied, ethical, and relational subjectivity creates new ways to perceive visual narratives like those of Aruna Raje, even though her work is not specifically within the context

of film theory. Furthermore, whereas Deleuze and Guattari proposed cognitive mapping as a conceptual strategy for navigating complex social landscapes, Raje's films, like Ahmed's disoriented bodies, disrupt the very foundation of mapping, favouring a feminist cartography that listens, wanders, and reconfigures meaning through affect, fragmentation, and ethical looking.

Raje's work is feminist in both content and methodology. As India's first trained woman technician in the film industry, her elliptical editing, focusses on women's emotional interiority, and denial of closure or moral certainty challenging Bollywood's linear, moralistic storytelling standards. While Aruna Raje did not deliberately draw on the theoretical frameworks of Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, or bell hooks, her cinematic technique is startlingly similar to their ideas. Raje's films, which stem from her lived experiences, ethical sensibilities, and intuitive feminist politics, employ a visual grammar that, in retrospect, is consistent with Mulvey's critique of the male gaze, Kaplan's theory of the female gaze, and hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze.

This article reframes Aruna Raje as a feminist cartographer of Indian cinema, rejecting the myth of the invisible woman artist and instead emphasising visibility as ethical responsibility. To study Raje is to trace a cinema of becoming—one that, like the director, rejects the formula and instead scripts its own liberation.

Reclaiming the Frame: Aruna Raje and the Rejection of the Male Gaze

In an era, when Bollywood's dominant visual culture was shaped by the objectification and sexualisation of women, with female characters often presented as spectacles of desire, Aruna Raje's films rose as a conscious and defiant counterpoint. Raje herself acknowledges that most mainstream filmmaking was made for "catering to the lowest common denominator, given that in India we have a very wide spectrum of people: uneducated, rural, poor, city folk, educated, rich, and belonging to diverse regions" (Patil, xii). As a female filmmaker, she was frequently viewed as "going against the trend" of the male-dominated industry. That trend was both institutional and aesthetic: a cinematic norm founded on voyeurism, narrative enclosure, and the patriarchal logic of the masculine gaze.

Raje's rejection of this visual economy is most visible in *Rihaee* (1988), which she also calls her "first big expression of her freedom" (Patil 1). The film also marked her emergence as a solo auteur following her divorce from

filmmaker Vikas Desai. Her creative and personal separation allowed her to completely claim authorship, both behind the camera and in the narratives she chose to tell. In the film, rural women are portrayed as agents of desire and ethical complexity rather than passive victims. The film's critical and economic success challenged the distinction between mainstream and parallel cinema—so much so that the term 'middle cinema' began to be used to characterise works like *Rihaee*, which combined the accessibility of commercial films with the thematic ambition of art-house storytelling. In doing so, Raje created a feminist arena that was neither marginal nor elite but rather widely relevant.

Rihaee begins with the departure of male villagers for city work, leaving behind a realm dominated by female labour, longing, and agency. Rather than portraying female desire as a sin that must be punished, Raje complicates the morality of sexual liberty, particularly through the figure of Taku (played by the actress Hema Malini), whose emotional and physical choices are dealt with nuance rather than judgement. The camera lingers on gestures, silences, and affective micro-moments, focusing on interior turmoil rather than plot conclusion. The film never uses spectacle; instead, it portrays passion, betrayal, and responsibility as experienced, conflicted feelings. *Rihaee* defies the redemptive arc prevalent in Indian cinema's presentation of 'fallen' women by refusing to conclude with a didactic moral payoff.

Zoya Akhtar, is a prominent contemporary film director whose feminist questioning becomes apparent in ensemble narratives like *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) and *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), which emphasize upper-middle-class mobility and individual self-fashioning. Even though these movies question patriarchal roles, cosmopolitan privilege frequently permeates the gaze. Although Akhtar's women fight against family expectations, they do so within frameworks of choice, wealth, travel, and therapy. In contrast, Aruna Raje's feminist project originates in contexts where women confront structural violence, abandonment, caste-coded labour, and socio-economic precarity. Raje maps feminist desire and agency from below, not through aspirational modernity but through emotional labour, survival, and moral ambiguity.

Raje's interventions deconstruct the pleasure systems that, as Laura Mulvey theorised, present women as passive objects for male consumptions (Mulvey 806). Her lens does not commodify or idealise; it observes, listens, and dwells. Additionally, a fascinating viewpoint through which *Rihaee* can be comprehendedis provided by bell hooks' theory of the oppositional gaze,

which was created to counteract the erasure and distortion of Black women in mainstream cinema. According to hooks, the oppositional gaze is about reclaiming the act of seeing as a place of resistance and alternative knowledge-making, not just about visibility. Though it emerges from a different racial and geopolitical context, this oppositional gaze provides a productive transposition when applied to Raje's *Rihaee*, a film that deconstructs patriarchal and caste-dominant cinematic norms by putting rural women, who are frequently seen as peripheral or silent in mainstream Hindi cinema, at the centre of narrative and visual power. Raje challenges patriarchal and urban-centric presumptions in *Rihaee* by creating a rural feminist visuality. She refuses to belittle rural women as martyrs or victims, instead portraying their extramarital affairs as nuanced reactions to rejection. Whether facing the men or the camera, the women's unwavering, steady gazes convey an active presence that begs for attention. Women in *Rihaee* do more than just inhabit space; they claim it via desire, speech, silence and, most importantly, their gaze. Raje's camera aligns with these women, allowing them to glance back, stare unflinchingly, and return the gaze in ways that both confront the spectator and the diegesis' underlying patriarchal codes. This active return of the gaze is consistent with hooks' formulation, in which seeing becomes a method of resistance, refusal, and redefinition. Like hooks' oppositional gaze, Raje's camera places more emphasis on ambiguity, gesture, and silence than on spectacle when it comes to resistance. These women are actors of moral complexity who challenge shame and control narrative space rather than being passive subjects. The politics of gazing is transformed into a politics of reinventing gender, desire, and dignity in *Rihaee*'s radical feminist intervention in Indian cinema.

The Female Gaze and Emotional Subjectivity

Aruna Raje's films facilitate the exploration of E. Ann Kaplan's theory of the female gaze, particularly its emotive, fragmented, and non-dominant aspects. In her groundbreaking book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1983), Kaplan identifies the female gaze as a complex way of looking that defies voyeurism, erotic objectification, and narrative mastery, rather than merely being an inversion of the male gaze.The female gaze creates a visual and narrative space for emotional resonance, ethical complexity, and layered subjectivity to develop, defying objectification or domination.

Raje embodies this female gaze in *Bhairavi* (1996) by addressing trauma and grief. Ragini, the protagonist, a well-known classical singer, is troubled by

the sexual abuse she experienced as a young child. Intimate close-ups and pauses are used by Raje to frame Ragini's inner complexity, giving gestures, silences, and musical rehearsals emotional weight. The protagonist sings a *raag*[1] in one particularly powerful scene, not as a performance but as a way to grieve—music turns into a space for emotional expression, remembering, and grief where memory turns into resistance. Because of its nonlinear temporality, the film rejects the logic of resolution that characterises male-centric cinema and instead captivates the audience with what could be referred to as a 'listening gaze'—a mode of spectatorship that listens rather than interrupts or diagnoses and is sensitive to affect, stillness, and minute changes in emotional texture.

Another poignantly symbolic and controversial scene in the movie is when the protagonist submerges her *mangalsutra*[2] in the river upon being deceived by the husband, purposefully mirroring the Hindu custom of submerging a loved one's ashes after their demise. Through a subtly radical ritual of self-authorship, rather than a divorce or conflict, this act signifies the emotional and metaphorical end of her marriage. As a transgressive perversion of Hindu marriage tradition, this act sparked public outrage when the movie was released. Yet it is precisely in this disruption that Raje orchestrates a radical feminist intervention. Raje creates a feminist orientation by repurposing a highly patriarchal signifier of marital status into authorship. This scene also relates to Sara Ahmed's concept of feminist orientation, which reroutes affect and belonging. Since the protagonist literally shifts from normative relationality to a different emotional landscape, she no longer identifies with the institution of marriage, which views grieving as an act of agency. The *mangalsutra* is quietly rearranged in terms of meanings and symbols, defying both religious dogma and film convention, rather than being destroyed in rage.

Also, following Kaplan's view of a unique feminine visual approach that avoids clear endings, resists a straightforward narrative, and highlights emotional experiences, this emphasis on feelings instead of plot development makes sense. *Bhairavi*, thus, transforms into a cinematic practice of listening, attunement, and relational seeing rather than merely a story about trauma and artistry.

In contrast with contemporary actor-director, Konkona Sen Sharma who also, particularly in *A Death in the Gunj* (2016), crafts an interior, psychological feminism that dissects masculinity and vulnerability, and presents

a gaze that is inward, attentive to psychic fragility and micro-aggressions in domestic spaces; Raje, works through exterior cartographies—community structures, public shame, sexual economies, religious symbolism—mapping how women negotiate their bodies and futures against the pressures of society. While both directors privilege emotional subjectivity, Raje's approach is more ethnographic and ethically interventionist, disrupting visual conventions rather than simply revealing interior fractures.

Raje's camera enables the viewer to observe and empathise with the woman on screen rather than to control/objectify, or decipher her. Through her rejection of spectacle and acceptance of vulnerability, Raje in *Bhairavi* presents a feminine visual ethic in which suffering is not met with sympathy and subjectivity is valued as a multi-layered, emotive experience rather than being reduced to a narrative function. Raje reclaims ritual as feminist performance with this act, mapping a cinematic space where women can grieve, break up, and live according to their own terms.

Trauma, Ambiguity, and Feminist Ethics

Aruna Raje's cinema frequently defies closure, preferring to concentrate on the emotional and moral ambiguities that define women's lived experiences. Her films do not provide simple solutions; instead, they depict trauma and recovery as interconnected processes characterised by silence, fragmentation, and moral complexity. This feminist ethic, based on ambiguity rather than moralising, is perhaps most evident in *Tum: A Dangerous Obsession*, a film that refuses to employ trauma as narrative spectacle.

While *Rihaee* reclaims rural women's sexual agency without moralising and *Bhairavi* turns grief into a form of political and emotional reorientation, *Tum* deepens Raje's feminist project by focusing on a woman who survives sexual assault and navigates the aftermath in silence and solitude. This film takes the discussion into the urban, middle-class realm, addressing trauma, remorse, and the ambiguities of consent and violence. The protagonist, a middle-aged widow and professional, is sexually assaulted by a younger man whom she later kills in an act of self-defence—or perhaps retribution. The film refrains from depicting the assault in graphic detail; instead, it focuses on the psychological weight of the event, conveyed through non-verbal cues, silences, and a slow-burning sense of dislocation.

Raje avoids the tropes that usually accompany rape-revenge stories in

Indian cinema—no judicial drama, no cathartic confrontation, and no moral didacticism. Instead, *Tum* unfolds with reluctance and fragmentation. Trauma is depicted as an ongoing state of emotional and ethical uncertainty rather than a single point of rupture. The protagonist in the film doesn't justify her acts or seek sympathy. Her silences become a discourse in and of themselves—what feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero refers to as a "narration without a voice" (Cavarero 109). This reluctance to define her as a victim or an avenger imposes an ethical obligation on the spectator: to witness without simplifying.

This approach is consistent with Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminist ethics, which rejects permanent identities and embraces the fluid, processual character of subjectivity. *Tum*'s protagonist is not a stable feminist icon but rather a moving, wounded subject confronting violence in the gaps between social and legal frameworks. In this way, *Tum* extends Raje's cinematic feminism into new terrain: the politics of ambiguity.

In *Tum*'s last act, the protagonist resumes her usual life, refusing atonement, and retribution. The film concludes not with resolution but with ethical suspension. Raje makes no moral pronouncements, instead leaving the viewer with the uncomfortable feeling of ambiguity.This inability to 'fix' trauma reflects a post-Mulveyan visuality and broader feminist ethic that rejects narrative mastery in favour of affective depth, nonlinear temporality, moral dichotomies, and unanswered questions.

Tum, despite its emotional depth and ethical intelligence, fits within a problematic location in Raje's oeuvre. Raje candidly discusses her disappointment with the outcome of the film in her biography, *Freedom: My Story*. Due to budgetary pressures from producers, she was compelled to include a sensuous dance sequence, which shattered the film's normally subdued and meditative mood. She later referred to *Tum* as "the most Bollywood-ish film of my career," implying a conflict between her artistic vision and the industry's needs for formulaic spectacle (Patil 182). This compromise highlights the difficult terrain that women filmmakers frequently navigate, especially when working under mainstream production institutions that rely on catering to the male gaze, even in films dealing with gendered trauma.

Nomadic Gaze: Raje Through Braidotti

Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity provides a useful lens for interpreting Aruna Raje's films as a constantly shifting feminist cartography

rather than a collection of fixed ideological views. As she puts it, "the image of 'nomadic subjects' is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour" (Braidotti 5).Simply put, for Braidotti, the nomadic subject is a figuration of the kind of subject who is in transit, endlessly assembling and disassembling identities, postconventional subjectivity, grounded in change and transgression without being ungrounded or chaotic. She further elaborates on the use of figuration and writes,

> The term figuration refers to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallocentric vision of the subject. A figuration is a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity. […] alternative accounts to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought. (Braidotti 1)

Nomadism prioritises becoming over being, connection over containment, and relational ethics over mastery. This idea is especially pertinent to gender in Raje's work, as identity is never static but always in flux. Her protagonists are not constituted by typical victim/agent or tradition/modernity dichotomies; rather, they represent gendered becoming, negotiating loss, desire, and pain without narrative resolution. In this approach, Raje's visual language is consistent with a nomadic feminist ethics that values fragmentation, emotional ambiguity, and the rejection of fixed roles—reimagining gender as a journey rather than a place. Further, this nomadism illustrates how Raje's camera moves between genres, moods, and social terrains, defying the stabilising binaries—male/female, centre/margin, oppressor/oppressed—that underpin most of mainstream Indian cinema.In Raje's films, the subject does not resolve but wanders, detours, fractures, and reinvents, documenting what Braidotti calls "an intensive, multiple, and discontinuous process of becoming" (Braidotti 110).

Raje had been tracking nomadic effects from her earliest collaboration with the Aruna-Vikas[3] alliance. *Shaque* (1976) begins as a home thriller but quickly defies genre expectations: a middle-class housewife begins to question her husband's innocence in a murder case. Her growing suspicion oscillates between dread, solidarity, and self-assertion, leaving viewers without the comfort of a clear moral decision. The picture oscillates between psychological thriller and family drama, but its essential tension rests in the wife's fluctuating

subjectivity—a gradual enlightenment that neither culminates in triumph nor absolute disillusionment.

Gehrayee (1980), wrapped in the trappings of supernatural horror, uses possession to reveal haunting repercussions of suppressed sexual abuse, caste violence, incestuous guilt, and familial denial; the viewers are forced to wander between rational and irrational explanations, echoing Braidotti's insistence that "nomadism engenders epistemological shifts that cannot be stabilised" (*Nomadic Subjects* 12). The film's affective logic shifts between genres, emotions, and social commentary, never giving the viewer the comfort of moral or narrative consistency.

In *Situm* (1982), a lady whose fiancé was accidentally killed by a footballer chooses to push for his psychological rehabilitation above vengeance and embraces restorative care for the man who unintentionally caused the death—a narrative diversion that abandons patriarchal codes of honour for a more fluid, dialogue-based ethics. Here, too, Raje's narrative perspective disrupts the logic of victimhood and punitive justice, favouring an emotionally fragmented, ethically mobile depiction of healing. Often in order to establish feminist views, film directors such as Nandita Das in *Firaaq* (2008) use a moralizing, witness-based framework—asking viewers to ethically confront communal violence through structured, interwoven narratives. Instead of positioning the viewer as a moral overseer, Raje's films enact a nomadic ethics, where the gaze wanders through trauma, desire, and contradiction without demanding resolution or righteous indignation. Rather than telling the viewer to 'see correctly,' Raje creates spaces where meaning is uncertain, shared, and emotionally negotiated.

Raje's award-winning documentary films advance and broaden this nomadic feminist cartography logic. *Mallika Sarabhai* (2000) follows the life of Mallika Sarabhai, a prominent Indian classical dancer-activist, through layered performance and political participation, not as a biography, but as a relational, growing feminist identity. *A New Paradigm* (2002) delves into the lived experiences of people on the autism spectrum, focusing on educational empowerment, communication issues, and the importance of empathy in promoting cognitive diversity. It provides a sympathetic, observational description that challenges clinical detachment and emphasises real subjectivity without didactic framing. *Behind the Glass Wall* (2014) expands on this method by documenting the daily lives of mentally challenged people, providing

sympathetic, respectful glimpses into the lives of the mentally challenged and autistic individuals through leisurely pacing and a listening gaze that prioritises gesture, environment, and relational dynamics. These documentaries avoid pathologising their protagonists, instead allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the different temporalities, perceptual rhythms, and emotional vocabularies of neurodivergence. They closely correlate with Braidotti's concept of the posthuman nomad, who inhabits non-normative modes of being with compassion.

Aruna Raje's fictions, documentaries, and writing constitute a nomadic feminist mapping that traces not permanent positions but ethical intensities, emotive landscapes, and visual solidarities. Her gaze is neither male nor female, neither opposing nor affirming—it is nomadic, moving alongside and through the lives it aims to depict.

Conclusion: Feminist Mapping as Ethical Looking

Aruna Raje's cinema delivers more than just a critique of patriarchy; it is a feminist mapping that emphasises how we look, how we feel, and what we fail to see. Her films do neither instruct nor resolve; they reject clear distinctions between genres, emotions, and meanings. Instead of closure, she creates places for ambiguity and ambivalence, in which the viewer is not a detached observer but an ethically implicated participant. She creates not a gaze that dominates its subject, but rather one that wanders alongside it, frequently in silence, fragmentation, or emotional drift.

What emerges is a sort of ethical gazing in which the act of seeing is not passive or omniscient but rather partial, placed, and highly responsive. Her films demand that we observe without control and track emotional and social terrains without reducing them to meaning. In this regard, Raje's cinematic strategy is consistent with cartography ethics: an encouragement to map—rather than conquer—unresolved experiences. This cartography of ethics is an invitation to navigate over emotional terrains, stay in silences and hesitations, and remain responsive to what is unresolved. This is notably visible in her fiction films, as desire, grief, pain, and resistance play out as distributed, embodied intensities rather than narrative arcs.Her documentaries are even more radical. Rather than speaking for the mentally handicapped or autistic people she depicts, Raje creates an aesthetic of ethical proximity by moving

with their rhythms, accommodating cognitive and perceptual differences, and inviting viewers into a place of encounter without appropriation.

This mapping isn't just thematic or visual. It is deeply ethical and temporal. Raje invites audiences to undergo transformations through film encounters, not just to consume them, but to explore, wander, and experience discomfort. Her characters are not emblems of empowerment or oppression but emotionally textured, ethically complicated figures whose paradoxes serve as invitations to redefine subjectivity itself. She breaks down the dichotomy of male/female gaze not by reversing but by constructing a gaze that listens, drifts, and observes without possession.

Aruna Raje's feminist cinema, thus, provides a practice rather than an answer: that of ethical gazing, mapping through emotion, and remaining accountable to complexity. In an era of commodified and flattened feminist tales, her art urges us back to a more intimate, incomplete, and immensely alive way of seeing.

Notes

1 A *raag* (also spelled *raga*) is a melodic framework in Indian classical music designed to evoke a specific mood, emotions, and occasionally specific times of the day or seasons.

2 The *mangalsutra* is a sacred necklace traditionally tied by the groom around the bride's neck during Hindu wedding ceremonies, symbolising marital commitment and the wife's social identity as a married woman. Its visibility and ritual sanctity are often tied to patriarchal notions of female virtue, fidelity, and duty.

3 Aruna Raje and Vikas Desai (married at the time) collaborated under the professional name "Aruna–Vikas," co-directing and editing several critically acclaimed films in the 1970s and early 1980s, including *Shaque* (1976), *Gehrayee* (1980), and *Situm* (1982), before parting ways personally and professionally.

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