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Note from the Editors

We are happy to present another edition of *Indraprasth - An International Journal of Culture and Communication Studies* devoted to Art, Literature, and Films by Indian Women. The publication of this second edition on the theme marks not a continuation alone, but a deepening. As editors, we view this edition as a living dialogue. It is shaped by collaboration between scholars and practitioners, between established critics and emerging voices. The creative works examined here remind us that art, literature, and films are not passive reflections of society but active forces that shape consciousness and community. These practices insist that storytelling is not only about representation but also about responsibility.

This edition investigates the ways in which Indian women writers and artists have perceived and shaped the world through art, literature, and films. It provides several sharp insights and deep meditation on the ways in which women authors, artists, playwrights, and filmmakers in India have registered feminine desires and feminist perceptions. The analyses presented here demonstrate that aesthetics and activism are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist in dynamic tension.

Puja Raj's article foregrounds a compelling argument regarding Aruna Raje's cinematic vision and her gender politics, calling it a "feminist mapping." The article extols her oeuvre for its complex characters and the constant endeavour to go beyond didactic feminism in order to explore the many layers to gendered experiences beyond the dichotomies of oppression and freedom.

Priyanka Das in her analysis of four films together offers a wider reading

of the feminist cinematic terrain. It examines the reconfiguration of aesthetics and ethics as well as the moral grammar by focusing on the changing depictions of female desire, agency, and subjectivity which does not shy away from depicting women in their less-than-appealing forms.

Onwutuebe Ucheoma's article discusses Shuchi Talati's 2004 film, *Girls Will Be Girls*, and interrogates societal assumptions that straitjacket women in motherhood. Through the "messiness" of the characters, she examines the ways in which allowances made for men can seldom be afforded by women especially as they age; girlhood and its fleeting joys elude women, forced into propriety by patriarchal conventions.

Lakshmi Salim and Sajna Sanal offer a close reading of Shalini Usha Nair's *Akam*, in order to explore the interrelation between domestic and psychological environments and feminine subjectivity. The article delineates the ways in which the visual medium—which has historically lent itself to making women available to the gaze—can be used to foil easy access leaving the woman with a haunting presence even as conventional portrayal of femininity is upended. The film reframes the mythical *yakshi*, positioning femininity as both spatial and spectral.

Partha Pramanik analyses Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* as reimagining feminist agency through its depiction of women in the domestic sphere, utilising their limited agency to subvert patriarchal norms. The use of satire, language, and supernatural elements extends the transformation by forging a reclaiming that converts a feminine trope into a feminist tool.

Simran Naudiyal, in her article, examines a lesser-known film from Deepa Mehta's oeuvre to showcase the intersections between food, class, and gender.

The article engages with food, not just in the form of a meal or a delicacy, but as a material that interferes with the social structures and reveals internal human complexities. By employing culinary-cinema topology methodology, the article analyses how the filmkaker writing and direction illustrate the subtle integration of food into the politics of gender and class and communities.

Divya KB's close reading of two Tamil novels, *Maane Maane Maane* (1986) and *Naan* (1987) is an exploration of the Tamil romance genre and its construction of romantic love which does not merely reify gender relations but helps rework them through complex negotiations. The formulaic nature of the genre makes for mass appeal but also opens up sites for dialogue on women's autonomy as well as desire for companionship speaking of their irrefutable contribution to the "long history of a mediation of gender and desire."

Jyoshna Dutta and Mushrifa Ibrahim examine Banamallika's *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, through an investigative lens to unearth the gendered solitude and marginal experience of women in Northeast India. The use of a psychoanalytic framework enables the use of Freudian concepts such as uncanny and melancholia along with Kristeva's theory of abjection to speak of the many layers of oppression that contribute to isolation and repression of women producing deep, irremediable isolation but also new means of psychic negotiation and resistance.

Paramita Ghosh in "The Flight of the 'Caged Bird': An Autobiography of Rassundari Devi in Nineteenth-century Colonial India," scrutinises the journey from literacy to self-writing for Rassundari Devi and the difficulties that she encountered in the process. The article is a careful study of the circumstances that shaped the endeavour leading to the formidable archive that is *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*).

Chahna Ahuja's article brings together the world of art through a discussion of Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings with the world of literature in Ismat Chugtai's stories to draw out the "inner lives" of women. The article reads the literary and visual imagery closely to draw out the taut circuits of accessibility and subversion that both kinds of texts navigate. Identity construction is a negotiation that involves the repeated undoing of the exoticising and eroticising gaze and creating a "heterotopic tension" within the domestic sphere.

We are grateful for the intellectual generosity that has made this issue possible, and we remain conscious that the field continues to expand in directions we cannot yet fully anticipate. We offer this volume to our readers with the hope that it will inspire further research, creative experimentation, and sustained dialogue. May it encourage us to listen more carefully, look more closely, and remain open to the transformative power of women's voices in shaping the cultural narratives of India today and tomorrow.

Editors, *Indraprasth*

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

Puja Raj

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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Desiring Otherwise: Ethical Subversion and Affective Feminism in Indian Cinema

Priyanka Das

Abstract

There are moments when watching a film made by a woman feels like discovering a new language, one that doesn't just *show* the world differently, but *feels* it otherwise. This article emerges from that space of affective disquiet and intellectual urgency, interrogating how women filmmakers in India are reclaiming cinema from ornamental representation to insurgent articulation, where female subjectivity is no longer relegated to subplots of sacrifice or shame, but recentred as the very axis of the story. In Rao's *Laapata Ladies* (2024),the protagonist's hunger for education is not a rebellion but the most ordinary yet radical form of survival. Yadav's *Parched* (2015) stages a ferocious reclamation of sexuality amidst brutal patriarchy. Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) resurrects the ghost of a greedy, sharp-tongued matriarch who refuses silence even in death, complicating the politics of inheritance and agency. Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020) transforms the trauma of an abused child-bride into the mythology of a vengeful deity, where the supernatural becomes feminist resistance cloaked in crimson. Diverse in tone and geography, they converge in their feminist ethic: rendering desire not as a moral problem but as an epistemological force. This article insists how they reconfigure aesthetics and ethics of Indian cinema, and reveals the dangerous, dazzling possibilities of wanting otherwise.

Keywords: Affective feminism; Gendered Desire; Feminist Film Theory; Technologies of Gender; Cinematic Resistance

Introduction

There are films that entertain, and then there are films that disarm. The latter often do not announce themselves with cinematic grandeur or self-important gravitas, but instead enter quietly, like memory, like an ache. Indian cinema has, for too long, relied on a moral grammar that punishes female desire. It has

given us an ample number of mothers who suffer in silence, wives who wait without protest, widows who just exist in vacuum. The architecture of mainstream cinema has largely consigned women to the margins: as muses or femme fatales, damsels in distress or moral lessons. But in the last decade, a new affective terrain has begun to emerge, charted by women filmmakers who seek neither pity nor permission. Their works do not merely place women at the centre; they reconfigure the camera's desire, the script's logic, and the very syntax of storytelling.

This article is an inquiry into that reconfiguration. Through four feminist films, *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), *Parched* (2015), *Goynar Baksho* (2013), and *Bulbbul* (2020), it examines how female subjectivity is repositioned, not as ornamental subplot, but as the generative axis of narrative and ethical inquiry. It tries to locate how female filmmakers, or films consciously crafted through feminist ethos, disturb, to borrow from Teresa de Lauretis, the "technologies of gender (de Lauretis 1)." These are not redemption tales of docile heroines overcoming hardship with quiet strength. Instead, they offer us women who are lost yet self-driven, vengeful yet unrepentant; not as tropes, not as moral caution or data, but as epistemic agents. Their agency is not always heroic; sometimes it is inconvenient, sometimes even monstrous. But it is always urgent.

The theoretical scaffolding of this article rests on two critical feminist thinkers: Teresa de Lauretis and Sara Ahmed. De Lauretis, in a way to extend Butler's gender performativity, reminds us that gender is not a fixed identity but a "process" enacted through cultural and representational technologies (de Lauretis 2). This article borrows from her notion as to how cinema can be complicit (or subversive) in the production of gendered roles. Sara Ahmed's work furthers this argument by turning our attention to affect, to the stickiness of emotions, and to the cultural politics of discomfort and rage at the centre of feminist knowledge-making. She argues that emotions are not private psychological states but "cultural practices" that stick to bodies and imagine futures (Ahmed 10). Together, these thinkers allow us to read cinema not just as text, but as atmosphere, as something we feel in our skin before we decode it with theory.

The cinema examined here embodies both: gender as performative refusal, and emotion as insurgent structure. What happens, these films ask, when women do not return home, do not smile when asked to, and do not suppress their

longing or their rage? What happens when ghosts speak, when goddesses burn, when brides get lost and do not wish to be found? In choosing these films, I am also choosing to think from the *periphery*: peripheral Gujarat, rural Bengal, haunted haveli, lonely railway station. These are not polished metropolitan films about feminism in accented English. These are dusty, emotionally messy tales carved in local textures that refuse easy resolution.

The Right to Want: Everyday Feminism and Erotic Hunger

What does it mean for a woman to 'want' in a world where feminine desire is either domesticated into obedience or punished as deviance? And what happens when that desire is not for men, or even for love, but for breath, for solitude, for a higher education degree, for a room with a view? In *Laapataa Ladies* and *Parched*,'wanting' becomes a political act. These films reject the overambitious arc of liberation and instead dwell in quieter insurgencies, in moments when a woman simply takes a detour, or decides not to apologize for what she feels in her body. They construct feminine subjectivity not as the outcome of universal code of emancipation but as a terrain of ongoing, lived, everyday assertion.

Laapataa Ladies, for instance, inhabits two distinct but overlapping registers of feminine desire where the brides' accidental deviation from their in-laws' houses is a detour into selfhood. The film performs an ethical inversion, where the loss of the bride is the gain of the girl. Jaya and Phool, though thrown into each other's narrative accidents, do not seek the same future. Jaya has always known she cannot stay; she is ambitious, confident, and already familiar with the cost of disobedience. The family she is mistakenly placed in offers her temporary warmth but not the permission to be anything 'more.' Jaya's decision to stay in this borrowed home, to forge a lie, is not a con but a survival strategy. It grants her time to arrange her real departure, to chase her real desire: an education in organic farming in Dehradun. The film does not mock her for this choice. Organic farming, often registered as 'non-ambitious' in today's rapidly growing AI and data-driven industry, is another feminist frontier; and can be metaphorically read in terms of soil as grounded sovereignty, and sustainability as persistent rebellion. Jaya's lie becomes her shelter, not because it's convenient, but because truth is too expensive. Kiran Rao crafts this narrative without irony. Jaya's struggle, though inspirational, is exhaustive.

Her resistance is not loud or immediate. Instead, her strength lies in clarity, in persistence, and in the tedious manipulation of administrative paper work. Each bureaucratic evasion is a step toward a world she has not yet entered but believes might exist, aptly fitting to Judith Butler's claim that gender is "a doing" rather than a "being" (Butler 25). Jaya cannot afford to step outside the system, so she performs from within its loopholes, exposing its fragility in the process.

Phool's journey unfolds along a different axis. The village station where she is stranded becomes the crucible for a kind of awakening that is neither intellectual nor transactional. Her education begins not in books, but in observation, in listening to Manju Maai who runs the tea stall and lives by a philosophy that defies every lesson Phool has absorbed as a girl raised to be someone's wife. Maai doesn't offer lectures; she models another way of 'being.' Smoking, selling *bread pakoda*, living on her own terms, she embodies a life where men are not gods and women are not pilgrims. Under her gaze, Phool begins to understand that survival is not obedience; it is a choice, at times even a pleasure. Phool doesn't articulate dreams of studying, earning, leaving. But she begins to notice the shape of her silence. She questions the rituals she once followed without thought. One morning she prepares to cook, then stops. She has no words for this gesture, but the camera lingers. Kiran Rao does not force clarity; instead, she allows ambiguity to become a kind of feminist method. As Sara Ahmed notes, feminism is homework. It is something we do at home. It is about how we live, how we think, how we move (Ahmed 7). Phool does not become someone else; she returns home different, and that difference is visible only to herself.

Parched shifts the terrain from the tentative to the urgent. Its women are not lost, they already know what is missing. They have learned to live without expectation. What remains is raw desire, stitched into the everyday with both shame and tenacity. Leena Yadav places Lajjo, Bijli, and Rani in a landscape where patriarchy is not abstract, but is evident in dowry, in loud bruises, in a son's slap. And yet, like the desert they inhabit, they persist with a resilience that is not romantic but feral.

Lajjo, mocked for her infertility, initiates her own bodily investigation. Her sexuality is not framed as scandal but necessity. She sleeps with a traveling bangle-seller not just for affection but for information, to test if she can bear

life. Her pleasure is not ornamental, it is diagnostic. The erotic here transgresses the trope to become the epistemology. When she says she feels beautiful afterward, it is not because she has been complimented. It is because she has entered her own body through another's, and found it intact. Bell hooks writes "when we love the body, we claim the space it occupies" (Hooks 27). Lajjo's love is forensic, she claims her body back from a man who only ever saw it as a lack. Bijli, meanwhile, refuses to be narrative collateral. The sex worker who watches everyone more sharply than she is watched, Bijli performs for money but never for approval. She dances because it feeds her, but she also knows the choreography of male hypocrisy. Her one-liners slice through the film's sentimental edges. When she tells Lajjo and Rani that men want to touch but cannot handle what they hold, she is not joking; she is documenting. Her wisdom is not moral; it is archival, and devastating for the patriarchal sexual confidence.

Rani begins as the enforcer, the one who marries off her son's child bride with a practised detachment. She calls it duty. But patriarchy, as hooks reminds us, teaches women to become its handmaidens. When that same son abuses his wife and robs Rani of her savings, the betrayal is more structural than personal. She begins to see what she has enabled. And in that realisation, something shatters. Her decision to flee with Lajjo and Bijli is more residual than redemptive. It is what is left when everything else has broken. Yadav's visual choices echo the politics of technology. Sand, cloth, bangles, blood: objects recur as motifs, for symbolism, for texture. The world is built from fragments. The women don't walk away into the light; they drive into the unknown, tired but together. Their journey is not shown as triumphant;it is merely possible. And in this possibility, a different feminist grammar emerges: one that Ahmed might call a "non-performative promise," where survival itself is a form of critique (Ahmed 152).

Haunting as Herstory: Spectral Women and the Politics of Inheritance

In *Goynar Baksho* and *Bulbbul*, the female subject does not undergo rehabilitation within patriarchy. She returns after death to haunt the world that mutilated her. The ghost and the *chudail* do not emerge as narrative climaxes: they exist throughout, embedded in the cinematic fabric as affective disturbances. They haunt because the structures that silenced them remain intact, thereby

their haunting itself becomes historiography.

Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* refuses the logic of reverence. Pishima, the cranky, razor-tongued widow who guards her jewellery with an unmatched ferocity, dies early in the film. But her presence intensifies after death. Her ghost visits Somlata, the wide-eyed daughter-in-law, not to dispense grandmotherly wisdom but to demand collusion, rebellion. Pishima, expected to offer her comfort, instead offers her a plan. Her jewels are not meant for sentimental mourning or sacrificial dowry. She wants them claimed and weaponized. Her afterlife is not spent in prayer, but in plotting. The *goynar baksho*, that is the jewellery box, an ostensible family heirloom, is a container of history, desire, rituals, and deferred agency. Pishima's demand that Somlata use the jewels to secure her independence is not just about accumulating wealth, but about legacy, about who gets to inherit and on what terms. Rather than looking at it as an act of benevolent matriarchy, we can call it a feminist redistribution. Pishima doesn't care about harmony; she wants revenge, not in blood, but in inheritance. Her ghost recalibrates the logic of the household, and in doing so, rewrites the script of feminine agency passed down through generations. Somlata learns not through didactic monologues, but through interaction and interruption. Every moment of her hesitation and modesty is ridiculed by Pishima until something harder begins to form beneath Somlata's innocence. Somlata's transformation is not to chase liberation from the family, but a negotiation with it, learning how to perform domesticity while subverting its core demands. She does not break away from the role of the good daughter-in-law; she repeats it with slight variations, until it fractures.

Sen places this domestic ghost story within the larger framework of Partition and economic disintegration. The family loses property, rituals collapse, and class hierarchies erode, but the ghost remains. Avery Gordon describes haunting as "a constituent element of modern social life," (Gordon 7). Pishima is the residue of a femininity that was never allowed to speak while alive. Her ghostliness should not be romanticised; it is practical. More than being simply remembered, she wants to be obeyed. Unlike the tragic female spectres of horror cinema, Pishima's ghost is not in pain. She is in power. She is also funny, rude, sarcastic, and political at the same time. Her presence disrupts not only the momentum of normative family but also the viewer's expectation of what it means to grieve a woman whose afterlife is both tragic and strategic.

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* operates in an entirely different key. Where Sen gives us satire and wit, Dutt gives us myth, iconography, goosebumps, and crimson-gothic. Yet, both films use the feminine afterlife as a terrain for ethical subversion: their ghosts do not haunt only corridors, but haunt beliefs. Bulbbul's transformation into a *chudail* is not a consequence of madness, as society would have us believe. It results in the emergence of another cosmology. The men call her a witch; the camera suggests she is a goddess. Framed within the melancholically beautiful, twilight-soaked interiors of an actual 250-year old *jomidaar baari* (zamindar's ancestral estate) in late nineteenth century Bengal, the film turns feudal architecture into a visual treat. Bulbbul was married as a child, brutalized for imagined sins, raped by her brother-in-law, and left to walk with broken feet, until she stopped walking altogether. Her floating presence, marked by inverted limbs, functions as an iconography of vengeance; she is wronged, but she refuses to be pitied or mourned. The village assumes a *chudail* is killing men. The viewer, much like Satya, begins by fearing this spectral presence. But as the narrative arc circles back and around again, the logic alters. The killings are beyond horror, they are horizon. Every time a man dies, a possibility opens, a wife lives, a girl survives, a her-story begins. Bulbbul's vengeance, as the audience could feel, is not hysterical, it is divine. Her transformations under the red moon invoke the Devi, *Maa Kaali* to be precise, in rage, in fire, in blood, in ritual violence. But the film does not reduce her to goddesshood. It does not offer sanctification or sacralization as compensation for pain. Bulbbul's power, much like Rani in *Parched,* is residual, as she carries within her the cold rage that Dutt herself identifies as the impulse behind the film. Rage not performed for spectacle, but nurtured as afterlife. Sara Ahmed reminds us that anger is not only about what has happened, but about the refusal to let go of the injury" (Ahmed 170). Bulbbul's refusal is not pathological, it is more pedagogical. The film asks us not to sympathize with her; but to watch her, to imbibe her, to witness her reclaim agency. To look away is to betray her.

Where *Goynar Baksho* stages the afterlife within the comedic apparatus of Bengal social realism, *Bulbbul* veers into the uncanny. Yet both films share an insistence that dead women are not done speaking. Hélène Cixous's claim that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing" finds haunting resonance here (Cixous 875). These films write women as more than just metaphors; they let them burn the metaphors to ashes. Satya's

inability to recognize Bulbbul's painful truth until it is too late mirrors a larger failure: the *Bangali bhadrolok's* Enlightenment desire to categorise, name, understand, and then correct. His grief, like the fire he sets, is unproductive. He weeps not for *her* suffering, but for *his* own failure to locate her within reason. His idea of rescue is masculine-conditioned and colonial-coded. He wanted to *save* a woman, what he got instead was a woman who had stopped asking to be human.

In both films, death is not the finality, but an ongoing method. Ghosts and goddesses are not tragic consequences, but tactics. Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, that is the state's power to determine who may live and who must die, operates in associative reversal here. It is the woman who decides; logically, not through law, but through legacy. Not through bloodlines, but through blood. These women do not wish to be worshipped or mourned. They want to be believed. Their haunting in itself is a feminist historiography: one that remembers what the living are eager to forget. In *Goynar Baksho,* memory comes coloured in paan stains and insults. In *Bulbbul,* it arrives with inverted feet under a bleeding sky. The afterlife, in these films, is not a question of superstition. It is the reckoning, the refusal to be buried. It is the Freudian return of the repressed.

Conclusion

Feminism, so far, when told cinematically, often arrived wearing the high robe of dignity, unwilling to be immoral or unkind. But lately, the women in these films do not chase righteousness. They lie, vanish, erupt, haunt. They aren't all empowered yet, but they are in the process. And this refusal to be complete, to be palatable, to be digestible, to be named and categorized into designated registers, is precisely where their radicality lies. The figures who inhabit these stories, of disappearance and drifting, do not become legible through tropes of dreamy resistance, but by staining the screen. They move in ways that fracture the familiar coordinates of genre, temporality, gender performance, and even hauntology. If traditional cinematic womanhood functioned as emotional infrastructure: reliable, repetitive, but ultimately forgettable, these films hollow out that scaffolding and install instead what might be called a poetics of deviation: deviant in structure and in ethics.

What binds these narratives is not genre but pressure: the pressure of

bodies trying to live 'otherwise.' It is in this 'otherwise' that a new vocabulary begins to crystallize: one that has the potential to exceed the restrictive contours of feminist film studies. The figure of the *chudail*,for instance, can no longer be confined to plain horror. Having transgressed the allegory, she is now affect, archive, architecture. She belongs as much to monster studies as to hauntology, not because she embodies the grotesque, she doesn't; but because she suspends the very notion of the 'human!' More than a feminine deviation, she is a breach in ontology. Desire in these films is never narratively stable; it is often partial or simply illegible. But it is precisely in this illegibility that politics begins to form. Feminist theory has always tried to return to the wound, at times to heal, at times to examine what festers, but mostly to allow the wound to stay open, to make space for the ache. Feminist narratives, as this article argues, have evolved from asking women to transcend, to asking them to stay with the mess. And the viewer on the external edge, is offered catharsis as well as cohabitation.

Within disciplines such as gender studies, monster theory, and postcolonial hauntology, the films explored here in this article complicate what it means to see, to feel, to remember. *Laapataa Ladies* and *Parched* remove women from the household where they were eternally fashioned to bear the weight of patriarchy, recruited, and trained to become its gatekeepers. *Goynar Baksho* and *Bulbbul,* in contrast, drag the ghost back into the household and the goddess down from the altar. Instead of merely revising representation, they recode affect. What emerges is not a passive doctrine to follow, but an invitation to witness and to question: to follow the lies, to peek into the privacy, to unlearn conditioned docility, to trace the smoke of the red sky. To *desire otherwise*, then, should not be a conclusion, but must remain a demand without a deadline.

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The Messy *Maa*: Exploring A Different Maternal Archetype in Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls*

Ucheoma Onwutuebe

Abstract

The maternal figure in Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls* is awkward, messy and above all, jealous of her daughter's more liberal coming-of-age. Her portrayal challenges the conventions of motherhood and thereby shows a different aspect of mothering rarely seen on screen. Through a feminist lens, this research closely examines this complex 'maa,' and argues that, though the film's central focus is on the sexual coming of age of its adolescent main character Mira, it is her mother's unhinged jealousy as she vacillates from being an overprotective mother to a genial confidante, who holds the narrative tension of the film. This article argues that this mother's need to share and even usurp the spotlight from her daughter stems from the mother's repression since she grew up and still exists under the vigilance and strictures of a patriarchal society that leaves her no option but to live vicariously through her daughter. This article also examines the mother as a lost girl whose nostalgia for her past and imagined future are reawakened in observing her daughter go through the rigours of first love. It also explores ways in which the mother's jealousy can be understood, considering the sacrifices women make of themselves in their duty of nurturing their household, which often leads to self-neglect and the abandonment of their own dreams.

Keywords : Maternal; Patriarchy; Messiness; Archetype; Mothers

Thoughtful and critical representation of motherhood on screen, as mentioned by E. Ann Kaplan in her book *Motherhood and Representation*, has been underemphasized, such that the image of 'the mother' appears as "...a figure in the design, out-of-focus; or, if in focus, then the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child (male or female) or in that of an adult (male or female) concerned to attribute all ills to the mother" (14). In past films, such as *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Bambi* (1942), mothers are

viewed as mere accessories to the plot, bound by the duties of their office, ever in service of the other. Bollywood has seen its share of mother-as-primary-caregiver, a figure lacking in agency and subsumed in her role and the confines of a patriarchal environment that disembodied and negated her private experiences. In their reading of the mother figure in multiple Bollywood films, Dey and Tripathi pinpoint, "The Indian cinematic screen has adroitly reflected the prevailing ideologies concerning the experience of motherhood that tends to disregard a woman's subjective presence and conventionally perceives her as a sacred and desexualized body" (642). This desexualisation of mothers negates and erases their sexual existence and autonomy and pours them into the roles where they are bound to behave soberly.

In *Girls Will Be Girls* (2024), Shuchi Talati takes these concerns and limitations into account and creates a maternal character who defies familiar tropes, thereby presenting a mother who is alive and brimming with individuality, even daring to be messy. 'Messiness,' in the context of this article, refers to that singularly, all-encompassing trait of the maternal figure in the film who refuses to stay within the constricted margins of motherhood. This mother sidesteps the lines of maternal propriety, upending the rules and conventions of the world of this story and fills in the much-needed vacuum for a different maternal figure who is not merely a poster for level-headedness and wisdom, but a human being full of complexities that are somewhat unsettling and antithetical to all that has been known for good maternal behavior.

Motherhood as an institution is loaded with an expected code of behaviour which includes self-sacrifice, erasure, hyper-alertness of offspring(s), and propriety. Cinematic representations of motherhood have shaped these expectations, and maternal depictions often fall into the dichotomy of screening mothers through the limited lens of good or bad mothering, especially in cultures where the patriarchal backdrop of society colours female and maternal experiences as well as existence. Hence, in this age of cinema, maternal representation on screen is bound to perform two duties: fight to subvert suppressive societal norms or fall into the trope of representation that perpetuates harmful beliefs about mothers. For decades, films such as *Astitva* (2000) and *Parched* (2015) have become a perfect meeting point for feminist theories and motherhood studies in analyzing these representations, thereby

challenging gender roles, mother-child relations and unrealistic demands on mothers.

In her interview with *Sundance*, in response to the question of her motivation to make *Girls Will Be Girls*, Talati says, "The film was inspired by my girlfriends and their mothers in India. I knew so many fierce and funny women who managed to subvert and circumvent social mores, but I didn't ever see them on screen" (Talati). As a female director, she reduces the dearth of women in Bollywood, going against the grain. The text she creates, and the maternal archetype in the film supplies Bollywood with a mother whose subversion is subtle yet evocative, especially against the backdrop of a world where shame surrounds the subject of sexuality and the demands of motherhood are high.

It is this unexplored canvas for a fresh representation of motherhood in Bollywood films that Talati creates the character of *maa*, Anila. We are introduced to Anila (Kani Kusruti) in the film through a side angle, only a slice of her back is visible as she occupies offscreen space, handing out treats to students and teachers while they walk past in her daughter's boarding school. She is the only parent present, jettisoning the rules of this world by wrangling herself into her daughter's space. Her framing at the edge of the screen highlights her outsider status, her refusal to honour her daughter's boundaries, which is a trait that persists throughout the duration of the story. Anila's constant trespassing in seemingly harmless ways, her refusal of propriety, can be best described as messy, and in her messiness, this portrayal of *maa* presents a different maternal archetype in Bollywood, nuanced yet powerful in her portrayal, as she resists the encoded demands of motherhood within a strict patriarchal environment.

Her daughter, Mira (Preeti Panigrahi), the film's central character, is a high-performing student, recently made the first female Head Prefect; Mira grapples with her sexual awakening when she falls in love with a new boy, Sri (Kesav Binoy Kiron) in the hyper-vigilant environment of this strict boarding school located in the Himalayas where girls are policed and warned off boys. However, Mira's coming of age faces major stumbling blocks—Anila's jealousy and her need to share and usurp Mira's spotlight. The film received high acclaim

and, amongst its numerous accolades, won the World Cinema Dramatic Audience Prize at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival.

Anila's subversion and circumvention can be seen first with her wardrobe. Unlike the other women in the film, Anila mostly wears western outfits just like Mira and the younger characters, signifying her bent towards her youthful side and her reluctance to accept her mother role. Her costumes stand in contrast to those of the other maternal figure in the film, Ms Bansal (Devika Shahani), the head teacher of the boarding school, who shepherds the girls and insists on rules of propriety. In the aforementioned scene, when Anila arrives unannounced at the boarding school, Ms Bansal greets and receives a treat from her. One can see the marked difference in their choice of clothing. While Ms Bansal dons a *sari* that drapes her body from neck to toe, Anila wears a frill blouse with ruffles on the sleeves, hinting towards her inclination towards youthful appearance and her desire to remain in her girlhood.

The film borrows its title from the catchphrase, 'Boys will be boys,' which panders to the societal allowance given to men to run free, to not change, making allowances for behaviour that inherently defines boyhood and manhood. Stephen M. Kaplan notes that the term "encapsulates most of what is wrong with patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, victimisation of females, and the gender binary, all of which play crucial roles in the continued subjugation and oppression of females in our society" (205). Turning this phrase on its head, Talati seems to ask, if boys are allowed to be without consequences, what would it mean for girls to be girls? Girls are stereotypically known to be effusive, vain, enchanted by teenage crushes, but what if they retained their state of girlhood even as they left their youth? When girls become mothers and society presents them a fresh script that demands the abandonment of girlhood and its giddiness, there must still exist for these former-girls an aspect of them that does not entirely shed the skin, attitudes, and longing of their younger selves. This disparity in male/fatherly versus female/maternal expectations is highlighted in the film through the contrast of Mira's father, Hardik (Jatin Gulati), and Anila's character. Hardik embodies the definition of a boy being a boy. He makes a few appearances, rarely presents at home due to business trips and only takes up the financial responsibility of the home. He leaves the emotional

labour of child rearing to Anila. Ironically, Mira adores him and wants to be like him, in contrast to her feelings towards Anila.

In a similar vein, Ramita Jhamtani observes that even though there has been a marked increase in the representations of mothers, yet "regardless of characterization, plot, story or genre, and no matter how rebellious, liberated, or modern they are presented, Bollywood mothers are imbued with patriarchal values that implicitly place unrealistic expectations on motherhood and, consequently on the women in Indian societies" (340). Also, Gangwar and Mishra observed this in their study, "Portrayal of Women in Highest Grossing Indian Films in 2022":

> Though the portrayal of women in the films has changed significantly but not to the point where we may confidently say that it is actually progressive in terms of how women are represented in the movies. The nature of portrayal of women is still extremely regressive in nature. Now it can be debated that since cinema is actually a mirror to the society it is created into, but it still has a responsibility to uplift the culture it is a part of rather than reinforcing the same old objectification and insignificant portrayal of women in films just to woo the audience. (7)

Some critics, such as Benazir Manzar and Aravind Aju, are slightly more optimistic. In "(Re)Thinking Women in Cinema: The Changing Narrative Structure in Bollywood," they critically examine the evolution of gender portrayal in Bollywood films and how gender intersects with nationality, ethnicity, and caste. They observe that there have been more graphic and sympathetic depictions of premarital sex, adultery, and pregnancy outside of marriage. However, they notice that in films, where mothers are taking ground, even within the demanding margins of their familial roles or the strict expectations of patriarchy, the backdrop of patriarchy looms large. They believe more room exists to create a richer nuance for women in Bollywood films.

Unlike Ms Bansal, who polices the girl's looks, Anila buys short skirts for her daughter. In the scene at the denim shop, Anila stands behind Mira as she checks out a new skirt Anila had picked out for her. Together, they regard

Mira's body in the skirt, and Mira worries that the skirt is too short. But Anila says, "No, it's not." (*Girls* 00:42:48-52). In her approval of this clothing item for her daughter, Anila encourages her daughter to exist outside the line of propriety, handing her a ticket to subversion. Through the buying of the skirt, she thrusts Mira into the world of unrestricted girlhood, endorsing her awakening.

Whereas Ms Bansal, this other mother-figure, is stern in her demands for propriety. In the skirt-measurement scene, Ms Bansal orders an offending student to pull a chair and instructs her to stand on it. She points at the length of the girl's skirt, grazing her knees and revealing her thighs. She says, "This is what it looks like when you climb stairs." In her concern for their sartorial choice, especially in her bid to maintain order and protect the girls from notorious boys who take pictures of girls' underskirts (as it later occurs in the film), Ms Basal presents herself as a mother-figure who upholds patriarchal structures; therefore, becoming a patriarchal mother.

Andrea O'Riley defines patriarchal motherhood as motherhood which "assumes (and expects) that all women want to be mothers (essentialisation), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalisation), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization)" (65). Outwardly, Anila seems trapped in the roles of patriarchal motherhood, but throughout the story, her conduct reveals she is non-patriarchal. As a former student of Mira's boarding school, she, too, must have been drilled to obey the codes of propriety, given that the rules were a lot more strident in her days. Anila is seen mostly at home, and even in the few scenes she appears outside her home, she is running errands in the service of her daughter and the entire household. She waxes Mira's legs, serves her food, and watches over her growing daughter. One would think she exists as an accessory to her daughter, especially when she says: "My daughter is my priority." (*Girls*, 00:21:23) Notwithstanding, her doting attention to Mira is not without a caveat. She hopes that her duties will entice Mira to invite her to have a front seat to witness Mira's girlhood. Though her hands are tied by patriarchy, by offering her daughter a free rein, such as the purchase of the short skirt, she makes ground for her vicarious resistance. But Mira is at that phase of teenagehood where her mother's continual doting is seen as pestilential. She shuts Anila out,

unable to stand her mother. This revulsion Mira feels is seen in the mirror/ dance scene; Mira regards her teenage self before a mirror. She lifts her arms and runs her fingers through the hair underneath; she pomades her body and arranges her hair, still regarding herself with deep interest. In this self-adoration, Mira contends with her budding body, wondering at its changes. With silent excitement, she anticipates the power her youthful body holds. A song comes up on the stereo, and Mira begins to dance sensuously to the beat. Anila walks into the room, smiles at her daughter and turns up the stereo. She moves towards Mira, urging her to dance along, an awkward attempt to share in her daughter's girlhood. Mira turns her back at the invitation and stops dancing, leaving Anila embarrassed and frustrated. In her refusal to dance with her mother, Mira shuts her mother out of her joyful girlhood, refusing the older woman a gate pass, as if expressing her belief that this youthful expression of a dancing lithe body belongs only to girls her age and not her mother. It is this isolation that evokes Anila's jealousy. This exiling of a mother from her daughter's coming-of-age stirs jealousy in Anila, and she is bent on reclaiming her girlhood by any means necessary, even if it means crossing the boundary and behaving unseeingly.

Anila often finds it hard to contain her jealousy. In the scene, when Mira returns home wearing the skirt her *maa* bought her, Anila snaps: "Is that the only skirt you have?" (*Girls* 01:05:38). In her oscillation between approval and disapproval, Anila's jealousy bubbles forth, exciting an envy she feels towards her daughter's girlhood. Despite this, she remains persistent in partaking in it. Unlike Ms Bansal, who forbids girls from speaking to boys unnecessarily, Anila does a more unconventional thing by asking Mira to bring her boyfriend home. It is in this scene that Anila's messiness becomes more apparent. When Sri arrives at Anila and Mira's home, Anila approaches the young boy, a quizzical look on her face as if to determine if the young boy represents danger or safety to her daughter. Sri and Anila are framed standing opposite each other as they regard each other. Mira stands offscreen, blurred by the camera as it focuses on the two characters—mother and Sri—in a moment of role reversal when the girl is cast as a mere spectator in this meeting. When Sri flashes a winsome smile and hands Anila a bunch of stunted, sparse flowers, his boyish charms immediately disarm Anila's aloofness, and a slight diffidence creeps into her face. In this meeting, that slight moment when boyish

charm meets elderly diffidence, a window opens for Anila to explore her lost girlhood through Sri.

As Anila's rapport with Sri grows, Mira becomes a third wheel to this burgeoning friendship and is often framed, standing by the margins as her mother and boyfriend get acquainted. In the second dance scene, Mira starts the music on the stereo and moves her body, inviting Sri to join her. In their dance, the teenagers show their unbridled affection for each other, glorying in their young love. Anila walks in and observes them, her face a mix of jealousy and longing, and soon she dances with them. Mira stumbles through her moves as she waltzes with Sri, and Anila ostensibly steps in to correct the dance, and soon, she is waltzing with Sri, while Mira looks on incredulously. By usurping Mira's space on the dance floor, Anila regains her footing and vengeance on Mira, claiming more ground for her own emancipation at the expense of her daughter's joy.

More occasions arise for *maa*'s messiness and her usurping of the spotlight, but the key scene that crowns her impropriety is the bedroom scene at Sri's birthday. When she suspects that the teenage lovers want to spend the night alone, Anila's jealousy, disguised as hypervigilance, sets in, and she commands Sri to sleep on the bed with her instead. In the middle of the night, when Mira comes to wake them up, the camera frames Anila's body in the background as she watches Sri's body rise and fall in sleep. Anila's obscured body in bed lies in the background as she runs her hands through Sri's head, a touch at once maternal and sensual. There is a space in the bed between their bodies to show that there is no sexual intimacy between Anila and Sri. Yet, the very act of sharing the bed suggests a weird closeness, a messiness, all in Anila's bid to sustain her upper hand in this silent duel with her daughter. In her unusual rapport with Sri, which culminates in this bedroom scene, Anila fully becomes a girl again and in taking away her daughter's thrill of spending the night with her boyfriend. Anila's youthful awakening reaches a crescendo, reclaiming the days when her own sexual evolution was stifled by the stridency of the world of her girlhood.

This messy *maa* still exists within the strict boundaries of patriarchy, and her resistance is not as loud as one would have expected. But there is power

in the fact that feminism and the portrayal of women are by no means unilateral. The resistance to define "feminism in any unitary sense" is the focus of Sangita Gopal's argument and research in *Feminism and the Big Picture: Conversations*. She questions the relevance of feminism in offering theoretical viewpoints in analyzing today's media and what new grounds the past feminist researchers helped in unravelling in today's media (135). Kaplan also notes that for global films tackling feminist subjects, "multicultural film feminists …are developing numerous other approaches, depending on local conditions and needs" (1236).

Girls Will Be Girls as a text offers one more answer to the quest for the expansion of maternal portrayal in Bollywood. The film resists the temptation to present an utterly feminist mother who does not exist against the backdrop of patriarchy. Though such screenings are crucial, Talati gleans from Bollywood feminist films like *Mary Kom* (2014), where a female boxer returns to the ring after marriage and childbirth to claim her championship, which stages their maternal figures against the backdrop of patriarchy. These screenings are more nuanced and relatable to audiences in that they see comparable and recognisable characters who are going through familiar dilemmas. The shift in how Indian women are portrayed in film indicates an evolution in their place in society, and a subtle, nuanced, and multi-dimensional approach to representation remains paramount. Films where maternal characters loudly resist are often far removed from the realities of viewers and merely serve as escapism. Films such as these provide an avenue to resist from the margins. Through her messiness, Anila finds grounds for resistance, thereby presenting the audience a different maternal archetype, a non-patriarchal mother who brings an honest, human and nuanced interpretation of motherhood on screen. Anila's refusal to stifle her girlish desires and make maternal sacrifices makes her personhood at once messy and feminist. It corrects the impression that motherhood is solely the venue for self-erasure, but is rather a complex role that reveals that even the mother confined by the strictures of patriarchy has within her a desire for girlhood not yet erased by societal expectations. Her messiness is an act of rebellion, a leaning towards self-definition and an abandonment of a worn script that ensures or prescribes order, neatness and

sobriety in the conduct of mothers. Talati, therefore, adds to the numerous filmmakers correcting the scripts that strip mothers in patriarchal societies of personal belongings outside of tending to their families. This different maternal archetype of the messy *maa*, who is familiar but subverts the expectations of her office and many times sabotages boundaries, is an ode to lost girlhood.

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Mapping the Interior: Gendered Spaces and the Haunting Feminine in *Akam* (2013)

Lakshmi Salim and Sajna Sanal

Abstract

Akam (2013), the Malayalam film directed by Shalini Usha Nair, is a contemporary adaptation of Malayatoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi*. The first cinematic adaptation of the novel, directed by K.S. Sethumadhavan, was released in 1968 under the title *Yakshi*. This version reflects the era's anxieties surrounding female sensuality and seeks to contain it through narrative erasure. In contrast, Shalini Usha Nair's *Akam* offers a deconstruction of the yakshi myth, delving into themes of female autonomy and the haunted feminine space, reimagining the legend through a feminist lens. The film reframes the mythical yakshi, positioning femininity as both spatial and spectral. Thus, it offers a compelling critique of gendered perception and challenges viewers to reconsider the boundaries of desire, identity, and the self. This article seeks to analyze the representation of feminine space in *Akam*, with a particular focus on how domestic and psychological environments shape and reflect gendered experiences. It also attempts to explore the articulation of female desire in the film, highlighting the ways in which it subverts the conventional portrayals of femininity. Drawing on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and spectral studies, the article investigates the construction of the haunting feminine as a site of power, ambiguity, and resistance.

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema**;** Yakshi Myth; Gendered Spaces; Spectrality; Spatial dynamics

Introduction

The figure of the *yakshi* occupies a central place in South Indian folklore, particularly within the cultural consciousness of Kerala, where she is frequently depicted as a spectral embodiment of feminine vengeance. Typically represented as a woman who has suffered betrayal or violence, often perpetrated by an upper-caste male, the *yakshi* returns as a ghostly seductress, employing her

physical allure as an instrument of retribution. Many of the *Yakshi* myths "invoke the fear of formidable female sexuality that refuses masculine closures or patriarchal caste laws, coming 'un-dead' to fulfil thwarted desires or pending revenge" (Pillai 18). Far from serving merely as a trope within the horror genre, the myth of the *yakshi* functions as a cultural site through which collective anxieties surrounding female agency, sexuality, and social transgression are mediated and explored.

In mid-twentieth century Malayalam cinema, the adaptation of the *yakshi* myth often operated as a narrative strategy to reinforce patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality and autonomy. The *yakshi* was typically portrayed as a seductive yet menacing presence, her physical allure constructed as a threat to male authority and societal norms. Rather than interrogating the historical or socio-cultural conditions that give rise to her spectral existence, these cinematic representations tended to frame her as a figure of excess and moral deviance. In doing so, the *yakshi* became a symbolic site through which anxieties about female transgression were contained, allowing the cinematic apparatus to discipline and neutralize expressions of feminine agency within a patriarchal order.

Akam offers a radical feminist reconfiguration of the *Yakshi* figure, departing from folkloric and psychological interpretations to foreground a spatially articulated and spectral feminine presence. Directed by Shalini Usha Nair, the film constructs domestic interiors, female desire, and the haunted psyche as interrelated terrains through which normative gender roles and patriarchal epistemologies are unsettled. While *Akam* is often approached as a psychological thriller or as a cinematic adaptation of *Yakshi*, existing scholarship has largely emphasized narrative ambiguity, masculine paranoia, and generic experimentation, thereby leaving the film's spatial politics insufficiently theorized. In particular, there is limited critical engagement with how the concept of *akam* is reworked in the film as a gendered and epistemically opaque interior that resists patriarchal modes of perception and mastery. Addressing this gap, the present study argues that *Akam* mobilizes domestic interiors as haunted, feminized spaces that contest patriarchal impulses to decode and dominate the female subject, offering a spatially grounded feminist critique of epistemic power. Methodologically, the article undertakes

close textual and visual analyses of selected scenes, focusing on mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, sound design, and architectural composition, and draws on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and spectral studies to examine how *akam* is spatially configured as a haunted interior and how feminine subjectivity is articulated through space as a site of power, opacity, and resistance.

Gendered Interiors and the Architecture of the Uncanny

Set in contemporary Kerala, the film follows the unraveling psyche of Srini, a young architect who begins to suspect that his enigmatic wife Ragini is a *yakshi*, a mythological seductress who lures and consumes men. While the film foregrounds Srini's descent into paranoia, the feminist reading reveals a deeper engagement with the themes of gendered space, epistemic violence, and the politics of female subjectivity.

The title *Akam*, taken from classical Tamil poetics, refers to the interior or emotional realm, often contrasted with *puram*, the external and public sphere. The Tamil literary tradition classifies *akam* poetry as concerned with the personal, emotional, and intimate centered around love, longing, and the inner life. In contrast, *puram* deals with war, heroism, and the public realm. In the film *Akam*, this conceptual duality is visualized through spatial arrangements and gendered subjectivities. Srini occupies the public world of work, architecture, and rationality, while Ragini is situated in the domestic space—the apartment, the kitchen, the bedroom—that becomes symbolic of the feminine *akam*. The film, thus, deploys the concept of *akam* as a gendered and haunted space both literally (as domestic interiors) and figuratively (as the unknowable feminine self) to critique the patriarchal compulsion to contain, decode, and dominate the female subject. Through its aesthetic strategies and narrative ambiguity, the film destabilises conventional gender binaries and reclaims the interior as a space of feminist resistance.

The domestic sphere, traditionally coded as feminine and secure, becomes deeply uncanny in the film. Freud defines the uncanny as "something familiar ['homely,' 'homey'] that has been repressed and then reappears" (152). The apartment Srini and Ragini inhabit transforms into a site of surveillance, suspicion, and psychological instability. Rather than offering comfort, the home becomes a haunted interior where normative expectations of gender, marriage,

and intimacy unravel. The film's sparse dialogue, unsettling sound design, and fragmented spatial framing amplify this transformation. One of the most striking expressions of the uncanny emerges within the apartment's corridors and rooms, which are consistently framed through constricted compositions and fragmented sightlines, producing a sense of spatial spectrality. As the camera trails Srini through these interiors, it initially evokes surveillance and control, yet the space repeatedly eludes his mastery. Half-open doors, dimly illuminated rooms, and disrupted spatial continuity render the apartment unstable and ghostly, transforming the familiar domestic interior into an unsettling presence. This spatial disorientation not only intensifies the uncanny but also registers the collapse of patriarchal rationality. Patriarchal rationality here denotes a masculine, logocentric mode of knowing grounded in surveillance, possession, and interpretive control, where linear causality and visual mastery position the male subject as the authority within the domestic sphere. *Akam* unsettles this epistemic structure by making space opaque, time fragmented, and the feminine subject spectral, thereby exposing the structural limits of phallocentric reason to comprehend the feminine interior.

The kitchen and bedroom spaces conventionally associated with domestic intimacy, play a crucial role in generating the uncanny within the film. Ragini's calm, ritualised movements within these interiors contrast sharply with Srini's escalating paranoia. In several scenes, her silence and stillness within these spaces provoke suspicion rather than reassurance. The uncanny here does not emerge from overt supernatural events but from the excess of meaning Srini projects onto ordinary domestic gestures, revealing how patriarchal fear arises when feminine interiority refuses transparency.

Mirrors and reflective surfaces further intensify the architecture of the uncanny. In scenes where Ragini is framed indirectly, through reflections or partial visibility, her presence becomes spectral, fragmented, and resistant to stable perception. These visual strategies deny the spectator, aligned with Srini's gaze, a coherent or authoritative view of the feminine subject. The apartment thus functions as a haunted interior, where space itself collaborates in destabilising masculine epistemic control. Within the structure of domestic patriarchy, epistemic authority is vested in the husband, who assumes the power to define and regulate the wife's subjectivity by categorizing her as loyal, deviant,

rational, or unstable, thereby securing himself as the sovereign producer of truth within the marital domain. As Luce Irigaray argues "The feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual" (86). In *Akam*, this masculinist epistemological privilege progressively erodes as spatial opacity and psychic ambiguity unsettle Srini's interpretive mastery.

Feminine Opacity and Epistemic Violence

Building on *Akam* as a gendered realm, the film foregrounds interior space as an uncanny site where patriarchal perception confronts the limits of knowledge and control, rendering feminine subjectivity simultaneously intimate, elusive, and unsettling. The interior spaces in *Akam* are rendered dim, claustrophobic, and spatially ambiguous, mirroring both the protagonist's psychological deterioration and the inaccessibility of the feminine interior. From the film's opening sequences, viewers are drawn into Srini's increasingly unstable perception of his wife, Ragini. Her silences and calm demeanor become sites of suspicion for Srini, who interprets them as signs of deception. Notably, his fear does not stem from any overt threat but from her refusal to disclose her inner life legible to him. In this context, *Akam* becomes synonymous with epistemic opacity, and Ragini's subjectivity emerges as a contested interior onto which Srini projects his masculine anxieties.

This dynamic aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal systems that position the feminine as the "other"—a figure whose subjectivity is either idealized or demonized, but never fully accessible. As Luce Irigaray observes in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, the feminine has been excluded from discourse (88). In *Akam*, Ragini's unknowability is not a narrative deficiency but a feminist refusal of transparency; a resistance to being fully seen, known, or appropriated by the male gaze. The domestic space she inhabits becomes a terrain of spectral feminine resistance not through overt confrontation or violence, but through an aesthetic of ambiguity that refuses patriarchal legibility.

In *Akam*, Nair offers a radical departure from conventional portrayals of feminine desire in Malayalam cinema by presenting a female protagonist who resists legibility and containment. Ragini, the central female figure, is neither

eroticized nor demonized in overt terms, but occupies a complex space where desire is implied, withheld, and quietly asserted. Rather than presenting her as the passive recipient of male attention, the film allows Ragini to exist as an autonomous subject, whose emotional and sexual interiority is rendered opaque. This challenges dominant cinematic representations where female desire is either hyper-visible and objectified or morally punished. Her calm demeanor, silences, and self-contained presence are not indications of repression but acts of refusal to perform expected emotional labour, to confess, or to make herself available to the male gaze.

Ragini embodies a form of desire that is enigmatic and inward, resisting the patriarchal tendency to define women's desires through the male gaze. The film uses subtle visual and narrative cues to portray Ragini's emotional autonomy and unsettling allure. One notable scene in the film occurs when Ragini gently but assertively initiates intimacy with Srinivasan. Her body language is calm, composed, and controlled, subverting the traditional portrayal of the desirable woman as expressive and eager to please. Here, desire is not flamboyant but self-possessed, expressed on her own terms. Srinivasan, however, grows increasingly disturbed not by her presence, but by his inability to read her desire or locate it within familiar gendered patterns. Her refusal to be transparent becomes a source of fear and suspicion. As the narrative progresses, Ragini's quiet self-containment becomes a site of projection for Srinivasan's insecurities. He becomes paranoid after noticing that she goes out alone or speaks to strangers without offering explanations. Instead of representing her desire as dangerous or immoral, *Akam* presents Srinivasan's anxiety as a reflection of his own fragile masculinity. The mystery of Ragini's inner life remains intact throughout the film, asserting her agency and resisting narrative closure.

"The Yakshi as the Monstrous Feminine," discusses how contemporary *Yakshi* narratives conflate the wife and the whore, rendering the wife persistently othered through the suspicion that she harbors secrets: what initially appears as mystery and allure later becomes the source of masculine paranoia and mistrust (Karollil and Bindu 168). *Akam* translates this logic into spatial terms, where the home, rather than offering reassurance, becomes unfamiliar and threatening. A telling instance occurs when Ragini exits a room after a brief

exchange and the camera lingers on the empty corridor she leaves behind; her absence is overdetermined as concealment. This moment crystallizes epistemic violence, as masculine anxiety transforms feminine opacity into evidence of guilt, projecting suspicion onto both the woman and the space she inhabits.

The subversiveness of Ragini's portrayal lies in how her desire is articulated not through dialogue or romantic display, but through spatial presence and affective withdrawal. Scenes such as those in the kitchen, where she appears immersed in her own world, or moments of physical intimacy that lack performative seduction, create a mode of feminine presence that is self-possessed rather than reactive. Ragini's failure to respond to Srini's growing paranoia further destabilizes conventional gender roles. Her silence becomes unsettling not because it signifies danger, but because it denies the male protagonist epistemic access. This refusal to be 'read' disrupts the patriarchal expectation that female desire must be transparent, available, and responsive to male interpretation. In this sense, Ragini's presence embodies what Irigaray calls a feminine discourse that resists being subsumed into masculine logic.

The Spectral Feminine Beyond Horror Trope

By refusing to make Ragini's motivations and inner life fully knowable, *Akam* reclaims female desire as a private, interior force rather than a spectacle for male consumption. The film critiques the traditional binary in which women are either idealized as nurturing and docile or vilified as dangerous and excessive in their desires. Ragini fits neither role; she is neither a loving wife nor a fatal seductress in any conventional sense. Instead, the film allows her ambiguity to remain unresolved, making her interiority a site of both narrative and political resistance. In doing so, *Akam* not only reimagines the *yakshi* myth through a feminist lens but also opens up new representational possibilities for depicting female desire less as an object of fear or control, and more as an autonomous and spectral force that destabilizes patriarchal narratives.

The feminist, Barbara Creed, has discussed the trope of the "monstrous-feminine," noting how horror films often frame the woman's body as the source of fear and abjection (3). In *Akam*, the fear does not stem from Ragini's body per se, but from her refusal to conform to the roles of the ideal wife. Her ambiguity, her silence, her sexuality—none of these fit Srini's expectations. As

a result, she is framed as monstrous, even though she commits no monstrous acts.

The notion of the feminine as a ‘spectral’ presence in *Akam* extends beyond supernatural tropes. It intersects with broader feminist questions of representation, knowledge, and power. The film questions who is allowed to know, who is seen, and who is believed. Srini’s descent into madness is not just psychological; it is epistemological. His world collapses because it cannot accommodate a woman who refuses to be possessed emotionally, sexually, or narratively. In this context, spectrality becomes a feminist epistemology where ghost stories evolve as a means of rewriting history, of including the excluded (Brogan 5). Ragini is excluded from Srini’s understanding, from the film’s narration, and from direct speech. But her spectral presence destabilizes the entire narrative structure. She does not haunt through action but through absence and withdrawal. This aligns with a feminist politics of opacity, as proposed by Édouard Glissant, who argues for “the right to opacity” as a resistance to the imperialist and patriarchal demand for transparency (Glissant 189). Ragini’s refusal to ‘explain herself’ is thus an assertion of her subjective autonomy, a radical insistence on the validity of interior life beyond male comprehension.

Nair’s directorial choices further reinforce the feminist thematics of *Akam*. The film avoids melodrama, horror tropes, and jump scares. Instead, it cultivates a slow, meditative rhythm that invites viewers into a contemplative state. The use of long takes, negative space, and subdued color palettes creates an atmosphere of disquiet, not terror. This aesthetic restraint is crucial as it shifts the focus from *what happens* to *how perception is shaped*. The editing is elliptical, often leaving gaps in time and information. Ragini is frequently framed alone, in windows or doorways, reinforcing her position both inside and outside the domestic sphere. These visual choices reflect a cinematic language of ambiguity, which resists patriarchal narrative closure. Moreover, the sound design characterized by minimal music, ambient noises, and silences deepens the sense of estrangement. Sound, like space, becomes a medium of haunting, suggesting that feminine presence is felt rather than seen. In this way, the film mobilizes a feminist poetics of the spectral, grounded in aesthetic indeterminacy rather than spectacle.

Conclusion

By reimagining *Akam* as a gendered and haunted interior, *Akam* offers a sustained critique of the patriarchal impulse to dominate the feminine emotionally, spatially, or epistemologically. The domestic space, traditionally coded as knowable and controllable within patriarchal logic, is rendered unstable and opaque, mirroring Srinivasan's psychological fragmentation. Ragini's spatial elusiveness functions not merely as an atmospheric device but as a narrative strategy that exposes the failure of masculine rationality and visual mastery. Her refusal to remain fixed within the frame destabilizes the male gaze, denying it a stable object of desire and undermining cinema's conventional mechanisms of narrative and visual control.

Positioned as both wife and spectral presence, Ragini emerges as a figure of feminist resistance rather than gothic excess. Her silence, opacity, and narrative refusal do not signify absence or monstrosity; instead, they operate as assertions of agency that resist interpretation and containment. By withholding explanatory closure, the film compels viewers to confront the limits of patriarchal knowledge systems that demand visibility, coherence, and resolution from the feminine interior. In this sense, *Akam* reclaims haunting as a political and feminist mode, transforming the domestic interior into a space that cannot be colonized by gaze, logic, or fear. The film ultimately proposes that the unknowability of the feminine interior signifies not absence or lack but a form of power that destabilizes patriarchal cinematic and epistemological authority.

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Voices from the Vault: Feminist Narratives and Resistance in Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho*

Parth Pramanik

Abstract

Goynar Baksho (2013) (transl. *The Jewellery Box*), directed by renowned actress-filmmaker Aparna Sen, is a landmark in the Bengali horror-comedy genre. Adapted from the novel *Goynar Baksho* and the short story *Rashmonir Sonadana* by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, originally published in *Desh* magazine in 1959, the film blends supernatural narrative with sharp social critique. Set in postcolonial Bengal, it traces the lives of three women across generations through the metaphor of a haunted jewellery box, interrogating patriarchal ideology and inheritance. Drawing upon feminist film theories such as Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze,' Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity,' and 'postcolonial feminist thought,' this article examines the evolution of feminist consciousness in the film. The ghostly presence of Rashmoni/Pishima articulates suppressed female desire and resistance, while Somlata and Chaitali reflect the feminist evolution from pragmatic to progressive. Through satire, vernacular expression, supernatural elements, and the domestic sphere, the film critiques gender norms, class, and cultural identity. The study argues that Aparna Sen reimagines feminist agency, offering a powerful commentary on womanhood, resistance, and liberation in contemporary South Asian narratives.

Keywords: Cinema; Feminism; Gender; Identity; Postcolonialism

Introduction

Women's voices in film have always been overshadowed by scripts written by men and dominated by male-centric narratives, despite the medium's long history of influencing and questioning societal attitudes. In Indian films, Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013) stands out as a notable exception, not just because it focuses on three generations of women, but also because it allows them to speak across time, across silence, and even from beyond the grave.

Based on Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's novella, the film switches between historical fiction, satire, and ghost story to create a complex narrative on women's agency, resistance and transformation in a patriarchal culture.

Set against the backdrop of post-Partition Bengal and spanning over several decades, *Goynar Baksho* follows the lives of three women: Pishima/Rashmoni, an elderly widowed aunt who refuses to go quietly into the margins; Somlata, a young housewife navigating the domestic expectations of a traditional household; and Chaitali, a modern, politically aware girl with dreams of her own. The linking thread among these three women is a *goynar baksho* (jewellery box) that becomes far more than a physical object. It turns into a metaphor for secrets, inheritance, power, and the silent struggles passed down from one generation of women to the next. At its core, the film is a feminist reflection on voice and visibility. By using the ghost of a repressed woman as a narrator, Aparna Sen skilfully blurs the line between the literal and the metaphorical, allowing the past to speak to the present. In doing so, *Goynar Baksho* not only critiques the patriarchal structures that have historically silenced women but also offers a narrative of resistance that evolves with time.

This article argues that in *Goynar Baksho*, each female character embodies a different mode of resistance—from bitterness and wit to economic independence and political activism. This essay also seeks to understand how Sen's film reclaims the suppressed voices of women and offers a layered feminist vision that speaks to both the past and the present.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To explore the feminist perspectives of *Goynar Baksho*, it is important to situate the discussion within relevant theoretical perspectives that illuminate the film's layered treatment of gender, power, and identity. Through the lens of feminist film theory, it will attempt to comprehend better how Aparna Sen crafts a narrative that not only centres women but gives them a voice in a world that has often denied them one.

One of the earliest and most influential ideas in feminist film theory comes from Laura Mulvey, whose concept of the 'male gaze' argues that mainstream cinema often treats women as objects to be looked at rather than as subjective

agents. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that cinematic conventions frequently align the camera, the narrative, and even the audience with a heterosexual male perspective, thereby turning the female characters into objects of visual pleasure (Mulvey 11). *Goynar Baksho* actively resists this positioning. The women in the film are not romanticized or aestheticized for male consumption; instead, they are given the power to observe, critique, and resist. Pishima, in particular, disrupts the gaze with her unsentimental commentary on the lives of others and her presence as a ghostly narrator destabilizes the patriarchal control over both the narrative and its meaning.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity advances this discussion further. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler posits that gender is not a stable identity but rather a performance that is repeated through social norms and expectations (Butler 25). Each of the women in *Goynar Baksho* perform gender differently, revealing the constructed nature of femininity. Although Somlata seems to fit the stereotype of a dutiful homemaker, she challenges it by taking initiative for the family's financial survival through entrepreneurial initiatives. Chaitali, however, displays a very different kind of femininity that is unapologetic, politically involved, and unconcerned with conventional home life. These women demonstrate Butler's notion that gender is a variable and debatable process by fighting against or reinterpreting the roles they have been given.

To better understand how these performances are shaped by the Indian context, postcolonial feminist thought is especially useful. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," critiques the tendency in Western feminist scholarship to represent women from the Global South as a monolithic group—voiceless, oppressed, and passive (Mohanty 337). Instead, she urges for an analysis rooted in historical and cultural specificity. *Goynar Baksho* offers precisely this. Its characters are not merely victims of patriarchy, but active agents negotiating power within their socio-cultural realities. Pishima's ghost, still clinging to her jewellery, symbolizes both resistance and a refusal to be erased. Somlata reclaims economic space within the domestic realm, while Chaitali represents a generation that seeks political and personal liberation. The film thus resists homogenizing feminist narratives and instead portrays how women's resistance

is shaped by class, caste, and generational experience.

Methodologically, this article combines close visual analysis with theoretical interpretation. Specific scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs—especially the recurring symbol of the jewellery box—will be analyzed to understand how feminist resistance is enacted or subverted in the film. Pishima's ghostly voice, Somlata's metamorphosis, and Chaitali's idealism each provide unique ways to interpret gender as a performative, ever-changing identity. These analyses will be supported by critical frameworks drawn from feminist and postcolonial theory. The aim is not only to trace feminist themes in the film but to show how *Goynar Baksho* contributes to the wider discourse of feminist cinema by offering a narrative that is both culturally rooted and ideologically radical.

Generational Feminisms: A Triadic Exploration

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Goynar Baksho* is how it reflects the progress of feminism through three generations of women, each influenced by their social and historical context but united by common battles. The characters—Pishima, Somlata, and Chaitali represent various expressions of womanhood and resistance. They constitute a three-way picture of feminist development, moving from suppression and rebellion to compromise and ultimately emancipation. Through these three women, Aparna Sen explores the idea that feminist consciousness is not monolithic but fluid—rooted in context, shaped by class and culture, and constantly evolving.

Pishima: The Ghost of Resistance

Pishima, the elderly widow whose spirit refuses to leave the house after death, is at once a haunting figure and a fierce presence. She represents an older generation of Bengali women raised under the suffocating norms of colonial patriarchy. Pishima's existence was characterized by silence, deprivation, and denial; she was married off at a young age and became a widow even earlier. However, she becomes quite outspoken and forceful in death. In a world where she has lost everything else, her compulsive protection of her jewellery is a symbolic act of dominance over the only form of power that remains to her.

Her dialogues, often laced with sarcasm and scorn, reflect both bitterness and clarity. At one point, she scoffs, "*Ei poribaar ta chheleder hatey noshto hoye jabe!*" [transl. "This family will be ruined in the hands of these men!"] (Sen 2013). Such remarks not only reveal her distrust of patriarchal incompetence but also highlights how she desires to see a woman take charge. Her ghostly presence functions like a subversive voice from the past—a voice that was silenced throughout her lifetime but has power in the afterlife. In this way, Pishima aligns with what Gayatri Spivak calls the 'subaltern' woman whose voice has been historically buried but finds occasional ruptures to speak (Spivak 284). Moreover, her transformation throughout the film—from a possessive spirit to a mentor figure for Somlata—indicates that feminist resistance is not static at all.

Somlata: Subversion through Strategy

Somlata, the young bride married into Pishima's decaying aristocratic household, represents a quieter but no less effective kind of resistance. At first glance, she seems to accept her domestic role without protest. Yet when she discovers Pishima's hidden jewellery box, she does something unexpected: she uses it to secure capital to start a saree business. This act is quite revolutionary because it challenges economic dependency—a core mechanism of patriarchal control.

Somlata's story resonates with the kind of feminism that grows from within the domestic space. Scholars like Nandita Bhavnani argue that Indian women have often found subtle ways to resist patriarchy while maintaining the outward appearances of tradition (Bhavnani 47). Somlata fits into this mold—negotiating power without direct rebellion, ensuring survival while gradually shifting the family's gender dynamics. Her secret partnership with Pishima's ghost also symbolizes how past and present feminisms can co-exist and support each other. But Somlata is not without contradictions. She sometimes hesitates, defers to elders and maintains the façade of an obedient daughter-in-law. These moments reveal the complex tightrope that many Indian women walk balancing selfhood and social expectation. Her feminism is not framed in slogans but in quiet choices that gradually alter the foundation of her household. As Judith Butler might suggest, Somlata's gender performance evolves as she navigates and reshapes the social script written for her (Butler 191).

Chaitali: Radical Independence and Political Awakening

Chaitali, the youngest woman in the narrative, belongs to a generation no longer willing to compromise with tradition. She is modern, educated, politically aware and uninterested in the jewellery box that once symbolized power for her predecessors. Her romantic involvement with a Naxalite revolutionary signals her desire for political transformation alongside personal freedom.

Chaitali's feminism is strong and outspoken. She challenges family norms openly, chooses her own path and expresses her opinions without any hesitation and apology. Her indifference towards the generational jewellery box conveys her rejection of not just physical inheritance but the psychological inheritance of female subjugation. Her actions reflect what Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to as a feminism rooted in historical consciousness and resistant to traditional narratives of passive femininity (Mohanty 344). Yet, Chaitali is also a product of privilege. Unlike Pishima or Somlata, her freedom comes with access to education and mobility. The film subtly acknowledges that feminist freedom is never evenly distributed, and that class and generational shifts play a major role in shaping what kind of resistance is possible.

Through these three women, *Goynar Baksho* constructs a layered narrative of feminist evolution. Each character reflects a different mode of survival and agency, and together, they show the resistance against patriarchy.

The Jewellery Box as a Feminist Metaphor

The whole narrative of *Goynar Baksho* revolves around a jewellery box. Even though it seems to be merely a box containing gold and family treasures, it actually represents a complex and multifaceted metaphor for female agency, generational inheritance, and quiet rebellion. Aparna Sen uses this seemingly ordinary object not just as a plot device, but as a symbolic thread that weaves the stories of three women together, transforming the box into a site of memory, rebellion, and identity.

For Pishima, the jewellery box is her last refuge—a personal treasure that represents everything she was denied in life. As a young widow under colonial patriarchy, she lost her colour, adornment, sexuality, and voice. The *goynar baksho* becomes her only source of power in a world that silenced

her. In a world that silenced her, the *goynar baksho* became her only source of authority. Even after her death, she fiercely protects it, making it her emotional anchor. The box represents a safe space where all of her repressed wishes, frustrations, and assertiveness have been kept. Her possessive attitude is not driven by greed but by a refusal to relinquish control in a life where she was denied autonomy.

When Somlata finds the box, the symbolism becomes more profound. Unlike Pishima, who kept the jewellery box hidden, Somlata chooses to use it to free her family from financial collapse—not to adorn herself. She pawns the jewels and uses the money to open a saree business that establishes her own economic agency. Somlata's use of the box aligns with material feminist theory which emphasizes the importance of objects and the domestic sphere in women's negotiation with power. As Annette Kuhn observes in her study of feminist film theory, material objects in women's narratives often function as "containers of memory and social tension" (Kuhn 29). Here, the jewellery box becomes a vessel not only of memory, but of transformation—changing hands, changing meaning and changing lives.

But the true evolution of the symbol comes with Chaitali. To her, the jewellery box holds no charm. She adamantly rejects the jewellery when it is offered to her, saying that she has no interest in the trappings of inherited femininity. Her rejection of the box signals a generational shift from material assertion to ideological emancipation. At first glance, Chaitali's attitude might seem ungrateful or disrespectful, but it signals a significant turning point in the feminist path: the freedom to select what to inherit and what to reject. As cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai writes, "the social life of things… illuminates the human transactions and calculations that enliven objects" (Appadurai 5). In this case, the jewellery box carries the weight of three women's lives, each of whom negotiates its meaning differently based on her historical context.

Through this simple, ornate box, Sen captures the complexity of women's lives in a patriarchal society—their silences, their sacrifices, their adaptations and their dreams. The *goynar baksho* is more than an ordinary box; it is a metaphor for the intergenerational struggle for self-definition, autonomy, and voice.

Ghosts, Genre and Gender: Subversion through Storytelling

One of the most distinctive features of *Goynar Baksho* is its genre-bending narrative. Aparna Sen skilfully combines elements of ghost story, satire, period drama, and social critique to create a film that is both entertaining and politically charged. This blending of genres serves as a deliberate strategy to challenge dominant narratives about women, especially within the traditionally conservative structure of Bengali families. By using humour, supernatural elements and an intimate domestic setting, the film manages to speak boldly about patriarchy without becoming didactic or alienating.

The figure of Pishima's ghost is particularly important in this regard. In most cultural traditions, ghosts are associated with fear, unfinished business, or vengeance. However, the ghost of Pishima is not like the frightening spirits seen in horror movies. She is witty, sharp-tongued, unapologetically critical and at times hilariously blunt. Through her ghostly commentary, she reclaims a space in the narrative from which she had long been excluded. As film theorist Tania Modleski notes, "the female ghost often serves as a narrative device to voice what was repressed in life" (Modleski 71). In *Goynar Baksho*, Pishima becomes the literal voice of the repressed; she speaks what she was never allowed to say while alive. Her sarcastic observations on the uselessness of the men in the family, her secret approval of Somlata's independence and her disdain for social hypocrisy turn the ghost from a symbol of fear into a force of feminist subversion.

Aparna Sen's use of humour is just as revolutionary. Despite covering significant topics such as widowhood, economic catastrophe and political upheaval, the movie retains its light-hearted mood throughout. Humour becomes a feminist tool—it disarms, exposes, and questions. As feminist scholar Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues, "comedy provides a space where women can momentarily escape the constraints of decorum and decorous femininity" (Karlyn 128). In the film, Pishima's unfiltered speech and Somlata's sly manipulation of her in-laws serve precisely this purpose—they push against the boundaries of 'good' womanhood and offer alternatives that are both clever and liberating.

The home itself is another important area for rebellion in the film.

Historically, the home has been viewed as a place where women are confined. Inside these walls, women have been reduced to the roles of caretakers, nurturers, and passive custodians of tradition. But *Goynar Baksho* establishes the house as a place for feminist negotiation and action. This transformation of domestic space into political space recalls bell hooks' idea of the homeplace as a site of resistance. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks writes that "the homeplace [is] that space where Black women could affirm one another and create communities of resistance" (hooks 42). While her context is different, the idea resonates with *Goynar Baksho* as well. The home in the film is not just a background setting—it becomes a battleground where patriarchy is subtly but steadily challenged, and where new forms of solidarity and agency emerge.

Even the choice to set the story across decades—starting from the Partition era and ending in the late 1970s—adds another layer to Sen's storytelling strategy. The ghost's timeless presence bridges these periods, suggesting that the struggles women face may change in form but persist across generations. This historical sweep allows Sen to reflect on both continuity and change within Bengali society, while always keeping the focus on female experience. In *Goynar Baksho*, Sen does not preach feminism—she stages it through ghosts, jokes, whispered conversations, and everyday rebellion.

Domesticity, Language and Cultural Subversion

In *Goynar Baksho*, the domestic sphere is not merely a backdrop but a contested space where power is both asserted and negotiated, particularly through language and cultural performance. Through everyday objects and ordinary conversations, Aparna Sen brings out the quiet, persistent tension between tradition and agency, revealing how women manipulate and reinvent the very structures that once confined them.

The household in which most of the film is set is an old *zamindar* (landed aristocrat) mansion—decaying, cluttered, and symbolically stagnant. Within its crumbling walls, the women strictly maintain the routines shaped by generations of patriarchal rule: serving food to male members, observing rituals, and upholding the family's social standing. However, these apparently passive behaviours are frequently accompanied by irony and resistance. For example,

Somlata performs her duties dutifully, but once she gains access to Pishima's jewellery box, she begins to manipulate the same domestic system to her advantage. She uses the gold not to decorate herself, but to financially support the family on her own terms. Her dual role—dutiful daughter-in-law by appearance, entrepreneurial woman in practice — is a perfect example of how domesticity may be used as a guise for rebellion.

Sen's feminist storytelling is also deeply rooted in language, especially in how Bengali is used in the film. The women speak in everyday idioms, familial slang, and sometimes in bitter sarcasm. In particular, Pishima's ghost is infamous for her sharp words. She frequently employs a tone that combines authority and irritation, makes fun of the men in the home for their incompetence and uses dry humour to refer to her history.

This use of colloquial and regionally textured speech challenges the sanitized, hyper-literary dialogues often found in mainstream Indian cinema. As scholar M. Madhava Prasad has argued, Indian cinema has historically been dominated by nationalist and patriarchal ideologies, where the woman often functions as a symbol rather than a subject (Prasad 74). In *Goynar Baksho*, Sen resists this pattern. Her women speak with complexity—sometimes bitter, sometimes funny, often contradictory—and their words reflect real emotional and cultural conflicts, not just roles scripted for narrative function. Through these layers of domesticity and language, Aparna Sen gives us a narrative that is deeply embedded in Bengali culture but not bound by its conventions. As the movie softly argues, power may reside in silence as well as in speech, and occasionally in a single sarcastic remark made from beyond the grave.

Conclusion

In *Goynar Baksho*, Aparna Sen does not hand us a singular image of a 'liberated woman.' Instead, she presents a rich, ironic, and deeply situated narrative where female agency is found not in defiance alone, but also in inheritance, adaptation, and transformation. The jewellery box, once a symbol of possession and repression, becomes a narrative device through which the buried voices of women are retrieved and revalued. Sen's feminism is neither imported nor overtly ideological—it is lived, layered, and responsive to the

nuances of Bengali culture and history. Her ghost is not just a ghost; her widow is not merely mournful; her housewife is not merely obedient; and her modern girl is not simply rebellious. They are all, in their own ways, writing over the silences they have inherited.

Consequently, Aparna Sen's film is not just a story of three women—it is a meditation on feminist legacy. Who speaks for the silenced? Who inherits the weight of resistance? And what do we do with the box, once it's ours?

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Deepa Mehta's *Cooking with Stella*: A Cinematic Intersection of Delicacies, Dreams, and Diplomacy

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Abstract

Deepa Mehta is a critically acclaimed Indo-Canadian filmmaker. The choices of stories adapted by her are often eccentric, yet phenomenally portrayed. Her magnum opus, Elemental Trilogy: *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water,* are often the centre of discussions, rendering her other works underappreciated. *Cooking with Stella* falls into the latter category. The simple story of a cook named Stella who practices regular thievery in the house brings out the emotional and social interdependence of humans. The food emerges as much more than a mere culinary product in the story, thereby creating a culinary space and textualizing the act of cooking. The article aims to revisit *Cooking with Stella* and comprehend the film by situating food at its core. This article will engage with food, not just in the form of a meal or a delicacy, but to understand its potential to interfere with the social structures and reveal internal human complexities. It also seeks to foreground and discuss several cultural motifs that are carefully placed throughout the movie. By employing culinary-cinema topology methodology, the article will analyse how Mehta's writing and direction illustrate the subtle integration of food into the politics of gender and class and communities.

Keywords: Cooking; Diplomacy; Human relationships; Dreams; Identity

Introduction

> …not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be the most unquestionably natural. (Strauss 164)

Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' categorises food as part of the physiological needs of humans to survive at the most basic level. Food provides us nutrients

and energy, but it is also a marker of hunger, memory, nature, culture, community, history, heritage, and one's identity. Food holds a special place in every culture and functions differently according to the social needs. The historical and cultural relevance of food in Indian subcontinent dates back to the Vedas. Indian food history is diverse due to the constant cross-cultural influx of invaders and traders, thus, adding to the richness of an Indian *thaali.* Along with the culture, the nature of food holds great significance in defining a person's identity, ideologies and nature. Where Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's phrase, "Tell me what a man eats and I'll tell you the kind of man he is" (ix) is prominently alluded to in academia in the West, on the other hand, Indian scriptures such as *Bhagvad Gita* evince the association of different foods as markers of distinct faith and character since ancient times. (Bhagvad Gita Chapter 17) Pushpesh Pant, a renowned food historian, further expounds this diverse nature of food in his book *Cuisines*.

> The basic tenets of Indian thought are reflected in India's culinary philosophy — the concept of *satvik*, *rajasik* and *tamasik* foods which is matched with three different personality types in the famous spiritual text, *ShrimadBhagwatGita*. These three terms roughly correspond to spiritual, active and inert materials respectively. (Pant 11)

Hence, this borrowed concept of food from *Bhagvad Gita*, when understood from the perspectives of psychology, attributes food as a carrier of energies and vibrations. Food is an integral part of many traditions and rituals, particularly in major South Asian cultures, where it is offered to elders, priests, gods, and ancestors. It is offered to God as *bhog*, as it is called in Hindu households, as a gesture of gratefulness for the food and life. The kitchen, then, becomes a sacred space, not accessible to all but only to family members and the cook, called *maharaj* in most traditional *Hindu* households.

The conventional role of a cook is not only to provide food but also take the responsibility for feeding the family good, nourishing, soulful food. The intention with which the food is prepared is also considered a major factor while deciding the energy of the food we consume. David Livert in his book *A Psychology of Food, Cooks, and Cooking* also attests to this as he says,

> The domestic cook is in charge of the menu and assumes the burden to satisfy the flavor, diet, and other likes and dislikes of household eaters (Rawlins & Livert, 2019). The world of the domestic cook is part of the invisible labor of the household. The labor of planning, coordinating, juggling, and strategizing how to feed a family, in addition to physical labor of pushing a cart down an aisle or fixing a salad or grilling a burger, may often not be acknowledged by others in the household or considered equivalent to work for pay (DeVault, 1991). (Livert 18)

While cooking can be a solo act performed by the cook who is in charge of the food, the act of commensality brings people together. It is not only about sitting together and sharing food, but also about sharing experiences that create memories and foster bonding at both social and personal levels. Susan Fiske, in her work *Social Beings: A Core Motives Approach to Social Psychology,* underscores the need for belonging and affiliation, which are also achieved through the practice of commensality. As social beings, humans necessitate the cooperation and inclusivity that is harboured when people come together. Eating together nurtures compassion and warmth between individuals.

The society, however, is not untainted and corruption, somehow, in some form or another, creeps into houses and takes root in such spaces. This loophole leads us to question the trust, moral values, ethics, and purity of the relationships that are fostered in homes between the family and its supposed members. Interesting circumstances surface when the literal and metaphorical connotations of 'consumptions' become interchangeably mobile. What becomes even more fascinating are the uncharacteristic changes that people undergo in order to protect their loved ones, where moral compromises are made without even realisation. Food may not be the primary focus in most scenarios, but in the end, it's always about the food.

Literature Review

The intersection of food, literature, and cinema, as a multidisciplinary subject, has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years, and it continues to evolve and merge into the mainstream canon. The relevant scholarship reshapes narratives and shifts perspectives, focusing on culture, language, and

communities through the lens of food-centric methodologies.

Steve Zimmerman, with his book *Food in Film,* published in two editions (2005 and 2009), stands as one of the pioneers discussing food scholarship in movies. By surveying and analysing over 900 films in the two respective editions of his book, Zimmerman foregrounds the food in films and discusses how it functions as more than a mere prop. The books explore the narrative power of food as they dissect the select films. Zimmerman's acute focus on colours and textures of food visuals, in a way, lays the foundation to centralise food in many food-centric and non-food-centric films, which ultimately affects the cinematic presence of food in films. This presence stimulates the underlying emotions of the people and thus encapsulates human nature. Zimmerman attests to the artistic qualities of food, thus highlighting its constituency in the mise-en-scène.

> That food of all kinds eventually found a prominent place for itself in films should not be all that surprising, considering that cooking and filmmaking share many of the same aspirations and techniques. In both ventures the 'artiste' works with color, texture, style, and tastes — with a dash of intrigue thrown in to create an experience that is more than just eating or just watching a movie. (Zimmerman 20)

Bloom's understanding of cinema resonates with what Zimmerman said in his comparison of cinema and food. In his paper, "Maternal Food Memories in Lin Cheng-Sheng's *27°C*: *Loaf Rock* and Eric Khoo's *Recipe: A Film on Dementia*," he states, "Analogous to culinary arts, cinema, which is made for consumption, combines art and science, embodies culture, and incorporates tradition and innovation, as I show in this comparative study" (Michelle E. Bloom 26) Employing the interdisciplinary approach, Jane F. Ferry combines films, semiotics, anthropology, and history in her research book,*Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication.* Ferry postulates the communicative powers of food that extend the boundaries of the kitchen and hold the potential to communicate and influence people beyond the ambit of the kitchen. The research has studied food and dining in combination, in relevance to the films portraying American landscapes. *Gastro-modernism: Food, Literature, Culture,* edited by Derek Gladwin, examines the literal,

physical, and metaphorical spaces created and observed in the modern literature from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.

In her collection of essays, *Cuisine and Symbolic Capital: Food in Film and Literature*, Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar encompasses the diverse metaphorical facets of food. Ten chapters divided into three categories based on cross-cultural writings locate food at the centre of social relationships. The struggles of identity formation and the intersection of cultural constructs such as class, gender, and nationality mediate the vitality of the role that food plays in defining the broader socio-spatial ideologies. This cognition of cultural and structural powers from a reversible 'prism of food cultures' is taken forward by Simi Malhotra, Kanika Sharma, and Sakshi Dogra in their work *Food Culture Studies in India: Consumption, Representation and Mediation*. The book thoroughly augments the scholarship on food studies as it constantly engages with identity, politics, cultural significance, power dynamics, and moral, ethical and geographical boundaries signifying food as a socio-economic stimulator. David Livert in his book *A Psychology of Food, Cooks, and Cooking*, brings the cook to the centre of the discussion, one who makes food and feeds people. Livert's psychoanalysis of people producing and consuming food not only suggests their food preferences but also sheds light on their identity, their routines, their ideologies and character traits, which primarily guides this research in the analysis of Stella, the protagonist. Claude Fischler's persuasive paper "Commensality, Society and Culture" engages with the exchange of meals, thoughts, and ideologies, which further foster the intimacy, trust, and inter-dependency among the people who sit together to eat. It constantly reshapes the relationship between the cook and the diners and helps in social bonding.

The wide scholarship on food studies across communities and landscapes has proven to be a guiding discourse, paving literary pathways to explore the genre further. However, while a greater body of works focuses on American, English, and French food literature across genres, a significant gap can be identified when it comes to South Asian interdisciplinary studies, in particular with regard to food studies. In the celebration of Western food-centric cinema, the literature surrounding oriental gastronomic gems remains oblivious to the world. While India's 'Butter Chicken' and 'Biryani' rank as one of the top

foods across the globe consecutively, the dynamics that Indians share with their cooks and the regard for their food practices still may seem beyond rational comprehension to non-Indians. This article highlights the importance of studying films like *Cooking with Stella* by examining it from a character-centric perspective rather than a plot-centric one. By situating food at the intersection of visual and metaphorical standpoints of cinema and literature, social and personal identity, class, community, politics and human relationships can be understood from fresh perspectives.

Analysis

Deepa Mehta, the renowned Indo-Canadian director and screenwriter, encapsulates human relationships and portrays them so immaculately in her films that each scene and every dialogue becomes a subject of study. Her characters are often layered epitomes of social characters. The choice of strong female protagonists is evident in each of her films, with a marvellous trajectory from a place of pity to a position of power and agency. From Radha, Sita, Shanta, Kalyani, Chuiya, to Stella, her often controversial characters transcend their existing status quo on different levels. Although her initial works, including the trilogy, have been sincerely and rightfully appreciated by the critics, cinephiles, and Mehta's fans, for foregrounding the social issues that were way ahead of their time and her remarkable narrative skills, it seems the right time to move forward and acknowledge the existence of her other works.

Cooking With Stella (2009), directed by Dilip Mehta and co-written by Deepa Mehta, is a visual treat for cinephiles. An eccentric piece of art—the movie is an impeccable amalgamation of dreams, diplomacy, and delicacies. Diplomacy is ubiquitous throughout the film. The film starts with a list of groceries curated by Stella and thus suggests the magnitude of the role food plays in shaping the lives of the characters. Dialogues delivered by the 'diplomat' cook, Stella, are replete with food innuendos. The simple grammatical error by one of the characters in the film, by addressing Stella as diplomat cook instead of a diplomat's cook, proves to be an ironic prolepsis intentionally deployed by Mehta. At the very beginning of the film, eponymous Stella foreshadows her ingenious schemes while speaking over a phone call: "ek murga jaa raha hai to dusra aa bhi raha hai" (*Cooking with Stella* 00:01:12-00:01:14) which simply

translates to "although one fool (diplomat) is leaving, another is coming too."

Diplomacy steps into the house with the arrival of Canadian Embassy Diplomat, Maya Chopra, 'diplomat' husband, Michael, and their infant, Zara. Stella takes them through the house, primarily focused on introducing Maya to her assumed place in the house as she says, "This is your kitchen, Madam" (Cooking with Stella 00:05:02-00:05:04). Stella's hesitant reaction to the revelation of the truth about Michael being the house-husband portrays her as a stereotypical product of patriarchy. Floyd, in his influential paper "Coming out of the Kitchen: Texts, Contexts and Debates," stresses this centuries-old assignment of traditional roles of women. "The kitchen has been very decisively argued to be marked out as a zone of feminine subjection, where women must manage a ceaseless routine of work to the satisfaction of people further up the domestic, social and political hierarchy." (Floyd 62)

Maya Chopra, a confident young diplomat, is mostly occupied with her office work guilt-free. Her engrossment in her work is reflected in one of the scenes where Michael and Maya are sitting at a table, but both seem on a different page altogether. While Michael cannot help but stop discussing his culinary experiments with Stella, Maya speaks the language of bureaucracy, sharing her office experiences. Maya, with her little presence on the screen, leaves a strong impact on the audience as a career-driven, goal-oriented woman with dreams and passion. Dreams emerge as one of the prominent themes of the movie. Michael and Stella, too, have dreams which they dedicatedly chase after. Michael dreams to learn authentic South Indian food, and to achieve this dream, he requests Stella to be his *guru*. Stella, on the other hand, dreams of her own house in Kerala which is revealed at the end of the film.

Mehta has portrayed the character of Stella through a kaleidoscopic lens. From being a caretaker to a cook, from a teacher to a treachery plotter, from a devotee to a diplomat; she can evidently be declared a juggler. The intentional use of the term juggler to multitasker is used in consideration of her risk-taking abilities, which aid her in making extra income beyond her salary. Stella performs the role of a domestic cook, literally and representationally, immaculately. Elaborating on the construction of social and personal identity, Wolfson and Garcia share how personal identities are shaped through our experiences as cooks in one of their papers. A similar idea promulgated by

Livert in his work articulates how "A cook's innovative experiences in the kitchen might strengthen her identification as a creative person or a risk taker." (Livert 67) Stella's dynamic character as a convincingly passionate cook and responsible caretaker, as well as a sly swiper and diligent planner of the kidnapping and systematic thievery in the house, along with other workers in the house, justifies her risk-taking abilities as per Livert's statements. Thus, she can be labelled as a smooth liar and a deft thief.

David Livert points out, "From the late nineteenth century, an important strand within feminist theory and activism favoured a kitchenless house; the kitchen was perceived to be the seat of women's oppression" (Livert 61-62). Mehta, in her movie, however, reverses the patriarchy where Stella thrives in her kitchen. She plans and strategizes not only menus for lunch and dinner, but also excels at pilfering imported wines and groceries. Most of Stella's business operates from the kitchen and the pantry. It is Stella's territory, and she has her own golden rules which everyone who enters her domain must abide by. It is evident in the scene where she prohibits Michael from entering the kitchen with shoes on, "Sorry, Sir, no shoes in my kitchen."(*Cooking with Stella* 00:10:54-00:10:57)

Stella's kitchen then performs as a contact zone[1], a space where Stella and Michael meet, not as employer and the employed but rather as a guru and chela. It becomes pious as a classroom that is unconventional on many levels. Stella's kitchen functions not only as a designated space provided for cooking, but the kitchen becomes the microcosm of the house that reflects the authorial shifts taking place. Dilip Mehta's observant direction helps the viewers to experience the kitchen as a space that is well encapsulated by Tasha Choma-Sampson and Tosha Sampson-Choma in their paper titled "Come, Dine at my Table: The Enactment of Safe Spaces in the Cookbooks of Maya Angelou," "The kitchen bears a multiplicity of functions. In addition to a space for creating art, it serves as a location for feeding, as well as a site for the impartation of survival skills and instruction in the ways of life." (Sampson and Choma 109) Stella emerges as a confident teacher in a domain where she could have been an invisible helper in the house. This promotion from a cook to a teacher is a result of strategised cognitive behaviour. Mehta employs the concept of commensality in her movie, where Michael and Stella are seen sharing a table

for the first time. The performance of eating together showcases the building trust, mutual understanding and respect, and a budding companionship that Michael and Stella form in the absence of Maya.She gains his trust as a cook and as a kind-hearted guru who is teaching him cookery without any fees. When offered 2.5 dollars per session by Michael, Stella denies it, saying, "money corrupting everything." (00:16:54-00:16:56) This incident foreshadows Stella's greed, which corrupts her conscience so much that she readily conspires to kidnap herself and go to jail as well.

Stella cooks, prays, and steals without any remorse. It is ironic how she abides by rules and principles, yet she profits from whatever and every opportunity she gets. She is traditional in her approach and believes in the social hierarchy. Throughout the film, Stella diplomatically throws phrases which she calls golden rules of servants: "serve first, eat last" (00:11:22-00:11:25), "never hire new servants. They are very dangerous. Middle of the night they enter and …," (00:33:24-00:33:30) "never call master by name." (00:48:13-00:48:15) Mehta creates juxtaposing imageries in particular frames of the film alluding to the persistent paradoxical character of Stella. In one of the scenes, Stella can be seen in the middle of the confession at Church when she receives a call regarding the next pilfering order comprising "Aunty Jemima Syrup (1), Spaghetti sauce (3), Canadian Beer (12)."

Food and hunger have been dealt with figuratively in the film in various contexts. Michael, at one instance, while speaking to Maya, compares Stella's inadequate diet to theirs, intending to warn of the impending dangers of hunger, as he says, "With hunger comes anger and resentment." (00:17:06-00:17:08) It is conspicuous that Michael is projecting his own unfulfilled hunger to be a chef again. On the contrary, Stella seems quite content as her hunger is temporarily satiated through minor thievery. Every space related to food becomes ground for Stella's profit-making. Be it the kitchen, pantry, grocery markets, or supermarkets. She steals not spontaneously but strategically. As a member of the lower social strata, Stella believes it is her right to steal; her way to resist class barriers. Referring to the pantry, she declares to Tannu, the nanny, "ye sab hamara hai, vaise to inka hai, lekin mai kehti hu hamara bhi hai" (00:41:33-00:41:40) which translates to "This is all ours, although it is theirs, but I say it is ours too." She further compares herself to Robinhood and assumes

the responsibility to take from the rich and distribute it among the poor. Even at the end of the movie, she is compared to Martin Luther King. When we see Stella's networking— from the laundryman to the florist to Tannu, all involved in thievery, from Marxist lens, a sense of empathy is evoked for such "class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work," (Marx and Engels 227) From her perspective, she diplomatically conspires and schemes to achieve her dreams and secure her future. She is eventually jailed. The judge's statement towards the end of the movie sums up the intention of the story: "It is true that in the judiciary there is no penalty for dreaming, but for kidnapping there certainly is." (01:31:06-01:31:14) However, Stella had to pay a penalty for her dream, her three years of life, to finally get her own home in Kerala.

Conclusion

Cooking with Stella by Dilip Mehta and Deepa Mehta is a common tale told in an uncommon way. Stella, despite being a mere servant at Canadian Embassy House, comes across as a strong character with her own ideologies, confidence and risk-taking faculties. Stella's performative presence in the diplomat's house as a cook, caretaker, and teacher facilitates her thievery effortlessly while maintaining her image of a good Christian in front of Maya and Michael. The efficient persuasion through good food becomes Stella's chief tactic. Food serves as the central motif in the movie. While the rich recipes add colours to the frames in the film, cultural representation through food is also conveyed to the audience by adding the affective elements of steaming lentils, the process of frying garlic and spices for flavour (*Chhauk* in North India), and Stella's individual style of marinating the fish. The centralisation of food becomes the intersecting point, upholding the lives of most of the characters in the film, directly and indirectly. Since Stella is the cook, she dominantly controls the kitchen and the house, thus marking the authorial shift. This research article has successfully analysed the movie *Cooking with Stella* from a feminist as well as a capitalist approach, where Stella emerges as a real diplomat, bargaining, and negotiating at every opportunity. From small commissions profited through flower bouquets, laundry, and groceries, to stealing silver knives, cufflinks, earrings, to kidnapping her own self, Stella proves to be a diplomatic servant who serves delicacies by day and steals at night to fulfil her dreams.

Notes

1. Contact Zone Theory is given by Mary Louise Pratt in her article "Art of Contact Zone Theory" in which she establishes a cultural space in discourses where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." (Pratt 34)

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Desiring Love, Desiring Freedom: A Close Study of Tamil Romances

Divya KB

Abstract

This article analyses two texts, *Maane Maane Maane* (1986) and *Naan* (1987) by Tamil authors Ramanichandran and Vidya Subramaniam respectively, to assess how the Tamil romance genre uses narratives of desire to speak of female agency and autonomy. It traces the history of female subjectivity of the Tamil woman as her image became co-opted in the imagining of the postcolonial Tamil state, limiting their roles to wives, mothers, and daughters. This article seeks to examine how Tamil romances written by female authors utilized the concepts of romantic love and pleasure to speak of pursuits larger than companionship. Through a close reading of the aforementioned texts supplemented by scholarship on twentieth century Tamil print journalism and cinema, this article attempts to highlight the romance form's ability to subvert and challenge the norm from within. Thus, this article intends to show how Tamil romances build on the complex articulations of desire to develop a nuanced critique of female subjectivity in postcolonial Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Tamil; Romance; Desire; Women; Subjectivity

Introduction

In her study of the romance novel titled *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction* (2014), Jayashree Kamblé summarizes that the scholarship on romance fiction is torn between two extremes. One commends the form as an aspirational medium while the other condemns it as formulaic and aligning with oppressive ideologies (Kamblé 2). The juxtaposition of positive representation of female pleasure with the importance conferred on marriage, a patriarchal institution, has divided scholarship on the feminist potential of romance fiction. To read romance fiction as a subversive form has been further complicated by how the scenes depicting female pleasure tend to reinforce the subject-object dynamic between the male and female characters. However,

it still emerges as an important form to study due to its position as a cultural object that reflects and reworks gender relations.

In India, scholarship on contemporary romance fiction is relatively new and few, with a large majority focusing on Indian English romance fiction as well as imported Mills and Boons (Singh and Uberoi 115) (Parameswaran 837-48). There has been negligible critical attention given to regional romances, especially those produced post-independence. In Tamil scholarship, there has been a disproportionate focus on Sangam literature which contains texts codifying aspects of romance and courtship. Contemporary Tamil romances are considered pulp fiction which has only recently come under academic review. These romances prove to be a compelling area for research due to their conspicuous aversion to sex and intimacy. They emerge in stark contrast to their western inspirations of Mills and Boons fame or even their Indian English counterparts. Thus, their large and steady readership raises questions as to the genre's allure.

Usually revolving around unmarried, educated, working women, Tamil romances focus on their interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex across family, friends, and coworkers. While desire frequently occurs as a topic of discussion, it is pinned by cultural anxieties surrounding chastity, grounded in Tamil history. These discussions on desire surpass sexual desire as they speak to concerns of female agency and autonomy amidst gendered societal restrictions. Traditionally such concerns were washed over by the postcolonial Tamil state's preoccupation with female sexuality. This preoccupation was strengthened by the historical emphasis on *karpu* or female chastity. As it was envisioned with the virtuous Tamil woman at the centre, it bound her to filial and social duties. However, these duties were also affected and transformed by various political movements that engaged with female agency as well as education and mass employment. Thus, female desire became a complicated terrain fraught with cultural constraints in twentieth century Tamil Nadu.

Modern Tamil romances not only reflect these constraints but also take the form to explore questions of female agency and gender relations through the concept of desire. This article contends that Tamil romances written by female authors utilized desire as a device to speak of pursuits larger than companionship. Through a close reading of works by Ramanichandran and

Vidya Subramaniam, it analyzes how through the concepts of *katal* (romantic love) and pleasure, Tamil romances sought to reconfigure gender relations with an emphasis on individuation. It attempts to do so through a close reading of *Maane Maane Maane* (1986) and *Naan* (1987) by Ramanichandran and Vidya Subramaniam respectively. In these texts, through education and employment, women, distanced from their families and filial obligations, become encouraged to explore their purpose and identities under the guise of burgeoning romance. The analysis will be supplemented by the highly publicised discourse on gender and desire in print journalism and cinema of twentieth century Tamil Nadu. Ultimately this article intends to demonstrate how Tamil romances build on the complex articulations of desire to develop a nuanced critique of female subjectivity in post-colonial Tamil Nadu.

The Novel and Its Women

In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Nancy Armstrong had famously asserted that "the modern individual was first and foremost a woman" (8). She argues that the domestic novel, in separating itself from the realm of men and politics, created a new political system with the woman at centre. As the novel disassociated itself from aristocratic powers, it shaped itself for the middle class, particularly through its female characters and their choices pertaining sex and marriage. Through her survey of writers such as Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen, Armstrong illustrates how women were depicted as central to maintaining the social order. The novel, in delving deep into the emotions and decisions of women, made "subjectivity a female domain" (Armstrong 12). As the male and female characters became differentiated primarily by their thoughts, the novel transformed itself to "form the masculine and feminine spheres that characterise modern culture" (Armstrong 22). In order to speak of the society and social relationships, the domestic novel became governed by the discourse on gender, particularly as to what constituted the ideal woman. Here, she asserts that "the modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as feminine discourse" through the proliferation of literature, primarily domestic fiction and conduct books. She comments:

> …narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with

> matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines. (Armstrong 12)

According to Armstrong, defining femininity was a crucial step to demarcate the working classes from the middle class, giving rise to social reformers who could 'guide' the working classes into civil society, successfully quashing any chances of political resistance. However, the more domestic novels attempted to define and represent 'ideal' femininity, the more they exposed it as not natural but rather constructed. Thus, she establishes that domestic novels did not merely reflect society but actively shaped society, especially society's relationship with women.

In colonial India, the novel form was embroiled in complicated cultural contestations from its beginning. Its history as an imported form has been challenged by numerous scholars who have proposed alternate, nuanced understandings of the interaction between the western novel and the Indian prose forms. Sascha Ebeling comments that the earliest Tamil novel:

> emerged as sites of dialogues between tradition and modernity, reality and imagination, didacticism and entertainment, the self and the colonial other, the written and the spoken word, and Tamil and English… the novel was not simply "imported" from English into Tamil literature, …and that it was not a mere "response to a Western impact." (206)

However, it was clear that the Tamil novel was seen as a new medium full of possibilities as its early names *naveenam* and *puthinam*, all suggested newness and novelty. The early Tamil novelists considered the novel both a fertile medium as well as the defense against western critiques of Tamil literature. Many of them were products of Missionary education and worked in the colonial administration, including the author of the first Tamil novel, Mayuram Vedanayakam Pillai. Sita Anantha Raman argues that the authors of the early Tamil novels were "brahman or vellala (upper-caste) men who used fiction to challenge women's unequal access to education and the ritually sanctified customs constraining women's sexual lives" (94). However, their focus on

women's welfare also revealed a disillusionment with traditional institutions such as marriage. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the English novel's attempt to redefine gender relations strongly resonated with the educated, upper-class Indians. She notes that:

> In depicting the man-woman relationship each major Indian writer attempted in his own way to reconcile the demands of the novel with its emphasis on self-determination for the individual with the intransigence of contemporary social reality. (Mukherjee 69)

Marriage thus emerged as an important concept through which the early Indian novelists could not only explore gender relations but also subjectivity. One of the early concerns in the first Tamil novel *Pratapa Mudaliar Charithram* (1879) is the protagonist Pratapa's marriage. When their families oppose their marriage, Pratapa writes to his childhood friend and lover Gnanambal, asking her to elope with him. Her reply reflects conflicted emotions:

> I was greatly saddened by your letter. The likes of which one would hesitate to address even to a prostitute. What impropriety did you notice in my behaviour that made you write to me thus? But should parents ignore the feelings of their children who are of an age to know their mind and proceed as if with cattle in an auction, the right to reject such marriage proposals rests with the children (60-61).

There's a clear gendering of emotions here as Pratapa considered his elopement plan to be a rational and justified move in the face of filial opposition whereas Gnanambal's plea reads as melodramatic. This is understandable considering how women were bestowed with the duty of upholding traditional values. However, Gnanambal also voices her disapproval of arranged marriages, allowing Pratapa (and the reader) to hope for change. Later Pratapa rescues Gnanambal when she gets abducted, following which her father finally permits their marriage. Throughout this Gnanambal exercises great discipline while yearning for Pratapa. While in love with him, she holds on to her father's words and almost marries someone else. Mukherjee had argued that women became "a site for the contestation between traditional norms and modernity"

in the early Indian novel (xiv). This is reflected in Gnanambal's characterisation as she was educated and critical of oppressive traditions but conformed nonetheless. The role of rejecting oppressive traditions lay within the male protagonist who was often modelled on the social reformer or reform-oriented writer.

The Woman and the Nation

C.S. Lakshmi observes that the Tamil nationalist movement of the twentieth century had intrinsically tied the image of the woman to the Tamil state, limiting their roles to mothers, daughters and wives. As a result, she comments that "how a woman generates life, how she dresses, how she lives, what she reads – what she does with her body – become the most crucial issues of debate" (Lakshmi 2954). Women, thus, began to occupy an integral part of Tamil print journalism and cinema in the twentieth century. However, they largely figured in terms of the cultural anxieties they presented in a newly independent state.

For instance, in an essay titled *A good woman, a very good woman: Tamil cinema's women* (2008), Lakshmi elucidates how the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the face of Dravidian politics, co-opted cinema as the "vehicle for projecting its identity, political claims and elaboration of Tamil culture" (17). Here she notes the attempts of early Tamil cinema in erasing the factual presence of women in public spaces, especially their participation in revolts related to the Anti-Hindi agitation and the Self-Respect movement. Instead, it worked towards reinstating a vision of the world where women and their chastity was always at risk, encouraging them to stay within the folds of domestic security (Lakshmi, *A good woman* 21-22). Popular cinema sought to reinforce the sexual vulnerability of women through active demonisation of the public sphere, aligning with cultural calls for restricting women's freedoms.

Meanwhile, popular journals contributed heavily to the objectification of women as recorded by Gita Wolf. Analysing textual and paratextual elements of popular periodicals, she cogently notes that they:

> gratify, in a crude and often perverse fashion, male fantasies and projections of female sexuality; and secondly, they also project, on their large female readership, continually limiting

> traditional versions of women's notions of themselves and their possibilities (Wolf WS-71)

Wolf further notes how these periodicals condemned working women and financial independence, with narratives situating happy endings within a return to tradition. Through its largely negative focus on women's sexuality, popular media provided little room for agential narratives for women.

Meanwhile, political outfits and their affiliated journals recognized sexuality as a productive topic for their ideological means. This was particularly visible in the Dravidian journals associated with the Self-Respect movement. E.V. Periyar, the leader of the Self-Respect movement, contested traditional Hindu Brahmanic family values through his prolonged critique of women's exploitation. Sarah Hodges notes that he located the performance of the Self-Respect philosophy in women and their conjugal lives. Starting with de-ritualised marriages, promotion of widow remarriage and the eschewal of insignia of married women such as *tali* and *bindi*, he called for companionate marriages and family planning that prioritised the woman's health and recognised her as an autonomous individual (Hodges 258-273). In this light, one of Periyar's greatest contributions was his location of sex within individual pleasure, outside of family planning and cultural restrictions (Hodges 270-274) (Sreenivas, *Reproductive Politics* 87-88).

On the other hand, women's magazines influenced by the rise of the Dravidian and the Nationalist movement as well as the establishment of women's organizations were greatly concerned with the institution of marriage. Mytheli Sreenivas in her study of women's magazines published from 1890-1940 records how some texts explicitly politicized marriage, situating it in the larger debate on women's oppression. While most texts focused on the concept of appropriate domesticity that prepared women to be "suitable partners for their newly urbanized and western educated husbands" (Sreenivas, Emotion 64); Sreenivas argues that they also argued for society to transform to meet the conjugal couple's emotional needs, partly alleviating the responsibility placed on the wives. These magazines wished to displace marriage from its social and economic contexts and located it within emotion and *katal* (romantic love) to not only view the husband and wife as equals but also to prioritise conjugal happiness (Sreenivas, Emotion 75-77). *Katal* not only became a means to

reform marriage but also emphasised female autonomy as it mandated that women chose their paths (and husbands). Ideas surrounding *katal* were also linked to the theme of companionate marriages that were popularized in the early Tamil novels. Within this context, women's magazines and romance novels emerged as an alternative medium that sought to view women outside of their sexual vulnerability, focusing on their emotional needs.

Within the diverse narratives surrounding female sexuality as espoused by popular media and political journalism emerged complicated notions of female subjectivity that grappled with the changing boundaries of women's cultural freedoms. They revealed a recognition and anxiety around women's growing autonomy, particularly through their education and employment that translated into unrestricted movement within the public sphere. These changes meant new opportunities for interactions between the sexes outside of filial control and cultural restrictions, especially in urban areas. Tamil romances juxtaposed these legitimate fears with generic tropes and cliches, creating a diverse range of stories exploring women's desires under a patriarchal economy.

Of Love and Pleasure

Ramanichandran's novel *Maane Maane Maane* (1986) begins with the protagonist Udhaya's decision to go to Chennai for work despite the opposition at home. While this decision is rooted in concern for her family's finances, Udhaya's experience in Chennai opens her up to new experiences that challenge her conservative worldviews. Her disciplined, sober lifestyle is constantly challenged by her boss Gauthaman, who is foreign-educated, smooth-talking, and liberal. The duo soon find pleasure in debating their contrasting views regarding culture, tradition, romance, and relationships. Chennai being a metropolis, also exposes Udhaya to people participating in casual sex, dating, and live-in relationships. Gauthaman remains a steady influence as he guides her through these experiences, rationalising them and encourages her to live life on her own terms. For instance, when Udhaya discovers that her friend Anitha is in a live-in relationship with her lover, her immediate reaction is disgust. However, Gauthaman helps her recognize the sincerity of the duo's feelings despite their premarital intimacy. While Udhaya is heavily repulsed by Gauthaman's attitudes towards love and desire, he inspires her to acknowledge

her personal feelings from her cultural learnings. This is best seen in her decision to break off her impending marriage to her childhood friend Pasupathy. While she remains faithful to him as she was 'promised to him' by her family, his frequent dismissal of her job, and in extension her independent lifestyle forces her to rethink their engagement. Gauthaman encourages her to put herself first, inspiring her to discover herself outside of her filial duties. Gauthaman is ultimately proven right as Udhaya's family eventually disregard her sacrifices and accuse her of engaging in prostitution and casual sex. Thinking back on her life of severe abstinence she bemoans to Gauthaman:

> Do I have an iron heart that I just watched Anitha and Sadanand [fall in love] and then I saw you? Do I have a body that lacks feelings? Discipline, tradition, family; I exercised caution in every aspect of my life. Finally, I am the one who created a scene? Body…Body…Body…What is this word? This prick...what does this mean Gauthaman? (Ramanichandran 202)

Recollecting how everyone else around her acted as per their desires, a broken Udhaya throws herself onto Gauthaman, deciding to give up on her life of propriety. However, Gauthaman, finally convinced of his love for her, proposes marriage instead. Meanwhile her stepmother Abhirami brings the police, accusing Udhaya of prostitution. By then, Gauthaman and Udhaya have married, much to Abhirami's dismay. It is then revealed that Udhaya's father was not as ill as she thought and that Abhirami was hoping to permanently ruin Udhaya's reputation to retain her as their primary breadwinner. This series of events helps Udhaya to break away from her family as she prepares herself to start anew with now husband, Gauthaman.

Udhaya's story reflects the impact of employment and education on women as they were able to break free from their restrictive homes. However, the emphasis on female propriety cannot be overlooked. It is through Gauthaman, the worldly, progressive male hero's guidance and acceptance that Udhaya's quest for agency becomes legitimate. The title *Maane Maane Maane* (Translated to Deer, Deer, Deer) too alludes to this as Udhaya is referred to as an innocent deer who can be directed to the right path. Gauthaman's acceptance of Udhaya is positioned as the reward for her sexual

abstinence which is verified through the various 'tests' he imposes on her, some of which prove to be quite dangerous. As with standard romances, the story culminates into a marriage. While it would be wrong to assume the Tamil romance as a feminist narrative, its romance arc provides its female characters the means to recognise their oppression and strive for their agency.

However, *Naan* (1987) (Translated to 'Me'), the short story written by Vidya Subramaniam could be considered a feminist narrative. Fittingly some readers and translators choose to read it as a 'working woman' tale and not a romance. From the beginning, it sets itself apart from other Tamil romances through its limited cast of two characters and lengthy dialogues. The story revolves around an unnamed narrator who is confronted by her mother regarding her promiscuous lifestyle. In the form of a first-person narrative, the story presents the contrasting perspectives of mother and daughter as they argue about marriage and sexual pleasure.

The narrator's mother chastises her, claiming that she is unable to keep her head held high due to her actions. However, the narrator retorts whether the mother was able to keep her head high with the eldest daughter unmarried. It is then revealed that the narrator, the eldest daughter, had taken on her father's job after he died. Laden with both financial responsibilities as well as the filial duties of getting her younger sisters married off, the narrator misses her chance to get married. She then accuses her mother of intentionally disrupting her chances of marriage in order to retain her as their primary breadwinner. The mother deflects the argument to the person the narrator is involved with. When her mother asks her whether she married him, the narrator calmly replies that she has only slept with him. When the mother, incensed, berates her, she retorts:

> Is it my fate or a curse that I have to live with a darkened future to ensure that yours is filled with three meals a day and two new sarees a year; that I have to live as a virgin experiencing no pleasure? (Subramaniam 3)

She further justifies herself that she views marriage as purely a license which she deems unnecessary. When her mother continues to berate her, calling her a sinner, the narrator demonstrates how marriage would not be a feasible

option as that would entail her leaving the former. She asserts, “I am not some god who can sacrifice her petty desires for your greed. I am just an ordinary human being” (Subramaniam 4). She also argues that her mother has no say in the matter as she has nowhere else to go and should respect her decision. She finally concludes:

> Even if you cannot witness a wedding, rejoice that your daughter is with the man she loves. If you truly birthed me with difficulty in ten months, then find it in your heart to bless me. (Subramaniam 4)

In this tale, the narrator, emboldened by her status as the primary breadwinner, asserts her right to seek pleasure, even if it means to deviate from societal convention. However, she also argues for her case that she has fulfilled her duties and more. The narrator’s case proves to be a unique one as she performs the duties of her late father but yearns for what is rightfully hers as a woman i.e., a happy marriage. As her mother failed in arranging a marriage for her, the narrator sought a partner who understands her and her commitments towards her family.

It must be noted that an active career and financial independence are clearly established as the means through which both protagonists can not only move unrestricted but also build the resolve to resist their family’s controlling demands. Although Udhaya is emotionally dependent on her family’s approval of her lifestyle, her position as the breadwinner enables her to reject an unsuitable marriage match, Pasupathy. It is after this rejection that she decides to seriously think about her feelings for Gauthaman. In pitting Pasupathy’s conservatism against Gauthaman’s progressive attitude, the novel also establishes Udhaya’s future with the latter as liberatory. Meanwhile, the protagonist in *Naan* appears to have even more agency through her unconventional romance outside of the constraints of marriage. While female writers of the fifties saw the emergence of working women as the price to be paid for progress (Lakshmi, Tradition), writers such as Ramanichandran and Vidya Subramaniam saw the working women trope as a means through which they could explore the binds of tradition and modernity. However, both of the writers seem to question the validity of the happy endings that society promises to women who follow the path of tradition. The Tamil romance, despite its

reputation as a conservative form, emerges as a questioning form, one that challenges women's ties to their community.

Most Indian theorists have read the failure of Indianised romances in light of the success of international series such as Mills and Boons as indicative of readers wanting their romances exotic fantasies situated away from their claustrophobic patriarchal realities (Parmeswaran 840) (Bagchi 36). However, I argue that the success of Tamil romances points towards readers wanting to engage directly with their patriarchal realities and its victories prove to be much more familiar and rewarding. Linda J. Lee suggests reading romances within their ability "to subvert and challenge existing social structures within the confines of its form" (Lee 54). Building off Lee, I suggest that Tamil romances utilise their patriarchal elements to question whether aligning with patriarchy can actually lead to a truly happy ending for its women. *Maane Maane Maane* (1986) and *Naan* (1987) simultaneously tests and rewards its protagonists on their performance as selfless and dutiful daughters. However, these novels also hold families and societies as potentially destructive to women's happiness, suggesting that blind subservience might not be fruitful. Both novels frame pleasure as a right that is initially refused to its protagonists on account of cultural restrictions and as something that needs to be fought for. The romance arc then becomes a quest for their rightful pleasure, realised through the support of the hero. However, it is only after the heroine takes a stand for herself that her romance is realised. Here, the path to romantic and sexual pleasure is framed as a path to liberation. Ultimately, they take on the universal concepts of desire and pleasure to pose questions of agency and autonomy.

These novels highlight the importance of choosing the right partner. This itself proves to be subversive in a country that traditionally practices arranged marriages. However, this choice is first predated by the women choosing to go against filial and cultural expectations. The novel seems to encourage women to choose themselves. Here the act of choosing is, thus, not merely posited as fantastical and aspirational but rather as a staunchly feminist practice.

Final Caveats

While romance remains one of the few genres that, historically speaking, is exclusively female-coded; it becomes clear that its narratives largely operate

within the confines of patriarchy. Given the history of the representation of desire in Tamil literature as outlined in one of the earlier sections, female desire is seen as a potent force that cannot be contained outside of marriage.

Tamil romances dislocate female desire from its sexual contexts to provide a reinterpretation that is grounded in a quest for freedom. The heroines in these texts desire acknowledgment, respect and harmony, often from their own families. Under the labels of homely and submissive, they voice out their frustration against a moral economy that curtails their desire for recognition and independence. These texts also expose filial ties as attached to larger systems that compromise on the woman's desires, thus encouraging her to look out for herself. They frame desire and pleasure as natural rights that women are entitled to.

However, these texts also show Tamil romances' tendency to uphold marriage as the ultimate form of validation. While they appear to conform with patriarchal expectations of women, they represent a long history of a mediation of gender and desire. They utilise the medium to open up sites of dialogue for pressing women's issues in a form that is accessible, reproducible and highly disseminable.

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Echoes from the Edge: Gendered Solitude and Interior Worlds in Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam

Jyoshna Dutta, Mushrifa Ibrahim and Pranami Bania

Abstract

In order to investigate the intricate portrayal of gendered solitude and psychic resistance in women's narratives of Northeast India, this article looks at selections from Banamallika's edited collection *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. The stories reconstruct solitude as a productive space for agency, self-reclamation, and affective expression rather than as seclusion against the complex sociopolitical and cultural backdrop of Assam. This article examines gendered solitude and psychic resistance in selections from Banamallika's *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, portraying solitude as a space for agency amid Assam's sociopolitical marginality. Drawing on feminist psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's repression and uncanny, the study analyzes Sanhita Devi's *A Void Life*, Runu Medhi's *Freedom*, and Anindita Kar's poems, "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's." These texts reveal how repressed desires and uncanny domestic spaces enable women to challenge patriarchal and regional erasure, functioning as literary counter-memories. Kristeva's abjection complements this by exploring bodily and emotional boundaries. Ultimately, the article highlights subversive interior worlds in marginalized narratives. So, in addition to gendered isolation, and repression, uncanny dynamics will be explored in order to examine how women's narratives unearth suppressed desires and unsettling familiarities in order to restore subjectivity within Assam's socio-cultural context. The article will also look at how these stories encounter hidden emotional conflicts and set off the unnerving interplay between familiarity and strangeness in describing agency using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression and the uncanny.

Keywords: Gendered Solitude; Psychic Resistance; Feminist Psychoanalysis; Freud's Uncanny; Repression

Introduction

Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam by Banamallika is a significant collection that unites female voices from Assam, a culturally rich yet neglected part of India. The stories of this collection explore the emotional and psychological space of women's lives, thereby offering rare glimpses into experiences shaped by personal histories and socio-political realities. Geographical isolation and cultural marginalisation within larger Indian literary and political contexts characterise this area called Assam. Such marginalisation is reflected in the lives of the women depicted in *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, those who live in interior worlds, literally and metaphorically. The text amplifies women's voices from a marginalised region, revealing solitude not as mere isolation but as a gendered psychic space shaped by repression. This article asks: How do these narratives use Freud's uncanny to transform inner worlds into sites of resistance against patriarchal and regional silences? Gendered solitude is a form of isolation tied to societal expectations of women, most notably within the domestic and familial spheres, whereas 'interiority' directs us toward their rich and often conflicted inner lives. These are not just stories of loneliness or silence; instead, they reveal how isolation can also be a space for reflection, resistance, and the quiet reclamation of selfhood. As Dolly Kikon argues, narratives from Northeast India often foreground everyday negotiations of belonging and exclusion, allowing personal stories to reveal broader political and cultural structures (Kikon 62).

A study of texts selected from the anthology will include Sanhita Devi's "A Void Life," Runu Medhi's "Freedom," and Anindita Kar's"Oversized" and "At the Butcher's." It investigates the myriad ways in which women express psychic resistance through text and image. Through feminist psychoanalysis, particularly through the concepts of repression and the uncanny, the selected texts will aim to reframe solitude as radical introspection. In a context where the Northeastern voices of women are repeatedly silenced from the mainstream literary narrative, *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* stands as a monument to the archive of emotional memory as well as symbolic meaning. It shows how solitude, traditionally considered a force of passivity and tragedy, can become a creative force, a journey going inward to self-realisation as well as a subtle act of rebellion.

Objective of the Study

This article analyses how *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* reimagines solitude as a psychic terrain for resistance, exploring visual and textual forms that express women's emotional interiority. It foregrounds Assam's underrepresented voices in Indian literature, evaluates aesthetic contributions to emotional storytelling, and expands on the value of feminist psychoanalysis, focusing on Freud's uncanny and repression to interpret silence as active resistance.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for bringing to light the voices that have been historically silenced or rendered mute i.e., 'woman writers' from Assam, a region very much marginalised, politically and culturally, in India. The term 'double marginalisation' can fittingly be used to explain these women: on one side, women coming through patriarchal situations; on the other, writers from the Northeast who are more often left out of the mainstream Indian literary canon. The article, by orienting itself towards *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam,* puts on a platform these voices and the agonies that their stories bring forth, conjoined with both personal and collective ramifications. It becomes important also insofar as it uses feminist psychoanalysis and particularly Freud's repression and uncanny in grasping how feelings such as sorrow, loneliness, and repression find their expression in literature. All these emotions have been treated in the past as either signs of weakness or as manifestations of psychological sickness, but this work fleshes out the potential of these emotions as a language of resistance and self-expression for women with few open spaces to articulate themselves freely. In addition, this study adds to the discourse of Indian literature by locating experiences away from a metropolitan center. Much of Indian literary criticism has been centered on cities or discourses of the elite class. Conversely, the works under consideration here reveal ways in which solitude and silence from a rural or domestic perspective can act as modes of resistance through which women reclaim agency to contemplate their inner lives. The study not only contributes to literary scholarship but also offers a deeper understanding of how gender, region, and emotion intersect in contemporary writing from Northeast India.

Literature Review

The section presents a survey of the existing literature considered relevant to the article's thrust of gendered solitude, repression, and the uncanny in contemporary women writers from Northeast India, especially Assam. This study brings to bear regional literatures and theoretical approaches, including those of psychoanalysis, regional literary studies in order to place its interventions solidly in the arena of broader critical discussions. Psychoanalysis has been extensively employed by a vast body of scholarship examining Indian women's literature. Psychoanalytic giants such as Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Nancy Chodorow have come to shape the study of female subjectivity, repression, melancholia, and the maternal. A psychoanalytic reading of Freud's theory of melancholia has been applied to read women's narratives of loss and internalized grief, while Kristeva's positing of abjection and the semiotic has allowed for new interpretations of emotional and symbolic lapses in women's writing. But most of these analyses have primarily engaged Indian canonical or urban writers, mostly neglecting the regional narratives.

When it comes to regional literary studies, scholars like Dolly Kikon and Tilottoma Misra have contributed significantly to bringing Northeast Indian literature into academic discussions. More specifically, Misra has demonstrated how women's writing from the Northeast is embroiled within the complex interactions among memory, identity, and socio-political conflict. As Tilottoma Misra notes, literature from Northeast India frequently engages with themes of marginality, silence, and emotional interiority, resisting homogenised narratives of Indian identity (Misra xix). Kikon's anthropological work foregrounds the lived experiences of these women in the midst of militarization and cultural erasure. While these scholars have indeed shed light on the cultural and historical dimensions of women's narratives from the region, relatively less attention has been paid to the interior emotional and psychic worlds of women writers and artists. Zubaan Books have worked for years toward a revolutionary edge of publishing and curating women's literature from Northeast India, thus creating an essential archive of writings that challenge mainstream literary hierarchies. Zubaan collections have embraced various forms like fiction, poetry, memoirs, and graphic narratives, that focus on marginalised voices and question gender, conflict, and identity. Critical studies on the interface between form and affect,

how exactly these writers use graphic and poetic means to express interiority are still nascent.

Psychoanalytic scholarship (Freud, Kristeva) has illuminated female subjectivity in Indian literature, but has often overlooked regional voices. Scholars like Misra and Kikon highlight Northeast women's narratives amid conflict, yet psychic interiors, via uncanny and repression remain underexplored. This article fills the gap by applying Freud's uncanny to Assam's texts, viewing solitude as subversive. While there is growing academic interest in women's narratives from Northeast India, there is limited attention to their inner psychic worlds, particularly at the intersection of gender, repression, and the uncanny. This article aims to address this gap by offering a focused study of *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, where women's solitude and melancholia are not merely personal states but powerful modes of resistance articulated through both words and images.

Research Methodology

In order to investigate how gendered isolation, repression, and psychic resistance are portrayed in selections from Banamallika's anthology *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, this study uses a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis. The goal is to reveal the psychological and emotional aspects of women's experiences through poetic voice and narrative form. Close reading of chosen texts, specifically, "A Void Life" by Sanhita Devi, "Freedom" by Runu Medhi, and "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's" by Anindita Kar is the primary technique employed. Because of their distinctive treatment of themes of loneliness, melancholy, and feminine subjectivity, these pieces have been selected. The analysis pays detailed attention to narrative structure, imagery, monologues, silence, and fragmentation, treating these formal elements as strategies of resistance against dominant socio-cultural discourses that often silence or marginalize women's voices.

Psychoanalytic theory (with an emphasis on Sigmund Freud's ideas of melancholy, repression and the uncanny) and theory of abjection (drawing from Julia Kristeva) comprise the theoretical framework that directs this methodology. A multi-layered reading of the texts is made possible by these frameworks, in which loneliness is not only a theme but also a means of

expressing one's emotions and politics. Additionally, using a comparative lens, the study looks at how various texts create women's psychic interiorities in a range of narrative formats. The study draws attention to the common affective undercurrents as well as the form-specific mechanisms that these works use to express agency and isolation by contrasting the internal landscapes of Reshma in "A Void Life," the unnamed figure in "Freedom," and the poetic voice in "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's."

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on psychoanalysis to interpret the emotional, visual, and narrative textures of selected works from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. The focus is on how women articulate solitude, repression, and resistance through literary and visual forms in a region marked by both patriarchal and geopolitical marginalisation.

Freudian Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's theories serve as a foundational lens through which the article examines the inner conflicts and affective disturbances of female characters. Key Freudian concepts include: Repression, understood as the psychological mechanism by which unacceptable desires or painful memories are pushed into the unconscious, is crucial in analysing characters who remain trapped in cycles of silence and self-blame. Melancholia, which differs from mourning by turning loss inward and creating self-directed aggression, provides insight into characters such as Reshma in "*A Void Life*," whose identity dissolves under the weight of social and familial expectations. The uncanny (*unheimlich*) is particularly useful in exploring how familiar domestic spaces become alienating or oppressive, especially in visual texts where homes, bedrooms, and windows evoke both safety and entrapment. Repetition compulsion, or the unconscious return to traumatic situations, helps decode cyclical behaviors and emotional paralysis within these stories. Freud's repression hides painful desires, leading to melancholia's inward aggression (as in Reshma's self-blame). The uncanny renders familiar spaces alien e.g., domestic rooms evoking entrapment via shadows/mirrors.

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

Building on Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection deepens the analysis of how women negotiate boundaries between the self and the other, especially in relation to the body, home, and identity. Abjection occurs when something once integral to the self is expelled but remains disturbingly close. In this study, abjection is used to interpret the domestic space as both nurturing and threatening, a site where female characters experience care and containment but also alienation and erasure. The female body as a source of both identity and anxiety, especially in narratives where illness, physical limitation, or societal control mark the boundaries of agency. Kristeva's insights help illuminate how disgust, shame, and emotional displacement are woven into the characters' psychological landscapes. Abjection complements by exploring expelled-yet-lingering boundaries, like the female body in patriarchal spaces. Together, these theoretical approaches allow for a rich, multi-layered reading of *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*.

Contribution to Existing Literature

This study adds significantly to the corpus of Northeast Indian literature and Indian feminist literary criticism. *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* highlights a group of voices that are frequently overlooked in scholarly and national discourse, especially those of women writers from Assam, a region that has historically been marginalised in Indian literary studies. The study first presents gendered solitude as a crucial yet little-studied concept in Indian feminist writing. It makes the case that loneliness, which is frequently seen as a sign of marginalisation, can also be a place of resistance, self-reclamation, and psychic negotiation, particularly in situations where women's voices are socially and symbolically silenced. This article advances feminist criticism by framing gendered solitude via Freud's uncanny, treating visual fragmentation as psychic resistance in Northeast narratives.

By demonstrating how women from Assam express resistance through nuanced, psychological, and artistic tactics rather than overt political slogans, the article adds to the expanding corpus of research on regional inclusion and feminist readings. The article presents a new form of political agency by emphasising psychic resistance, which is the act of enduring, remembering, or

internalising pain. Far from being apolitical, it contends that emotional and psychological interiority can be a subdued yet potent form of resistance, particularly in patriarchal and postcolonial structures that aim to obscure the complexity of women. This study expands the field of Indian feminist literary criticism by providing new frameworks for interpreting women's solitudes, silences, and subtle gestures as intricate negotiations with their identities, society, and the place they live in rather than as signs of weakness.

Text Analysis

With an emphasis on how each work expresses gendered solitude, psychic repression, and inner worlds shaped by sociocultural marginalization, this section provides a close textual analysis of three chosen pieces from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. These pieces by Sanhita Devi, Runu Medhi, and Anindita Kar demonstrate how silence, stillness, and fragmentation function as resistance tactics when analyzed via the prism of psychoanalysis. *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* brings together contemporary voices that explore interiority, silence, and gendered experience, making it a crucial archive for examining solitude in Northeast Indian women's writing (Banamallika).

Sanhita Devi's "*A Void Life*": Melancholia and the Fragmented Ego

In "*A Void Life*," Sanhita Devi presents a psychologically raw depiction of Reshma, a thirty-year-old unemployed woman confined within the domestic space. The narrative unfolds through fragmented visual panels, broken monologues, and repetitive self-lacerations ("I am a disappointment," "I am worthless"), all of which mirror the psychic disintegration typical of Freud's melancholia. The protagonist is repeatedly drawn with minimal facial features, often with eyes lowered, obscured, or reduced to short lines, signalling emotional withdrawal and a fractured sense of self. The frequent use of enclosed interiors, such as bedrooms and windows frame solitude as spatial confinement rather than chosen privacy. Panels depicting Reshma seated alone, curled inward, or occupying the margins of the frame visually reinforce her psychic stagnation and lack of agency. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is useful here, as Reshma's repeated self-accusatory thoughts reflect melancholia's defining feature, the internalisation of loss and the turning of criticism inward against the self (Freud 249). Unlike mourning, which

externalizes loss, melancholia turns inward, causing the ego to absorb the object of loss and punish itself for it, a dynamic deeply evident in Reshma's internal dialogue. In Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*, the bedroom, which is normally a place of rest and safety, becomes uncanny, both familiar and unsettlingly strange. This psychological discomfort is exacerbated by the room's mise-en-scène, which includes claustrophobic panels, looming shadows. Reshma's motionless physical arrangement in the space betrays a more profound emotional immobility. Her frequent interactions with windows and mirrors point to a shattered sense of who she is, torn between self-disrespect and desire. Reshma's bedroom becomes uncanny: familiar yet alien through shadows and mirrors, evoking repressed desires. Freud's concept of the uncanny further illuminates how the domestic interior becomes unsettling, as familiar spaces such as the bedroom and home are transformed into sites of psychological discomfort rather than safety (Freud, *The Uncanny* 123). Moreover, Sara Ahmed's concept of "happy objects" explains how cultural expectations attach happiness to socially sanctioned milestones such as marriage, productivity, and emotional fulfillment, making their absence a source of affective failure rather than personal choice (Ahmed 29–30). Reshma's condition is further clarified by Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Here, the female body becomes a site of conflict because it is simultaneously rejected and culturally coded as nurturing. Being unemployed and single, Reshma's body defies social norms and is therefore perceived as deplorable. In addition to social criticism, her shame and inward criticism are a result of internalized cultural narratives about female productivity, beauty, and worth. Crucially, her inner monologue turns into a type of counter-memory, a psychological act of defiance against social and familial expectations to keep quiet. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Reshma's unemployed and unmarried body occupies a socially marginal position, rendered both invisible and disturbing within dominant narratives of feminine success (Kristeva 4). Even in its pain, Reshma's voice demands to be heard, defining solitude as a space that is generative for radical introspection and self-confrontation rather than merely being absent.

Runu Medhi's "*Freedom*": The Silent Longing for Belonging

Runu Medhi's "*Freedom*," is a subtle, nearly wordless visual story that uses a child's eyes to depict loneliness. Here, Runu Medhi's watercolor composition

presents freedom through a deceptively simple, childlike visual idiom that contrasts sharply with the underlying politics of bodily limitation and social visibility. The scene is rendered in soft, uneven brushstrokes and muted natural colours like greens, browns, and greys, creating an atmosphere of ordinariness rather than triumph. A wheelchair-bound person is depicted in the painting sitting at the edge of a bright playground, which is a place full of activity and life but emotionally closed off to the viewer. This figure embodies affect theory, especially the subdued longing linked to the low-level affects of interest, distress, and shame, and is visually divided by a fence or spatial margin. Stillness is highly expressive here. The playground's vivid colors stand out against the child's surroundings' subdued tones, further highlighting the emotional gap between inclusion and exclusion. The wheelchair serves as a metaphor for social and psychic stasis, implying both emotional detachment and physical immobility. The viewer is invited to consider how desire, particularly the desire to connect, is experienced when there is no language or agency to articulate it. The visual arrangement is particularly significant: the swing, a conventional symbol of childhood freedom and motion, is placed in the background and remains inaccessible to the central figure. Other figures in the image engage with everyday activities like sitting, standing, playing, yet there is no direct interaction with the wheelchair user, reinforcing a sense of social isolation without overt dramatisation. The scale and placement of the wheelchair-bound body emphasize visibility without agency, suggesting inclusion in space but exclusion from participation. The absence of facial detail further universalises the figure, shifting attention from individual identity to structural conditions of disability and marginalisation.

The focal point of this desire is the child's gaze. It conveys both quiet resignation and curiosity. Uncanny liminality is evoked by the child's position, not quite inside, not quite outside, which alludes to more general themes of social and regional marginalisation in Indian urban life. Because the scene implies wish-fulfillment without resolution, a longing that remains suspended in visual stillness, Freud's dream theory also resonates here. In order to visually represent the affective distance between the child and the outside world, Medhi's painting employs semiotic oppositions, such as vibrancy versus dullness, motion versus stillness, and inside versus outside. By doing this, it turns seclusion into

a creative tactic and subtly conveys the unsaid. Instead of screaming, the image waits, and that waiting is incredibly poignant. Visual stillness creates uncanny liminality, playground as desired-yet-unattainable home.

Anindita Kar's "*Oversized and Others*": Emotional Excess and Embodied Resistance

Anindita Kar uses the metaphors of fit, fabric, flesh, and professional space to describe gendered interiority and solitude in a selection of her poems from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. Through the metaphor of an ill-fitting knit sweater, the poem "*Oversized*" provides a profoundly personal reflection on love as a misfit. The 'oversized' garment turns into a tangible representation of asymmetry and emotional overreach. A melancholic mismatch between intention and reception is suggested by the persona's 'love,' which is not insufficient but rather excessive, too loose, and never 'made for you.' The sweater's refusal to 'slim fit' the beloved represents the expectation that feminine love, which is frequently expansive and self-effacing, will contract, adapt, and change. The regulation of the aesthetics of affection and gendered emotional labor is subtly criticized by this metaphor.

The workplace appears as yet another complex area of gendered performance in "*At the Butcher's*." The female speaker wears the traditional Assamese garment known as the *mekhela sador*, tucking 'culture safely' into her attire as a signifier and a shield. Although it appears that she works with 'decent male colleagues,' the irony is that social graces conceal more covert forms of sexist and ageist surveillance. Her agency is undermined when her coworkers subtly create a narrative about her being single. In this case, culture serves as performance rather than protection; it is unable to shield her from the patriarchal violence of her imagination. This violence is heightened in the poem "*At the Butcher*'s." Kar makes a visceral comparison between objectification and dismemberment by using the gory imagery of a butcher's booth. The female body is broken down and valued as 'a piece of the thighs,' 'the breasts,' and 'the forearm.' The speaker's 'tongue' and 'fingers,' her voice and agency, are among the discards at the butcher's table, which turns into a place of sexual commodification. Being perceived as a woman is now synonymous with violation, as this poem blurs the line between literal and figurative violence. Since the described abjection is both physical and

psychological, affect theory is essential in this situation. Kar's speaker is both a witness and an inventory, painfully aware of what is lost and what is sold, defying the politics of polite victimhood.

Collectively, these poems reflect affective rupture through textual and visual fragmentation. Kar's verse presents loneliness as both psychological exposure and emotional displacement, whether it is through the dissected body that cannot claim wholeness or the oversized sweater that lacks love. The poems resist resolution, healing, and incorporation into traditional feminist motifs of empowerment. Rather, they insist on discomfort, melancholy, and incompleteness as ways of expressing themselves. The sartorial, the anatomical, and the domestic all blend together to form a poetics of resistance rooted in personal rebellion. Bodily metaphors abject the female form, uncanny in its commodified familiarity.

Findings

The text portrays loneliness as a profoundly gendered, emotional, and social state influenced by patriarchal and regional structures, rather than just as physical seclusion. Domestic spaces emerge uncanny, contesting idealised Indian womanhood. Women's stories use inner monologue, psychic fragmentation, and emotional depth as subtly powerful ways to protest social silencing. Disjointed panels, silence, and ellipses are examples of literary and visual fragmentation that reflect the protagonists' torn emotional landscapes. Here, domestic spaces, which are frequently romanticized in popular Indian literature, are reframed as eerie, cramped, and contested places of intimacy and captivity. Reclaiming voice, resisting erasure, and asserting agency are all made possible by the representation of emotional trauma through affective aesthetics. The anthology favors open-ended, emotionally charged depictions of inner life over traditional narrative closure and cogent resolution. The text, through uncanny interiors, affirm psychic resistance. Future work could extend Freudian lenses to digital Northeast narratives.

Conclusion

By emphasizing emotional isolation, psychic fragmentation as instruments of subdued yet potent resistance, the chosen texts from *Riverside Stories:*

Writings from Assam greatly broaden the scope of Indian women's writing. By emphasizing affective and interior states as sites of agency and self-reclamation rather than as indicators of passivity, these narratives subvert literary conventions. In "*A Void Life,*" the splintered monologue and uncanny domestic space become tools through which melancholia is both lived and narrated, allowing Reshma's body and voice to resist cultural silencing. Similarly, Runu Medhi's "*Freedom*," through its minimalist visual composition and affective stillness, transforms the image of stasis into an allegory of longing, loss, and the yearning for emotional mobility. Anindita Kar's poems "*Oversized*" and "*At the Butcher's*" explore the politics of the female body, its excess, its commodification, and its quiet resistance highlighting the intersection of gender, desire, and societal alienation through visceral metaphor and psychological unease. The works analyzed in this study reclaim subjectivity for women navigating marginality within Assam's sociocultural landscape through their inventive use of form, both textual and visual, and their nuanced depiction of gendered isolation. Silence turns into a language of dissent, and the body, memory, and home become charged sites where articulation and repression collide. As a result, this article places affective and psychic experiences at the center of Northeast Indian women's literature today. Future studies could look at how such narratives continue to reshape representations of interior life in Indian literature, investigate the digital turn through women's zines and visual essays, or expand this investigation to other Northeastern regions.

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The Flight of the 'Caged Bird': An Autobiography of Rassundari Devi in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India

Paramita Ghosh

Abstract

Amar Jiban (*My Life* in English, *Mera Jeevan* in Hindi) was originally written by Rassundari Devi (born in 1809) in Bengali and was first published in 1868. Translated in English by Enakshi Chatterjee in 1999, this book remains one of the most significant books by women writers in Bengali. This book is noted to be the first ever autobiography written by an Indian woman (and may be the first autobiography in Bengali); therefore, offering much valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, injustices that the 19th century women had/faced and also the resilience that they showed against all these hardships. Rassundari, an illiterate woman, who taught herself how to read and write in utmost secrecy due to social ban on women's literacy, establishes this autobiography not only as a significant landmark in the history of Indian Feminism, but also as a literary achievement, commended for its simple, dispassionate, objective style and the well-connected, coherent and polished prose. Rassundari remains relevant even after almost one hundred and fifty years later due to the three major 'transgressions' that she committed according to patriarchy: reading, writing, and entering the public sphere.

Keywords: Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, Women's autobiography, 19th century women, Women's literacy

> People put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this cage for life. I would never be freed.
>
> — Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*)

That was Rassundari's reflection on her marriage while being carried away to her marital home when she was merely twelve. *Amar Jiban* (*My Life* in English, *Mera Jeevan* in Hindi) by Rassundari Devi (1809-1899) was first published

in 1868 when she was 59 years old. It is the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman; the first autobiography written in Bengali and may be the first ever autobiography in India written by a woman. Rassundari added a second part to the book when she was 88 and published it in 1897.

Before we examine the significance of Rassundari Devi's autobiography in nineteenth century colonial India, let us first briefly explore the genre of women's autobiography to put *Amar Jiban* in a relevant context. The specific domain of women's autobiography started to garner popular and then academic interest (in the West) not before the mid-twentieth century. While women's autobiographies like *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) by Mary McCarthy, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) by Anne Moody, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou created a popular interest in this field, it was only in the 1980s that women's autobiography began to be considered a serious academic area for research. The critical tools that started to prove useful for that purpose were manifold—most important of those being feminism, literary theory, and cultural theory. Then followed a stream of exhaustive and diverse studies/collections in/of women's autobiography such as Domna C. Stanton's collection titled *The Female Autograph* (1984), *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987) by Sidonie Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998), edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson and many more.

In India, we have only a few published women autobiographies, like *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*) by Rassundari Devi in 1868, *Amar Katha* (*My Story*), and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (*My Life as an Actress*) by Binodini Dasi in 1912 and 1924-25 respectively, *Aaydan* (*The Weave of My Life*) by Urmila Pawar in 2003, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, and fewer books on women's autobiography, such as *Indian Women's Autobiographies* (1993) by Ranjana Harish, *Indian Women Autobiographies: A Study of Gender Identity* (2012) by Krati Sharma, *Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Critical Appraisal* (2016) by Bijender Singh, *Ahead of their Times: Essays on Women Autobiography in India* (2020) edited by K. Purushotham etc.

But be it West or East, the primary queries that guide both the critics and readers while reading women's autobiographies, especially of the early

era, are quite fundamental in nature: how does the woman autobiographer establish her authorship? How does she negotiate her gendered identity as already established in social/cultural/literary narratives while expressing herself? How does she handle her sexuality in her literary expression of the self? How does she create a balance between her need for self-expression and her fear of immoderate self- exposure? Does she try to establish an authentic self while breaking free from the chains of oppression or does she lead us towards her hybrid self? The queries remain endless while it is not unsurprising to discover that Rassundari Devi too leads us to explore most of these primary queries through her text.

Amar Jiban can be roughly divided into three primary sections to facilitate the exploration of indisputably one of the most significant texts in nineteenth century colonial India—from Rassundari's early childhood till her marriage, from her marriage till her widowhood, and then her spiritual state of being. While the third section, her spiritual journey, is covered in the entire second part which she added when she was 88, the first and second sections quite appear like mirror states of each other. Each and every one of her fears, losses, hopes and instances of helplessness described in the first section (from her early childhood till her marriage) comes alive once again in the second part of the book (from her marriage till her widowhood). Or maybe it was an intentional narrative technique adopted by her while writing the book to highlight and revisit the most traumatic episodes in her life.

For example, she remembers and identifies her fear of being kidnapped by a child lifter as her most morbid fear in her childhood when her mother introduced this idea to her. Her mother then would try to calm her down with two assurances—that the child lifters kidnap only the naughty and quarrelsome children and that Dayamadhav (their family deity) will always protect her in any kind of calamity. So, the little girl learnt to do two things—never resist or report any kind of bullying and to blindly rely on her Dayamadhav in a world where no human would/could save her from the eventual calamities.

This morbid fear of being kidnapped, however, comes alive very soon for her through the guise of her marriage at the age of twelve. Rassundari describes her marriage and its emotional impact on her in the following days just like someone who has been kidnapped. As a child lifter would tempt a

child with attractive toys first, she too "was cheered up by the ornaments, the red wedding sari, and the wedding music" (34). But very soon her happiness turned into a nightmare as the time to leave, unaccompanied by anyone from her own family, for her marital home came, she felt "like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams" (35). Although everyone thought that she would very soon settle down into her new life and new role, Rassundari continued to cry for years, feeling kidnapped for decades: "Even now I remember those days. / The caged bird, the fish caught in the net" (36). Even later, when it seemed like she had finally accepted her new role, it was the acceptance of hopelessness by a prisoner: "Look at me now. I am no longer free. I have learned to work for others" (44).

As for the next mirror image Rassundari upholds in her book, we find that before her marriage she helped a sick aunt with her housework voluntarily, although she was not required to do any at her own home. But once her family found out about it they became very happy and that in turn encouraged Rassundari to be engaged with this even more; though this time it might not have been something that she really wanted: "Thus my days of playing childhood games were gone, there were no more games for me, only household chores" (32). This motif comes back later in all its unpleasantness when she describes how she had to take care of her blind mother-in-law, take care of her husband (and later children too), cook for and serve food to almost twenty-six people every day, take care of the family deity, take care of the many guests who frequently visited their home, and do all the household work single-handedly. She was only fourteen at that time: "My day used to begin very early—and there was no respite from housework till long past midnight. I could not rest, even for a moment" (43). Tanika Sarkar notes in this context how the image of the ideal Indian Woman was created by the patriarchy in a colonized nation to find respite in a self-sacrificing, docile and pious woman at home after being exposed to the regular humiliation of colonization, while that very colonized state made women's literacy to the contemporary Bengalis an attractive concept (58). But Rassundari never conforms to this image or any Cult of Domesticity as an ideal woman who finds happiness and fulfillment in her role as a wife and mother. She never demonstrates her happiness generating from her domestic burden. At the most, she approaches the herculean load of her housework as

her duty, nothing else. She also never gives any credit to the contemporary society for her literacy, which she repeatedly maintains to have been achieved by the Dayamadhav's blessings, and the determination and hard labour by her, against active social censure. She even donates the earnings from her book to Dayamadhav, not to her family.

As for the theme of motherhood, we find Rassundari placing a very pertinent set of mirror images in this context as well. Before her marriage, Rassundari took the infant son of a relative under her wing. She "loved him dearly, never let him out of sight, bathing, feeding, carrying him all the time. I never let him cry" (31). But the child dies which she describes very briefly: "Suddenly the child fell ill and died. His death plunged me into grief" (32). Likewise, Rassundari, a mother of twelve children, out of which only five survived, is shown to engage with the role of an affectionate mother only when she loses Pyarilal, her third son. He died quite young and Rassundari had dreamt about it beforehand: "I saw that my Pyarilal ….died ….in the dream l began to tremble and fell to the ground weeping…. I cannot describe how desperate l felt. I wanted to jump into the pyre. . . calling the name of my son loudly and crying" (80-81). Except for this poignant description, Rassundari never displays any emotional episode with/for any of her children although she perfectly fulfills her child rearing responsibilities. But then she also describes the burden of 'mother work' in the most factual way when she presents the list of her twelve children and says, "My first child was born when l was eighteen and the last when l was forty-one. God only knows what l had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either" (46).

However, the mirror images which form the crux of this book are about the education of Rassundari. She remembers early in the book how as a child she would be left in the school at their outer house by her family for the whole day. Since she was eight till she was ten, she used to be there and watched the boys learn and practice all the alphabets. Girls were not allowed to study at that time and nobody thought that she was paying any attention either. But Rassundari was different: "Since l used to be there all the time l learned all the letters by myself. But nobody had any knowledge of this" (24). Similarly, as Rassundari remembers, in her marital house, with an educated husband, sons who were learning the alphabets and lots of books lying around, her hunger

for education remained unfulfilled and unnoticed. Rassundari’s fear of social censure was so severe that she “dared not look at a page with written letters on it, in case they attributed it to my desire for learning” (44).

As her desire for learning grew, her feelings of helplessness grew with it: “I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read. How could l? What a peculiar situation l had placed myself in” (51). Eventually she decides not to accept this situation and resolves to take matters in her own hands. In her extremely hectic housework schedule and while taking care of four small children, she takes a page out of her husband’s *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, hides it in the kitchen storage, takes a page from her eldest son’s alphabet practice book, remembers the alphabets that she learnt as an onlooker in the classroom as a child and tries to match those letters in utmost secrecy in kitchen, so that not a single soul in the large household catches her doing that. She managed to learn the alphabets finally, but could not manage to learn how to write as that needed an elaborate preparation and could not be done in secrecy. Although, she was happy that she managed to learn the letters on her own and now could read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and other religious books at house (she emphasizes it repeatedly that she learnt the letters only to read religious books), she nonetheless is very forthright in her pointing out the social injustice involved: “Wasn’t it a matter to be regretted that l had to go through all these humiliation just because l was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence” (54).

Rassundari learns to write much later. It was not before one of her sons moved away for higher studies and demands to get letters written by her at regular intervals. But she could manage the time to learn and practice writing only when her husband falls ill and she has to accompany him for treatment at another place where the load of housework was much lighter.

All these episodes make it clear why Rassundari always found her marriage, her housework, her motherhood a strain. She refers to her life as a life in captivity again and again in *Amar Jiban*: “I am no longer free,” (44) “But l am helpless. I am a caged bird,” (50) “We were completely under the control of men,” (52) “I was in my parents’ home and then the next twenty-eight years of my life were spent in captivity,” (62) “But in those days women did not enjoy any freedom at all, they could not do anything on their own, they

were totally under others. It was like the life of a bird in a cage," (63) "I was married at the age of twelve. Since then l have completely lost my freedom," (72) "But live the caged life of a wild beast," (78) and so on. It is no wonder that she learnt to write once she was quite old and free from a lot of her domestic duties. It might also explain the fact that her autobiography was published the year following her husband's death.

Although Rassundari describes her domestic life and activities in detail, she never explores any kind of romantic relationship with her husband in her book. Although, it might very well be attributed to the natural bashfulness of a nineteenth century Indian woman, that does not seem to be the probable cause once we come across Rassundari's brief account of her husband in *Amar Jiban*, which she claims happened only because of the narrative demand of her book, not because she felt compelled to write about him. She does not give any flattering description of her husband—neither physically nor mentally, besides the customary good words about him. She describes him as rather flabby and as someone who "liked lawsuits" (89). In fact, the only account of her husband in *Amar Jiban* is not primarily about him, but about Rassundari herself, how she resolved a legal dispute that her husband had with a powerful landlord. The dispute had continued for three generations, but Rassundari resolved it in a moment of crisis when none of the men in charge of the household were around to handle it. She also describes in detail her fear of displeasing him by doing so. Even when she describes the death of her husband, she notes it in a very restrained manner (mentioning the death of their family priest in the same paragraph) and rather presents it as her social disgrace: "Shaving of the head is worse than death….my husband died. The gold crown tumbled from my head after all these years…. Now at the fag end of my life I encountered widowhood…. I feel embarrassed to talk about it" (74).

While it might appear that Rassundari never grew close to her husband and carried her wifely role quite as a duty without any significant romantic attachment, she almost never shows any remarkable emotional involvement with any of the people in her life through her autobiography. The only exceptions are the child she took care of in her childhood, Pyarilal in her dream sequence, and most importantly, her mother. Rassundari is her mother's daughter, she refuses to believe that she ever had a father (he died when she was four and

she did not remember him) and if she was socially introduced as her father’s daughter—”the daughter of Padmalochan Rai”—she felt upset (26). Rassundari loved her mother dearly, found her very beautiful, could do anything to impress her, never wanted to part with her, followed her teachings blindly till her last breath and considered her to be her first and only teacher. So, when she recounts how she was denied a visit to her dying mother because the housework at her marital home would suffer, Rassundari, for the only time in her autobiography, loses her calm and dispassionate demeanor and pours forth her anger and frustration over the social imposition of a gendered role playing: “Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life!...If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother’s bedside” (50).

Some of the most notable critics of women’s autobiography like W. E. B. Du Bois or Susan Stanford Friedman believe that to counter ‘the paralysis of consciousness’ a socially oppressed group must learn to connect and trust each other (Friedman 76). But, Rassundari does not have any such group identity as she found herself existing in a society where other girls of her age or the elderly women around her were most likely to prevent her from being her free self—free to dislike housework, free to feel exhausted by the demands of motherhood, free to learn the alphabets and write. Even when she feels the socially imposed gender roles to be unjust for women, she maintains that it is completely her personal observation as she does “not know how other girls feel” (36).

And maybe this is why she claims her authorship not through the solidarity of a group of oppressed women or through a supportive husband but through a God, omnipotent, and obeyed by all. As Rassundari never reported or resisted any bullying in her childhood, she continued the same practice throughout her adult life and rather decided to open up only to Dayamadhav: “Nobody knew of my sorrow. How could they know, for my face lay hidden. Only you knew because you are my father, my God….You know all that l have experienced; l cannot keep anything back from you” (44-45). And thus, develops a strange pattern in Rassundari’s autobiography, whenever she describes some distressing, humiliating, unjust episode in her married life, she almost always ends that episode with an invocation and prayer to her Dayamadhav and praising him for giving her the strength and courage to bear

all these. It is as if Rassundari has a twofold goal here. While she makes it very clear that no human could earn her trust enough (even her mother gave her "away to strangers,") it was only her God who could become her refuge, her confidante, her only protector (38). The second purpose that her Dayamadhav fulfilled was to moderate the effect of the apparent social and religious transgressions that Rassundari made as someone who was acutely aware of the social condemnation that she was inviting through her unconventional desires and actions.

This is quite a curious point to note here that autobiography is considered to have developed from the genre of religious confessions, as exemplified in Saint Augustine, Saint Teresa or in Margery Kempe (Kempe was probably the first autobiographer in English). But, even though Rassundari's *Amar Jiban* is wholly dedicated to Dayamadhav, Rassundari manages to create a split between the self she perceives to be authentic and the socially restricted, conventional self which is supposedly shaped by the scriptures she loved. Therefore, *Amar Jiban* focuses more on Rassundari's individuation and less on her religious confessions like her predecessors in this genre. Rassundari's use of the mode of religious confession seems to be more like her way of establishing her authorship in a time, in a society where only a divine approval could let her write what she was about to write, to express the thoughts and feelings that were way too inappropriate for a dutiful wife, pious daughter-in-law, and a sacrificing mother figure.

This omnipotent God not only gives her the power of authority over her life experiences as a woman but also allows her to subvert the customary religious sayings like when she says that "[y]our husband, sons, people, wealth/ are only images" in the line of commonly practised words by male ascetics who leave or stay detached from their wife/family which they consider only to be an illusion (43). This also proves Rassundari's uniqueness regarding the observation of the critics like Mary Mason who believe that women autobiographers always build themselves in relation to the others around them (Friedman 78).

As noted by critics like Rita Felski, women autobiographies are also found to carry the note of self-castigation in their texts (88). Regina Blackburn, Patricia Meyer Spacks and others think, this trait emerges from the problematic

internalization of gender ideologies by women autobiographers who become enmeshed in their effort to oppose and focus on the very notions that reject them as autonomous identities thereby either looking at themselves through patriarchy or looking and disliking the powerlessness in themselves (Felski 88). If we study *Amar Jiban*, we can find that although Rassundari appears to paint herself as a timid girl, calling herself foolish/ignorant/naïve frequently in the book, it always seems to be a tempering strategy to balance her delving into the exposure of the social injustices in her book. She, for example, describes the episode of Joyhari, her husband's horse whom she avoided because of her bashfulness. Rassundari quite masterfully shows how in a society, at a home where a wife is strictly ordered to pull the end of the sari down to her chest, to always work in utter silence (these conditions made her to compare herself with a bull on tether,) to not step outside of the inner house (not even to the outer section of her own house,) a woman will eventually feel bashful even in front of a male horse belonging to her husband (42). While others thought that she was scared of the horse, Rassundari shares her secret only with the readers and eventually decides to stop hiding from the horse as she realizes the foolishness of the act. Rassundari never really castigates herself or finds herself less than others. Where we feel that she is doing those, a careful reading of the text shows that it is her strategy to not appear rebellious while uncovering the absurd social customs and restrictions for her readers.

Another issue of concern for the critics of women autobiographies like Sidonie Smith is the writers of the earliest phase being uncomfortable with their femininity and sexuality. This is also quite understandable as the women autobiographers at that time were indubitably stepping into a predominantly male domain and committing three major 'transgressions' according to patriarchy—reading, writing, and entering a public domain. Although, Rassundari never attempts any description of her conjugal life with her husband in a romantic way, she however, distinctly discusses her own physical beauty (and the lack of it in old age), her child bearing years and her love for food in her old age (she at times went without food for consecutive days due to the pressure of housework in her youth). She also mentions how with the advance of age she lost all other identities and now she is known only as the mother of her children. But she makes it clear to the reader that she does not find it a natural

progression: “Now I am a mother to everybody. The name which I once had at my parents’ place is long forgotten” (88).

Rassundari knew her society well and she successfully chose a narrative style in order to diffuse the effect of her nonconformist autobiography on conventional society like repeatedly highlighting herself as an ignorant, helpless woman who did all her social transgressions (reading, writing, and publishing) in the name of God, or elaborately describing all the incessant housework she perfectly did while obliquely mentioning how she found it torturous, or giving us a list of all the twelve children she bore while describing how they would not even let her sleep or eat, telling us how she always obeyed the social customs while letting us know that she found those very customs humiliating, absurd or at times inhuman. The Nineteenth-century colonial India did not let Rassundari live a life of dignity and freedom just because she was a woman. Whatever freedom Rassundari achieved was through her books and her autobiography. It was not her social success as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife or mother that gave her much desired wings—it was only the alphabets that helped her fly. And that is why even when at the end of the book she insists that she has lived a full life and has no more earthly desire left within her, she also appears anxious about the reception of her book among the readers. While concluding her autobiography she makes a dignified request to her readers to respect her effort, to honour her wings that were not inherited but achieved through a lifelong refusal to be caged: “This book is written by my own hand. I am not literate in the real sense. Do not neglect it my dear readers, do not look down upon it” (122).

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The (Male) Gaze of Shadows : The Inner Lives of Women in Works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil

Chahna Ahuja

Abstract

In the 1930s-40s, the rhetoric of the colonialists and the Indian nationalists sounded similar, as each group's modernizing mission viewed women as objects of desire and protection. How did Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short stories and Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings respond to this dominant patriarchal discourse? Critics have often read their overlapping explorations of women's inner lives as 'subverting' the 'male gaze.' But considering the realist locations of their works are spaces of hetero-patriarchal imagination, where does the audience's gaze turn? Is the subversion successful? This article analyzes Chughtai's 'Lihaaf' and Sher-Gil's paintings, 'Women Resting on a Charpoy' and 'Self-Portrait as a Tahitian,' focusing on the domestic sphere. They reveal the oppressiveness of these spaces while compelling the audience to confront how its inhabitants assert their desires and selfhood. Foucault's 'heterotopia,' closed spaces to contain disruptive 'Others,' is a useful lens to understand the patriarchal design of the domestic sphere. By reading the visual and literary imagery of shadows in these works, this article examines the tension between the perpetuation of the male gaze and its internalization by women to argue that Chughtai and Sher-Gil do not wholly subvert the male gaze but bring the audience to a place of uneasy acknowledgement.

Keywords: Male Gaze; Ismat Chughtai; Amrita Sher-Gil; Heterotopia; Colonial Modernity

Introduction

At the pinnacle of nationalistic consciousness that challenged the colonial experiences of modernity, Indian society of the 1930s and 1940s was 'in-transit' toward modernity and 'in-transition' toward a nation-state. What was the position of Indian women in this modernizing nation?

To address this question, I will first contextualize the historical positioning of women in the Indian subcontinent before examining 'the women question' under colonial rule. In ancient Brahmanical societies, women were relegated to subordinate roles that restricted their mobility and sexuality. Uma Chakravarti, who theorizes on Brahmanical patriarchy in early India, argues that female sexuality was regulated through a rigid reproductive structure to uphold caste purity and patrilineal succession. With the expansion of agrarian economies and the increasing ownership of *dasis* (enslaved women) by Aryan clans, elite Aryan women's labor was further shifted from food production and confined to domestic and reproductive labour within the household (Chakravarti 581). In the early modern Islamic societies of the subcontinent, elite Muslim women were secluded in gender-segregated quarters known as the *zenana*, in accordance with patriarchal Islamic family structures. Eventually, these practices of veiling and seclusion became prevalent in Muslim, Sikh, and even elite upper-caste Hindu communities, entrenching women's confinement to the domestic sphere.

Political philosopher Kanchana Mahadevan turns to a critical tension regarding Indian womanhood under colonial modernity. One aspect of the modernizing idea of India that subsumed the societies of the Indian subcontinent was the emergence of the public/private divide, restructuring social life into civic and domestic spheres. Indian women continued to occupy a marginal presence in the civil sphere under colonial modernity, even though both colonialists and Indian Hindu reformers as nationalists appealed to the very modern notion of nation as "the telos of womanhood" (Mahadevan 202). Although Indian womanhood occupied a symbolic stage in the imagination of a modern India, both colonialists and nationalists viewed Indian women not as autonomous political subjects with different social realities across caste, class, and sexuality. They were considered what Mahadevan calls 'abstract citizens,' who are divorced from their social realities and used as cultural representations by both colonialists and nationalists to legitimize their respective modernizing missions.

These constructions of cultural representations of womanhood by colonialists and nationalists constitute a dual 'male gaze.' In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist visual theorist Laura Mulvey

coined the term 'male gaze' to examine the nature of media created by and for men. Her study uses a psychoanalytic framework to study how cinema fosters a scopophilic instinct, that is, the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object. By analyzing the depictions of women as sexualized figures presented in Hollywood cinema to be gazed at by the male creator and spectator, Mulvey puts forth the concept of the 'male gaze.' She asserts that media of visual art, such as cinema, present and represent women as passive objects, thus perpetuating the real-world patriarchal power hierarchies ordered by sexual imbalance. Women are made to be looked at for the pleasure of the heterosexual male spectator. The male spectator remains an active subject in his act of gazing, projecting his fantasies of desire onto the female figure. Similarly, in the modernity rhetoric of colonialists and nationalists, the dual male gaze reduced Indian womanhood to passive objects of desire and protection.

On the one hand, white colonizers appealed to Indian women as 'objects of protection' to justify their colonial rule. They promoted the so-called White Man's burden to 'civilize' the 'backwardness' of Indian culture by reforming Indian womanhood from oppressive traditional practices and beliefs. Simultaneously, as art historian Gianna Carotenuto argues, colonialists also conflated the *zenana* with the *harem*, superimposing the Orientalist trope of *harems* onto colonial pictorial representations of the *zenana* to further objectify Indian women. Carotenuto observes that in British colonial society, the *zenana*, women's quarters within the family home, was used interchangeably with the *harem* (6). *Harem* is a term that defines Ottoman imperial cultures of polygynous royal households, which were considered a symbol of Oriental decadence by European colonialists. She identifies that this conflation introduced an "erotic aesthetic" into colonial portrayals of the *zenana* (Carotenuto 10). I believe that the exoticisation of the *zenana* as a forbidden and erotic space legitimised the colonisers' appeal to Indian women as 'objects of desire.' This dual objectification framed Indian society as both sexually transgressive and morally backwards, allowing colonizers to pathologize and eroticise Indian womanhood at once.

On the other hand, nationalists invoked women's identity in cultural representations as the 'preservers of the Indian motherland,' effectively domesticating Indian womanhood. Hindu nationalists venerated the idea of an

independent Indian nation to a sacred maternal figure by conflating women's identities with the imaginaries of the free homeland. They idealised Indian womanhood as epitome of purity, sacrifice, and spiritual strength—all the qualities they deemed essential for the modern Indian nation. By tying women's selfhood to their social positions as mothers, wives, and caretakers within the household, they made the domestic sphere a site of protection and national preservation. These imaginaries enabled nationalists to justify their subordination of women by confining them within the domestic sphere. Rai further observes that the Hindu nationalists' modernizing mission rationalized practices such as purdah and gender segregation by "invoking the presence of a society full of lustful and lecherous male gaze" (55). In this context, the rhetoric of nationalists simultaneously casts women as objects of male desire who require protection, not only from colonial oppressors but also from Indian men. These essentialist, androcentric constructions of womanhood undermine women as free subjects in both public and private spheres, framing them as objects of desire and parochial protection.

In this androcentric milieu of transitioning India, the oeuvres of Ismat Chughtai, an Urdu novelist and short story writer, and Amrita Sher-Gil, a Hungarian Indian avant-garde painter and a pioneer of modern Indian art, converge in their focus on women's lives. This article explores their works concerning the narratives and representations of women's lives within the continually contested public and private spheres of colonial and nationalist modernities. Through close reading of the visual language in Chughtai's short story and Sher-Gil's paintings, I explore the inner lives of women within the domestic sphere where the male gaze was ever-present.

Beginning her writing career in the 1930s, Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) became a canonical figure in Urdu literature of the 20th century due to her compelling narratives on the everyday issues that grappled with the lives of Indians, specifically women. Literary realism characterizes her writing, encompassing a range of diverse themes such as, marriage, childbirth, feudal and sexual politics, colonial surveillance, class conflict, middle-class gentility (specifically Muslims), and various rural and urban issues. Chughtai's portrayal of selfhood, an autonomous state of being an individual, in her realistic and diverse characters presents insights into women's sexuality and psyche. Her

typical first-person narratives, infused with wit, grief, and colloquial diction, sketch out how women's psyches are formed via socio-cultural, political, and economic conflicts. Chughtai explores the inner lives of her female characters in the changing milieu of colonial and nationalistic modernities. Her writing illustrates the complex roles of women in navigating the boundaries of the colonial and nationalistic gaze of femininity and their selfhood. Beyond her fiction, Chughtai challenged the closed, androcentric literary circles by representing women's selfhood, inspiring Urdu women writers to seize their own literary space through their identity.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41), who also began her career in the 1930s, challenged European androcentric art circles and traditional Indian art. Sher-Gil, born to a Hungarian mother and a Sikh father, was trained in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts at age sixteen. As a result, her early oil paintings and self-portraits drew inspiration from European painters such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh. Leaving Europe in 1934, her extensive travels in India transformed her European perspectives, resulting in what art critics call her 'artistic awakening.' Influenced by miniature Mughal paintings, the Pahari School of paintings, Ajanta cave sculptures, landscapes of Saraya, Shimla, and other rural dwellings, Sher-Gil's Indian paintings "in oils recorded an ambivalent balance in the feudal/feminine world within the terms of a modernizing consciousness" (Rana 38). Depicting women's agency and subjectivity in feudal and domestic landscapes, Sher-Gil carved out a modernization that was neither colonial nor nationalist. Sher-Gil established a counter-discourse of Indian modernity, challenging nationalist and colonialist conceptions of women as objects by visually representing women as fundamental subjects in modernizing India.

When juxtaposed, Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works share overlapping themes of women's interiority and selfhood. In their literary and artistic practices, they re-worlded the subjectivity of women by delving into their psyche, desire, sexuality, and agency. To examine their treatment of women's interiority, I will analyze Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942), a short story told through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl, about a sexually frustrated housewife who suffers from a lonely marriage and engages sexually with her servant, Rabbu, under the *lihaaf* or quilt. I will also comparatively examine the visual language in Sher-Gil's

paintings *Women Resting on a Charpoy* (1940) and *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934). Given the realistic location of their work, in the short story and paintings, is the space of hetero-patriarchal imagination, how do their works engage with the male gaze?

This article explores the inner lives of women in the domestic sphere through the comparative works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil. I establish the nature of domestic spaces inhabited by these women under colonial modernity using Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia.' Through a comparative study of their works, I propose that both Chughtai's and Sher-Gil's exploration of women's lives within the domestic environment confronts the dual male gaze of colonialists and nationalists.

The Domestic Space as Heterotopia

The works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil represent Indian womanhood within the domestic sphere. They capture how women navigated identity, desire, and lived experience at a time when the boundaries between tradition and colonial modernity were increasingly blurred. Under both colonial and nationalist modernities, Indian women were confined to the private realm, cast as 'objects of protection' or 'objects of desire' to exclude them from civic life. One way to understand the establishment of these domestic spaces fraught with the entangled gendered relations of tradition and colonial modernity is through Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia.'

In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault argues that the spaces we inhabit are heterogeneous because they are produced through discourses of power. Each space is organized and made meaningful by its relations with other spaces. This heterogeneity strips away the neutrality of spaces. Spaces are governed by rules of the social order, which enable or restrain ways of being and belonging. Who may enter these spaces? What behaviours are permitted? What symbolic functions do they serve—order, leisure, sanctity, or profanity? For instance, we recognize the prison as a space of punishment due to its contrast from normative spaces that are organized around freedom, rehabilitation and routine. The prison as an 'other' space is defined not in isolation, but in its power difference from normative spaces that exist in tension with the social order.

According to the translation of the lecture by Miskowiec, Foucault is drawn to these 'other' spaces that have "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 3). He calls these 'other' spaces 'heterotopias. 'Norwegian artist and scholar Knut Åsdam explains that heterotopias exist "outside of the society which produced [them], while at the same time carrying a relation to all the other remaining, 'external' spaces" (Åsdam 1). As such, heterotopic spaces exist within society yet are set apart from the dominant regulatory social order. They are produced in relation to normative spaces, but at the same time, they reflect and also challenge the rules that govern these normative spaces. Foucault identifies that the modern heterotopia is the heterotopia of deviation: "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 5). These heterotopic spaces localize society's 'other' behaviour to maintain social order or allow people to act contrary to this order. For example, asylums, prisons, elderly homes, brothels, and even amusement parks contain people who act in manners contrary to the social order.

In my view, Foucault's modern notion of heterotopia offers a useful lens to understand the domestic spaces depicted in the works of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil. Their representations open a portal into the interior worlds of women. Following Foucault, the domestic sphere in their works can be read as heterotopias—closed spaces designed to contain 'deviant' Others, that simultaneously reflect and resist the patriarchal social order. Their narratives highlight the hetero-patriarchal systems that construct these spaces to discipline and regulate female desire, mobility, and autonomy. However, in their contradictory position as heterotopias, these spaces provide an interiority that enables inadvertent forms of resistance. Women's agency in such environments is never absolute; rather, it depends on where they fall within patriarchal hierarchies of caste, class, and social status.

Chughtai and Sher-Gil both move beyond viewing the *zenana* as purely oppressive, instead presenting it as a fraught but intimate space with uncharted freedom where women cultivated their inner lives. Inside the *zenana* of Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, Begum Jan freely expresses her estrangement and sexual

frustration in a home where "neither Nawab Sahib [found] a spare moment from his preoccupation with the gossamer shirts nor allow[ed] her to venture outside the home" (Tr. Hameed 10). Although Nawab Sahib was a closeted homosexual drawn to his young male students and their gossamer shirts, his disinterest in his marriage to the much younger Begum Jan did not diminish his exercise of patriarchal control over her. Cast as 'other' and isolated by the patriarchal head, Begum Jan remains a prisoner of the *zenana*, a space structured by the gendered orthodoxies that trapped Indian women within honour codes of respectability to uphold traditional androcentric ideals. By traditional, I refer not only to the non-nuclear, extended family structure and sexually segregated households representative of quotidian arranged marriages between two ostensibly 'straight' individuals but also to the ideological work this configuration performs. For nationalists, a household is a microcosm of the nation where patriarchal control and heteronormativity are naturalized under the guise of cultural continuity into modernity. Women are portrayed as passive sacred objects of cultural purity, protected within domestic interiors for the symbolic desires of the nation and the erotic desires of their husbands. Despite her husband's lack of sexual interest in her, Begum Jan remains marked as a deviant body, desiring and thus dangerous. Her confinement reveals the paradox of the *zenana*: it exists to protect women from the public male gaze by detaining their selfhood in the domestic sphere. In this context, the *zenana* functions as a heterotopia of deviation, meant to contain those who defy normative social roles in patriarchal systems. As I hope to show, the heterotopic contradictions of the *zenana* in *Lihaaf* expose how the domestic space becomes a site of quiet transgression where desire is both disavowed and dangerously present. Within this heterotopic interiority, Begum Jan asserts her desires and reclaims a silenced selfhood that both reflects and challenges the very structures meant to mute her deviant voice in dominant discourse.

Lihaaf inhabits the contradictions of the *zenana's* heterotopic design. Estranged from her husband, Begum Jan yearns to live fully for her desires, in concordance with her name that signifies life itself. As the literary scholar who writes about *Lihaaf*, Geeta Patel, notes, "*Lihaaf*orders the questions of the sexual subjectivity of women through what women come to expect from modernity, the phantasm of companionate marriage with a good man (whose

other is the sultan and his *harem*)" ("Marking the Quilt" 14). Patel critiques how colonial discourses conflated the *zenana* with the Orientalist *harem* to justify intervention in the name of 'civilizing' the subcontinent colonies. The heterosexual, companionate marriage was imagined as a modern solution to 'emancipate' Indian women, in stark contrast to the imagined decadence of the sultan and his *harem*. Whether framed as liberal reform or cultural preservation, both colonial and nationalist projects used marriage to naturalize women's subordination under patriarchal control. But Begum Jan's husband is not the figure of a 'good man' because he is neither emotionally nor sexually available. The dream of modern marriage becomes a new form of abandonment to oppress Begum Jan further in the walls of the *zenana*.

In rebellion, Begum Jan seeks emotional and physical fulfillment with her servant Rabbu. What begins as daily massages for her 'undernourished' body evolves into a clandestine affair beneath the quilt. Though confined as a domestic figure, Begum Jan's desires transgress the roles imposed upon her as a wife and as a 'respectable' woman. The narrative unfolds through the first-person perspective of a child, whose adult recollection shows the psycho-sexual forces and socio-cultural conflicts that govern female subjectivities within the *zenana* (Naqvi xii). The child, as a reluctant spectator of the affair, enters the orbit of Begum Jan's longing and becomes a predatory focus of her desire. These intimacies within the *zenana* lay bare the fraught power imbalances of coercion and agency within a patriarchal order where the boundaries between desire and domination blur. As an elite, adult woman, Begum Jan occupies a position that affords her power over her servant Rabbu, and disturbingly, over the child narrator. Chughtai refuses the comfort of moral resolution, instead confronting the reader with the unsettling reality that female subjectivity can emerge within and be complicit in the same structures that oppress. The unresolved dynamics of power and intimacy in *Lihaaf's zenana* arise from its heterotopic nature, a space teeming with contradictory meanings of protection and imprisonment, repression and resistance, desire and violence. The heterotopic structure of the *zenana* functions as a marginalized space acting on gendered subjugation, yet it simultaneously reproduces patriarchal hierarchies that are fraught with other intersecting identities of caste, class, age, and social status. This heterotopia both maintains yet contests the patriarchal

social order, compelling readers to confront how women's desire and selfhood are mediated within the interiors of the heterotopic *zenana*.

The comparative analysis of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works demonstrates the tension between women as both subjects and objects within domestic spaces. In *Woman Resting on a Charpoy* (1940) (Figure 1), Amrita Sher-Gil portrays a woman not as a passive object of androcentric desire, but as a subject marked by deviation and defiance of patriarchal norms. This painting of Sher-Gil can be read as a pictorial representation of Begum Jan's loneliness. It features a young woman in a flamboyant red Punjabi dress, adorning *sindoor*, symbolic of her marital status. She lounges on a cot with half-closed eyes and legs positioned at an angle that typically accentuates sensuality and eroticism in visual art. The bodily enactment of loneliness starkly contrasts with the colour red, an emblem of desire. The predominant red hues dramatize the room as Sher-Gil heightens the tension by exhibiting the intimate yearning of the woman's psyche in the outer manifestation of the domestic space. Much like the metaphor of the quilt in Chughtai's *Lihaaf* that both conceals and discloses repressed desire, the reclining female body on the charpoy mirrors the body under the quilt; it is rendered still, yet suggestive of unspoken desires. Both evoke the repetitive rhythms and quiet disobedience of women who are not passive residents of these heterotopic spaces.

Figure 1 Woman Resting on a Charpoy (1940)

The presence of a servant fanning the reclining woman materializes a tableau of disproportionate intimacy within the heterotopic domestic space. The fanning gesture, like the act of massaging in *Lihaaf*, becomes an embodied performance that oscillates between desire and servitude, care, and control. These tactile interactions stem from a gendered and classed economy of care, where the bodies of working-class women are instrumentalized to soothe the psychic and erotic alienation of elite women. In this heterotopic interior, Sher-Gil builds up a scene of inequitable intimacy, where the affect of unfulfilled desires flows unevenly through relations of servitude and power. The domestic sphere is reframed as a site of quiet disobedience, longing, and the reconfiguration of feminine subjectivity. Sher-Gil's painting, from her 'Red Period,' is a visual meditation on the heterotopic dichotomy of the domestic space. The central figure is both a passive object of male desire within the patriarchal household and an active subject of unfulfilled desire, who in turn objectifies another woman of a lower ranking in this patriarchal hierarchy for her own needs. The painting captures the intensity of suspended female subjectivities, where autonomy emerges not through overt rebellion, but through charged and ambiguous intimacies cultivated in the power dynamics of these enclosed yet expansive domestic worlds.

Visualizing the Domestic Heterotopia: Gaze of Color and Language

When comparing the oeuvres of Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Sher-Gil, a striking resonance emerges in their use of visual and literary imagery to conceptualize women's agency and autonomy within heterotopic spaces. Both artist and writer disrupt colonial and nationalist inscriptions of the male gaze that exoticized and eroticized women as 'objects of desire.' Sher-Gil's early works bore traces of Western orientalist aesthetics, but her return to India sparked a decisive transformation. Disillusioned by European romanticization of India, she developed a radical visual vocabulary during her 'Red Period.' In this phase, bold, saturated reds and muted earth tones transgressed her earlier orientalist palettes, marking a conscious break from colonial visual language. As Rana Subir observes, Sher-Gil's 'Red Period' reflects the inner psyche and ontology of (sexual) desire of Indian women confined within feudal domestic structures (Rana 51). Devoting these years to representing women through form and

colour, Sher-Gil's work draws on themes from her travels. Using her aesthetic philosophy of red as a formal strategy, she evokes women's interiority—their imaginations, desires, hopes, fears, and dreams—within confined feudal and domestic spaces. Red is traditionally associated with erotic charge and domestic entrapment, symbolised by *sindoor* to signify women as 'objects of protection.' But the red that saturates the spaces in Sher-Gil's paintings manifests a heterotopic tension between repression and expression within the domestic sphere. Through form and colour, Sher-Gil's modernist compositions abstract not only the female body but also the textures of their lived experiences. These domestic representations challenge modernizing discourses that frame women as 'objects of protection,' underlining them instead as subjects negotiating autonomy in spaces designed to contain them.

In the trajectory of modern Indian art and Urdu literature, Sher-Gil's 'Red Period' and Chughtai's *Lihaaf* obscenity trial remain landmark interventions for how they render women's subjectivities within patriarchal domestic milieus. In *Lihaaf*, Chughtai visualizes the heterotopic domestic sphere through her figurative and often tactile language. Her prose draws from the tonality of *begmati* Urdu yet remains strikingly colloquial. In a 1972 interview, Chughtai remarked, "[w]hen I started to write, people were very shocked because I wrote ... and do write as I speak, in a very simple language, not the literary language" (Coppola). According to Patel, the idioms and dialects she uses produces a physical presence through sound that have often been described as "tactile word pictures" ("An Uncivil Woman" 349), This sonic immediacy often found in her first-person narratives "almost unceremoniously dump[ed] you into a present which you as a reader suddenly begin to inhabit" ("An Uncivil Woman" 347). These tactile word pictures disrupt linear narrative time, weaving together resonant moments and memories that animate the closed, gendered spaces of the *zenana* with psychological intensity.

Chughtai's familiar storytelling uses metaphors (the quilt in *Lihaaf*) to probe into the unfamiliar, intimate thoughts, and lives of her female subjects. These subjects are formed by identities of violation, loss, longing, and identities that do not blend into society—defining her leitmotif of "repeated traumatic fiction." Patel claims that Chughtai's characterizations are a thematic reiteration of loss, longing, and stifled resistance that define the lives of Indian women in

this androcentric milieu of India ("An Uncivil Woman" 352). We see this in *Lihaaf*, where the use of metaphors helps convey the child narrator's fragmented perceptions and Begum Jan's veiled desires and grief. Chughtai creates a poetics of interiority that ricochets a constant tension between being a woman on the periphery of society and being a woman in the interiority of their mind. This tension brings women's subjectivities to the forefront.

Together, Sher-Gil's scarlet sensuality and Chughtai's figurative tactility reimagine the domestic not as a passive setting of patriarchal hierarchies but as a heterotopic space where women cope with the constraints of their desire, subjectivity, and autonomy. In both cases, visual and verbal imagery attempt to reposition women from the peripheries assigned to them by showcasing them as complex subjects in the affective atmosphere inside the domestic sphere.

Confrontation, Not Subversion of Male Gaze

A comparative analysis of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's visual language is incomplete without addressing the symbolism of shadows. I argue that their use of shadows confronts, rather than fully subverts, the pervasive male gaze within patriarchal domestic spaces. Scholarship on *Lihaaf* often interprets the shadows beneath the quilt as female desire existing independently of the male gaze, interpreting Begum Jan's intimacy with Rabbu as evidence that women seek fulfilment beyond patriarchal boundaries (Gautam 55). Similarly, Sher-Gil's self-portraits are often read as acts of subversion. One such example is *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* (1934) (Figure 2), a three-quarter profile of a bare-chested Sher-Gil lost in a reverie with an ambiguous manlike shadow in the background. Reading this painting, art critic Saloni Mathur suggests that Sher-Gil's self remains unharmed by the male shadow because she revels in her self-sufficiency, using Tahitian and Indian elements to express her intercultural and gender identities (521). Yet, given that these domestic spaces are heterotopic imaginations shaped by heteropatriarchal power relations under colonial and nationalist discourses, this article argues that the subjects of Chughtai and Sher-Gil can never fully escape the male gaze. Their shadows haunt an ongoing internal negotiation of women's identity with this inescapable gaze.

I contend that these shadows embody suppressed desires persisting under the unrelenting male gaze. In Sher-Gil's *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian*, I distinguish between self-perception and self-objectification as these concepts are often conflated in readings of the painting. While I challenge Mathur's view of subversion here, I agree with her critique that Sher-Gil's work has been overly reduced to Gauguin's primitivist exoticism. She importantly notes Sher-Gil's connection to van Gogh's radical ideas, which offered an alternative model for solidarity with India's marginalized (519). Thus, the painting can be seen as an expression of empathy toward women stifled under the dual male gaze of colonialism and nationalism. It challenges Gaugin's colonial gaze and the androcentric nationalistic gaze that marginalised Indian women. By recognizing women's internalisation of this dual gaze, which implicates them in their subjugation, I reimagine the shadow in this painting. I evoke Margaret Atwood's poignant quote from *The Robber Bride* about the 'male fantasy': "Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? ...You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur" (442). The gaze of 'male fantasy' implies that women's self-perception becomes objectified, making them voyeurs of themselves. The manlike shadow in *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* acknowledges the inevitability of self-objectification within patriarchal structures.

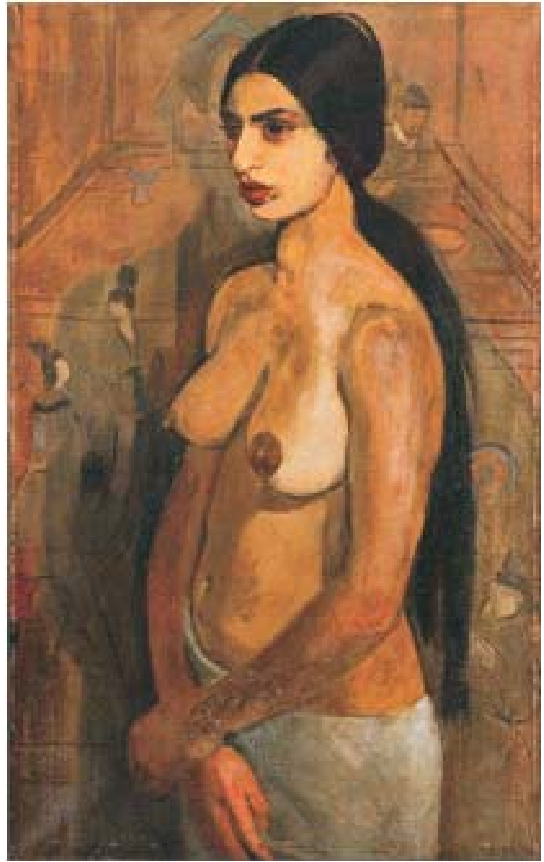

Figure 2 Self-Portrait as a Tahitian (1934)

The shadows in Chughtai's *Lihaaf* symbolise the friction between women's repressed desires and the male gaze in inequitable domestic spaces. Inside the *zenana*, the shadows on the wall personify Begum Jan's sexual repression and loneliness. Shivering from prolonged isolation, "[Begum Jan's] quilt assumed ferocious shapes that appeared like shadowy monsters on the wall … [but] not one of the shadows carried any promise of life" (Tr. Hameed 10). These shadows, cloaked by the quilt, are not figments of women's forbidden longing for desires in a space where they are treated as objects of desire and protection. Begum Jan started 'living' when the maidservant Rabbu fulfilled her sexual desires. The child narrator expresses the sexual intimacy of Begum Jan and Rabbu as shadows under the quilt that "sway like an elephant" (Tr. Hameed 13). This forbidden, shadowed homoerotic bond signals a negotiation of female agency in pursuing desire. But within a heterotopia designed by patriarchal structures, their homoerotic bond is marked by oppression, circumscribed by class and power imbalances. "Rabbu's dependency on Begum Jan as a servant makes her vulnerable to sexual exploitation, as Begum Jan snatches away her agency and makes her an object of her desire within the *zenana*. As remarked by *Lihaaf*'s ending, "it was pitch dark, Begum Jan's quilt was shaking vigorously as if an elephant was struggling beneath it" (Tr. Hameed 13). The shadow of the elephant is the 'elephant in the room,' suggestive of Rabbu's lack of agency as her identity 'struggles' as an androcentric object of desire despite being in a domestic space meant to represent women's selfhood. The shadows in *Lihaaf* crystallize that the *zenana* is a heterotopia and not a feminist utopia. The class hierarchy, a consequence of patriarchal structures, leads to the inevitability of women's objectification, even by other women.

Conclusion

A comparative study of Chughtai's short story and Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings demonstrates how their works of the 1930s and 1940s intersect inside the domestic. Their narratives explore the inner lives of women who struggle to confront the dual male gaze. The male gaze here refers to the modernizing discourses of colonialists and nationalists that reduced women to 'objects of protection' and 'object of desire' under colonial modernity. The domestic

sphere in modernizing India is a heterotopic space that regulates the visibility and mobility of women as the 'Othered' gender. Women embodying the heterotopic contradictions of the domestic space simultaneously resist and reproduce the patriarchal social order.

A closer examination of Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works through colour, language, and shadows helps interpret the inner worlds of women. Together, Sher-Gil and Chughtai use shadows not to subvert but to confront the male gaze. They shed light on the inescapability of the male gaze within patriarchal domestic spaces, exposing the fraught tensions between repression and expression, self-objectification and self-perception. By emphasizing confrontation over subversion, I argue that these artists reject any idealization of the domestic as a feminist utopia. Instead, the domestic is ultimately a contested terrain of heterotopia constructed by authorized patriarchal structures. In this heterotopia, women have also internalized patriarchal norms, such as class conflicts and self-objectification of the prevalent male gaze, thus limiting their agency and autonomy. My comparative analysis aims to show that the representations of women in Chughtai and Sher-Gil's works resist simplistic narratives of victimhood or empowerment that act as a subversion of the male gaze. Rather, they bring their audiences to an uneasy acknowledgement of the male gaze in hetero-patriarchal structures.

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