

## The Female Gaze: An Answer to the Subjugation Caused by the Male Gaze

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### Abstract

The fundamental concept behind the male gaze is how women are portrayed to satisfy the fantasies of a heterosexual male. Laura Mulvey is a renowned British filmmaker and film theorist. In her vast experience, she observed how the movies always portrayed women as objects or sexualized ones. Women were always shown as extensions of their male counterparts. They had no identity of their own and they only existed to complement the personality of the male characters. This observation is what led to the birth of the idea of the male gaze. The female gaze is an answer to the male gaze and it shows us how fantasies and desires do not require the objectification, sexualization, and subjugation of anyone for a matter of fact. This paper aims to analyze the problems posed by the male gaze and its presence in the Indian film industry. This research paper attempts to highlight the impacts of the male gaze and concludes the discussion with how the female gaze can change the narrative and lay the foundation for a just and equitable society.

**Keywords:** Male gaze, female gaze, patriarchy, cinema, film industry, etc.

### INTRODUCTION:

First used by Laura Mulvey in her 1973 essay titled “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, the term, male gaze, has gained profound significance and popularity in the last five decades. Sarah Vanbuskirk describes it in her article titled, “*What is the Male Gaze*”;

“The male gaze describes a way of portraying and looking at women that empowers men while sexualizing and diminishing women.

From early adolescence on, we are biologically driven to look at and evaluate each other as potential mates—but the male gaze twists this natural urge, turning women into

passive items to possess and use as props.”

Because of the fact that the film industry is dominated by men like any other field, it appears as if it only operates to please and satisfy the desires of the male viewers. The male gaze has been an object of great discussion and debate but its presence in the cinema and media is still very much prevalent as a way of portraying various characters in a movie. The male gaze dictates the majority of the themes and narratives in the film industry. This is nothing new. Since the birth of the film industry, women were not included as actors, directors, etc. This is very wrong but unfortunately, this is not surprising. This is the way our society is originally structured. Because of the power dynamics in the early

days of modern civilization, men occupied the central and more powerful roles. As time passed, men did not want to give up their power or position and consequently, women, their needs, and their potential were ignored and pushed to the periphery, and this ultimately resulted in an unjust and unequal society, the effects of which are still faced by people in present times and have not been completely undone. It has only made it harder to establish a just and equitable society because it is extremely hard to challenge and change the established power order.

#### **EARLY DAYS OF THE INDIAN CINEMA: AN EPITOME OF ABSOLUTE PATRIARCHY:**

If we talk about this distribution of power in the film industry, we find that in the beginning, women were not even allowed to act in movies. In India, it was believed to be a trait of a characterless woman. It was highly discouraged whenever a woman wanted to act in a movie. It was considered to be an insult to the family. It is ironic how the same standards never applied to men at all and they were not only encouraged but also supported in every way possible to pursue whatever dreams and ambitions they had. There is only so much that can be done by a woman without the support of society. But it is really commendable how many women defied these baseless norms and fought for all of us. It is because of these women that we are able to see females in the film industry. As time passed, women started acting and asserted their presence in the film industry. While it was almost necessary to take a woman for acting purposes in a movie, people did not want to give women the roles behind the camera and this is why we see such a small

number of women working behind the camera.

All this contributes to the male gaze. The male gaze essentially signifies portraying the characters in movies and TV shows in a way a heterosexual male would like to see them. This ultimately leads to the sexualization and objectification of women on screens. The filmmakers know that the success of their work ultimately depends on its ability to please and appeal to the viewers. Since most of the filmmakers, scriptwriters, directors, etc. are males, they create movies and shows that appeal to the audience. And according to them, only the male population is the target audience they are trying to please because as males, they only create movies and shows that appeal to them. It is generally understood that a man's opinion, desires, and requirements are those of the whole society. The needs and choices of women are not given equal importance and they are always treated as secondary. It is assumed that what a man wants is what everyone else also wants. This is wrong not only because it ignores the choices and needs of a woman but also because it gives undue importance and preference to a man's choices and needs.

#### **EFFECTS OF THE MALE GAZE: SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN:**

If we analyze the movies and shows, we find that with a few rare exceptions, most of them are the result of the male gaze. Almost all the movies show women in a subordinate role. Women are shown in a way that makes one feel that their only importance is their beauty. The female characters are supposedly always weak and the movies are always male-centric. If you look into it, you will find that

almost all the movies are about a man. This is the case in ninety-nine percent of the movies in the Indian film industry. Usually, the story is about a man and his journey. The movie talks highly of his character, his qualities, flaws, etc. while the woman is just there. She is just an extension of him. Her identity is almost always somewhere lost between the lines. The camera only shows us her beauty and her body, her personality, preferences, opinions, etc. are silenced and her only job is to compliment the male protagonist and make him look good. This is very concerning. The woman is almost always related to the male protagonist. She is either his wife, his sister, his mother, his daughter, etc. She is never herself. She is always an extension of him.

All this leads to limiting a woman's potential. The camera keeps zooming in on her curves, her body, her eyes, her hair, her lips, etc. It is never done to a man. Why? Because it is the norm that a man's worth does not lie in his beauty or good looks but in his ambition, character, and personality. Why can the same not be done for women? In my opinion, this is because the male population feels threatened by seeing women in more powerful, strong, and controlling roles. It threatens the established authority of males and it is naturally resisted by them. But this does not mean that the male gaze should be allowed to prevail solely because the male population is threatened. It leaves a very bad and misleading message for the younger generation watching these movies and shows and it also supports the existing patriarchy. What we see on the television screens is what we idolize. We need something to look up to as human beings and cinema appears to be the perfect thing for us to idolize. It is a shame

that an industry that is a part of almost everyone's life is biased and prejudiced. It dictates roles for people based on their genders. This is what we are learning and teaching as a society. Not only is this wrong but it is also shameful.

Not only does the male gaze dictate gender roles, but it also puts women in a position where men believe that they own women like property or objects. Women are not treated as fellow human beings but as objects of physical pleasure created just to please men. It also affects how a woman thinks of herself. Simone Meyer talks about this problem in her article titled, "*The Male Gaze Puts Pressure On All Women*";

"Audiences of any gender or age receive the message that women are sexual objects that must intrigue men. This sets an unrealistic and unhealthy standard for all women, and it severely sexualizes women. The media needs to stop objectifying women on screen.

The male gaze can cause women of any sexual orientation to think that they are subservient to men and are meant to play a more passive role in society. It can create insecurities among these individuals, resulting in them changing their behavior, such as how they dress, how they interact with men, or how they view their bodies themselves."

### **BOLLYWOOD'S OBSESSION WITH THE MALE GAZE:**

It is very concerning and shameful how the Indian film industry promotes and harbors the male gaze. Some of the most iconic movies are examples of the male gaze.

Movies like *Animal* and *Kabir Singh* are indeed the next examples of the presence of the male gaze in Indian cinema. Rashmika Mandana is an amazing actress and she has done some really good roles in her career. But where do we see her in *Animal*? Absolutely nowhere. Her husband is abusive and she tolerates all that abuse. Her husband only thinks about one person, and that is his father. He completely ignores her and his family. He is ignorant and neglectful. He does everything she tells him not to do. He abuses her and insults her. According to him, he is allowed to do all this because, first of all, he is doing all this for his father and he feels that whatever he does for his father is always right and can never be wrong. Secondly, he justifies this because she is his wife and he feels that he can do anything to his wife. He even cheats on her. What does his wife do in response? Again, absolutely nothing. She still stands by him and loves him. This is what men are taught to expect from their wives and wives are taught to do for their husbands. It is really surprising how such movies gain so much popularity. But then again, it is only proof that this movie actually does perfectly align with the expectations of the viewers. It is not only questionable but also deeply concerning that this is what the viewers expect. It is bluntly teaching men that they can do anything to their wives and the wives, in return, should continue to love their husbands. How is this even okay to show on screens? Shilajit Mitra describes the movie and the director's intentions very appropriately in his article titled "*Animal* movie review: Ranbir Kapoor suffers in Sandeep Reddy Vanga's twisted paean to masculinity";

"Sandeep Reddy Vanga's protagonists — thick-headed creatures of privilege and entitlement — are all badly-behaved men who could easily pass for monsters. After *Arjun Reddy* (2017) and *Kabir Singh* (2019), two films about a chain-smoking doctor with anger issues, the director returns with *Animal*, his second Hindi feature, about a chain-smoking engineer with deep-seated daddy issues. Yet no matter how bleak and paleolithic his view of human instincts, he also wants us to stand in awe of his heroes, even admire and empathize with them."

The same is the story with *Kabir Singh*. These are two different movies with startling similarities. It is concerning how these were so appreciated by the viewers. Shilajit Mitra's view on this is noticeable;

"*Kabir Singh*, a monster hit, was widely criticized for glamourizing misogyny and toxic masculinity (the hero slapped his girlfriend, OD'd after a heartbreak, spouted self-pitying gasconades like "I'm not a rebel without a cause... nor a murderer with a hand blade). Ranvijay, very much a murderer with a hand blade, is Vanga's cheeky expansion of this cinematic landscape. There is a stream of steadily escalating provocations that are pure critic-bait. The word 'toxic' is uttered in the opening minutes. There are two kinds of men, Ranvijay proclaims to Geetanjali: 'alphas' and all the other poetry-writing wimps."

**NORMALIZING AND  
ROMANTICIZING ABUSE:**

This is the film industry's portrayal of men and women which is in fact very much loved by the audience. It is basically teaching men that they are allowed to do anything while women are simply supposed to accept it and love them throughout. It is impossible to justify abusing to partner or cheating on them but these movies do exactly that. This leads men to believe that they are superior to their female partners. It shows us that as a man, a person can do anything, and no one can question his behavior or call him out for his actions. This is what actually happens in our society. This is grossly inappropriate as well as unacceptable. It is really hard to understand what these movies are actually trying to convey. In an interview, the director of these movies, Sandeep Vanga Reddy, went as far as saying that if a person does not have the freedom to slap their partner, he feels that their relationship is not real. He says that he believes people should be allowed to slap or lay hands on their partners. This is how Bollywood romanticizes abuse and tells people that in an ideal relationship, people slap each other. This is why domestic abuse is such a big issue in India. It is because of such people who create such movies and people who idolize such movies that people face domestic abuse. Such victims are told to just endure it as supposedly it is nothing wrong.

Moreover, it is not solely the directors who are responsible, it is also the people who love these movies. If such movies are not criticized and do really well on the big screen, it is not a question for directors to create more movies along the same lines. It can also be said that it is because of the success that *Kabir Singh* and *Arjun Reddy* received that

led to the creation of *Animal*. *Kabir Singh* earned a whopping amount of Rs 379 crores and it was also the second highest-grossing Bollywood movie of 2019. The same is the case with *Animal*. This movie earned a sum of Rs 550.85 crores, even more than *Kabir Singh*. The viewers should brace themselves for another movie on the same lines as this is what has happened so far and till such movies continue to earn so much, the chain will never stop.

### IMPACT OF THE MALE GAZE:

These movies fundamentally mess up the idea of equality and justice and cause people to idolize a world where these notions do not exist. This also affects how we think of ourselves as well as others. The male gaze causes people to think that a woman is only needed and wanted for her beauty and her ability to serve a man. It also leads to women thinking that they are only worthy if a man wants them. We have witnessed enough movies where the female lead was chased by multiple men and she was desired by so many people. Bollywood makes us think that this is indeed an indicator of a woman's worth and importance. It is never her intelligence, nature, or anything else. It also makes us romanticize and idolize having multiple men constantly chasing after you and wanting you for your body. This is wrong on so many levels. It is quite absurd to expect anyone to appreciate being loved for their body. Because our body is something that we have little control over and you can never tell when it is going to change. This is where the problem starts because your body indeed does change. And when this happens, women are taught to believe that this is the end of their world. If a woman is too thin, too fat,



too short, too tall, or practically, anything except the established and accepted norm, she is not important enough to be loved.

The male gaze also teaches us that it is a woman's ability to serve her partner that makes her desirable. She is taught to be the perfect wife who is appreciated by her husband and others. If a woman raises her voice at her husband, she is considered to be uncivilized. But a man can do the same without having to face any judgment from anyone. This is not surprising anymore but it is surely concerning. This is also very problematic as it is not possible for anyone to always stay quiet and endure the abuse. As human beings, we all have opinions, desires, and needs, and saying that voicing them is a sign of your bad behavior is not only wrong but also very oppressive.

Another problem that the male gaze poses is that it teaches women that their worth depends on male validation. They are taught to seek male validation throughout their lives. They are taught that if your husband or your partner does not want you for any reason, however baseless, you have no worth. The same is not the case for men. If we look at Bollywood movies, we find that mostly what happens is that women are shown to be loyal and loving and tolerate everything while the men are impulsive and they have the ability to move on while women do not. Why is it so? Women are taught to always be dependent on their male counterparts.

Another idea that the male gaze poses is that of "fixing" the man. It is very problematic in itself. There are many movies we see where the man is very impulsive and just, a bad person. Such a man is usually careless, and

irresponsible and engages in every conflict he can. Such a man is the typical bad boy of Bollywood. And while one would not actually want to be around such a man if it was not for the male gaze, the male gaze makes us idolize such a man. His wife or partner usually 'fixes' him. This is as absurd as it sounds. We are shown that he changes for her because she loves him and takes care of him. It would have still been a little bit better if he did all this to keep her in his life but he just does this because she is his unpaid therapist. She never leaves him no matter what he does. This is what we are teaching young girls. We are teaching them to stay in abusive relationships and fix such men who are nothing but a menace because apparently, it is a girl's job to fix the unacceptable behavior of a man.

#### **THE FEMALE GAZE: AN ANSWER TO THE MALE GAZE:**

This is how the male gaze affects us as a society. The female gaze is an answer to this. Contrary to what many people think, the female gaze is not the opposite of the male gaze. It is not a tool for revenge. It simply teaches us that it is completely possible and in fact needed to create a society where we do not have the need to sexualize, objectify, subjugate, or suppress anyone. It teaches us that fantasies and desires are not synonyms of sexualization and objectification. The female gaze simply states that nothing has to be completely submitted to one gender or set of people. It is as unproblematic as it can get. Alexis Loftis does a very good job of explaining the female gaze;

"Characters viewed through the lens of the female gaze are not caricatures. The

beauty of the female gaze is that it aims to empathize rather than objectify, to show emotion and intimacy while also showing respect. This is a refreshing idea compared to the control, dominance, and superficialities of the male gaze.”

The female gaze is not about men or women, instead, it is about humans. It is about everyone. It talks about changing the narratives so that no one idolizes anything which is essentially wrong or problematic. Movies like *Thappad* are exactly what we need as a society. It does not show us that all men are the problem or anything like that. It is simply about why a woman does not need to tolerate abuse. It sounds very simple but it

is something that is very new to our film industry as this is not something that is being shown or portrayed in movies at all.

#### CONCLUSION:

This is why we need the female gaze in our film industry. As long as we continue to idolize the male gaze, a just and equitable society will only remain a dream for all of us. The male gaze is nothing but a support to patriarchy and misogyny. There is no reason as to why the narrative should not be changed. The male gaze is not only problematic and questionable but it is also very regressive and discriminatory. It essentially ruins the mental health of many individuals and only makes our society a more unsafe and problematic place to live in.

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