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Transcending the boundaries of male gaze by embracing variability through female gaze: A critical study of the theoretical perspectives

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Abstract

The idea of 'male gaze' had been conceptualized initially in the context of media but later it has been adopted in social, literary, and cultural criticism as well. In media, the notion portrays women as objects of visual pleasure, focusing on their physical attractiveness and framing them from a heterosexual male perspective. It often reduces women to passive subjects for male consumption, reinforcing gender stereotypes and inequality in representation. Mirroring the very same theory, the concept of 'female gaze' has been constructed which when applied in the context of both media and literature centers on depicting men and women through a lens that prioritizes female subjectivity, desire, and agency. It portrays male characters with emotional depth and explores themes of intimacy and relationships from a perspective that resonates with women's experiences. Unlike the male gaze, which objectifies and commodifies women, the female gaze seeks to humanize and celebrate diverse expressions of masculinity while challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Through nuanced storytelling and character development, the female gaze aims to empower and validate women's perspectives in cultural narratives. This paper demonstrates the theory of 'female gaze' and its relevance in the modern world.

Keywords: Cultural criticism, female gaze, female subjectivity, gender roles, male gaze

Introduction

The concept of the term 'male gaze', coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, has since become a critical framework for analyzing visual media and understanding power dynamics in society. At its core, the male gaze refers to the way visual arts, literature, and media depict the entire world and women from a masculine and heterosexual perspective, objectifying and sexualizing them for the pleasure of male viewers or readers. The term has been first implemented in the context of cinema and interpretation of the cinematic world. In cinema, the male gaze often manifests through several key elements which include firstly the camera perspective. The camera tends to adopt a perspective that aligns with a heterosexual male viewer. It directs the audience's attention to the physique of female characters and moreover it is witnessed to be focusing on specific body parts most often, thereby especially emphasizing their physical charm. The second element being characterization. Female characters are frequently portrayed as objects of desire or as passive objects to be looked at rather than active agents with their own motivations and desires. They may lack complexity and exist primarily to serve the narrative or support the storyline. The narrative function comes next. Women in media frequently function as catalysts for the development of male protagonists or are seen to serve as rewards for their achievements. Their autonomy and agency are often secondary to their role in advancing the male-driven plots. Sexualization and objectification being the last points of consideration where it must be noted that women are frequently depicted in a sexualized manner, framed in ways that highlight their physical beauty and conform to traditional standards of attractiveness defined by the male gaze. This reinforces societal norms about femininity and perpetuates unrealistic expectations for women's appearance.

The implications of the male gaze extend beyond media representations to influence societal attitudes and behaviours. It perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing stereotypes and normalizing the objectification of women.

When women are consistently depicted as objects of male desire rather than as fully realized individuals, it reinforces the idea that their value lies primarily in their physical appearance and their ability to please men. Critiques of the male gaze argue that it not only marginalizes women but also limits the representation of diverse identities and experiences. By prioritizing the heterosexual male perspective, media often excludes or misrepresents LGBTQ+ individuals, people of colour, and other marginalized groups. However, contemporary discourse acknowledges that the male gaze is not a monolithic phenomenon. Intersectional feminism has expanded the critique to consider how race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors intersect with gender in shaping representation and power dynamics in media.

Efforts to challenge and subvert the male gaze include creating media that offers alternative perspectives, featuring complex and multifaceted female characters, and promoting diversity both in front of and behind the camera. Increasingly, filmmakers, writers, and artists are exploring narratives that empower women, celebrate diverse bodies and identities, and challenge traditional notions of beauty and desire. Thus, while the male gaze continues to influence media and cultural representations, it is increasingly scrutinized and contested in contemporary discourse. By recognizing its impact and advocating for more inclusive and equitable representations, we can work towards media that reflects and respects the diversity of human experiences and identities.

The concept of the female gaze similarly emerges as a counterpoint to the widely discussed male gaze in feminist film theory and broader cultural criticism. Coined in response to Laura Mulvey's influential work on the male gaze in cinema, the female gaze aims to redirect the narrative and visual representation towards a perspective that prioritizes female subjectivity, agency, and desire. This concept has evolved beyond film theory to encompass various forms of media and cultural expression, challenging traditional norms and offering new insights into gender dynamics and representation.

The term "female gaze" gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, as feminist scholars and critics sought to expand Mulvey's theories. While the male gaze typically portrays women as objects of male desire and voyeurism, the female gaze seeks to depict men and women from a female perspective. It emphasizes themes such as empowerment, emotional depth, and relational dynamics that resonate with women's experiences. Unlike the male gaze, which often objectifies and commodifies female bodies, the female gaze aims to humanize and celebrate the diversity of women's experiences, desires, and relationships. It challenges traditional stereotypes and offers alternative narratives that reflect women's agency and autonomy. Agnes Varda, known to be the queen of the French New Wave of cinema has well expressed the concept by claiming –

The first feminist gesture is to say: "OK, they're looking at me. But I'm looking at them." The act of deciding to look, of deciding that the world is not defined by how people see me, but how I see them. (Varda)

The most important point of discussion in the context of the female gaze is subjectivity and agency. The female gaze centers on the subjective experiences and agency of female characters. It portrays women as active participants in their own stories, with complex motivations, desires, and

struggles. Female characters are not merely objects of desire but are depicted with emotional depth and multifaceted identities. It thereby lays stress on reversal of power dynamics. In contrast to the male gaze, which often positions men as the dominant observers and women as passive objects of scrutiny, the female gaze may reverse or subvert these power dynamics. It challenges traditional gender roles and representations by portraying men through a lens that emphasizes vulnerability, sensitivity, and emotional intimacy (Walters, 1995) ^[3].

The term female gaze can be nevertheless interpreted as a medium for representation of female desire. The female gaze acknowledges and celebrates female desire in its various forms. It may explore eroticism, intimacy, and emotional connections from a perspective that resonates with women's fantasies and experiences. This includes depicting male bodies in ways that are respectful, sensual, and attentive to consent and mutual pleasure. Moreover, being considered to be a critique of objectification, the term has gained its prominence the most. While the male gaze tends to objectify and sexualize women's bodies for the pleasure of male viewers, the female gaze critiques and subverts this objectification. It encourages viewers to empathize with female characters as individuals with agency and autonomy, rather than reducing them to passive objects of visual consumption.

In literature, the female gaze is evident in narratives that prioritize women's perspectives, experiences, and relationships. Female authors often challenge conventional storytelling structures and characterizations by offering nuanced portrayals of female protagonists and their interactions with others. Novels, poetry, and memoirs written from a female gaze perspective explore themes such as identity, sexuality, motherhood, and social justice through a lens that reflects women's lived realities and aspirations. The female gaze in literary texts encompasses narratives that prioritize women's perspectives, desires, and experiences, challenging traditional patriarchal norms and representations. Unlike the male gaze, which often objectifies and reduces women to passive objects of desire, the female gaze explores female subjectivity and agency. The female gaze is evident in works where female authors subvert stereotypes and offer nuanced portrayals of female characters. Authors like Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, among others, employ the female gaze to delve into themes such as identity, relationships, sexuality, and societal expectations from a distinctly female viewpoint.

For instance, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* provides an intimate portrayal of a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, exploring her inner thoughts and emotions as she navigates social expectations and personal reflection. Morrison's *Beloved* on the other hand confronts issues of trauma and motherhood through the lens of Sethe, a former slave haunted by her past. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* offer perspectives on Nigerian and Nigerian-American women respectively, challenging stereotypes and offering complex portrayals of identity and belonging.

These authors use their narratives to critique and challenge patriarchal structures, offering readers insights into the complexities of women's lives and relationships. By centering female experiences and perspectives, literary texts that employ the female gaze contribute to broader conversations about gender equality, representation, and the

diverse experiences of women across different cultures and contexts.

Similarly in film and television, the female gaze is increasingly evident in works directed by women and those that consciously subvert traditional gender norms. Directors such as Jane Campion, Sofia Coppola, and Ava DuVernay have garnered acclaim for their portrayals of female characters that defy stereotypes and explore themes of empowerment, agency, and resilience. These works often prioritize intimate storytelling, character development, and emotional authenticity over spectacle and sensationalism.

In visual arts again, the female gaze challenges traditional representations of the female body and sexuality. Female artists use photography, painting, sculpture, and performance art to reclaim and redefine the female form, exploring themes of identity, beauty, and autonomy. Their works thus often challenge societal expectations and celebrates diverse expressions of femininity and desire (Levin, 2023) ^[4].

In the digital age, the female gaze finds expression through social media platforms, blogs, podcasts, and online communities. Women creators use these mediums to share personal narratives, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for social change. Online activism and feminist discourse amplify the voices and perspectives of women, fostering dialogue and solidarity around issues of gender equality, representation, and empowerment (Caviness, 2001) ^[5].

While the concept of the female gaze offers a valuable critique of patriarchal norms and representation, it is not without its critiques and challenges; intersectionality being a very important issue in this context. Critics argue that the concept of the female gaze needs to be more inclusive of diverse identities and experiences. Intersectional feminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other social factors, thereby highlighting the need for representations that reflect the complexity of women's lives. The second challenge in this regard is commercial constraints. In mainstream media, commercial pressures often prioritize profit over progressive portrayals of gender and sexuality. While there is increasing recognition of the female gaze in independent and niche productions, mainstream media continues to be dominated by narratives that cater to traditional gender norms and audience expectations. Another important critique that has been witnessed in this aspect is backlash and resistance. The rise of the female gaze has sparked backlash and resistance from those who perceive it as a threat to established norms and identities. Critics argue that efforts to challenge the male gaze may reinforce essentialist notions of gender and limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences within feminist discourse (Ponterotto, 2016) ^[2].

Looking ahead, the concept of the female gaze continues to evolve and expand as feminist scholars, artists, and activists explore new ways of representing and interpreting gender in media and culture. The key directions for future research and practice include intersectional approaches, emphasizing intersectionality in discussions of the female gaze to ensure inclusivity and representation of diverse identities and experiences; media activism which when used with digital platforms to amplify marginalized voices, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for social change; and education and advocacy, i.e., incorporating the study of the female gaze into educational curricula and advocacy efforts to

promote critical media literacy and empower future generations of creators and consumers.

In conclusion, the concept of the female gaze offers a compelling framework for understanding and challenging traditional representations of gender and sexuality in media and culture. By centering women's perspectives, agency, and desires, the female gaze encourages critical reflection, artistic innovation, and social transformation. As we continue to navigate evolving cultural landscapes, the female gaze serves as a powerful tool for advancing feminist principles and promoting gender equality in all aspects of society.

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