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## The Female Gaze: Undoing The Adverse Effects of The Male Gaze

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### **Abstract:**

The male gaze is the phenomenon characterized by the portrayal of various characters in a way that appeals to and pleases the stereotypical heterosexual male. Because of the negative impacts of the male gaze on our society, the female gaze was evolved as an answer to the male gaze. The female gaze, simply put, is a way of portraying people and things that is neither offensive nor particularly pleasing to any one gender or part of the population. The female gaze talks about a way of portrayal that is not demeaning to any one gender and neither does it unnecessarily glorify any other gender. For years, just like any other field, the film industry has also been dominated by male opinions and preferences. This is what has led to the male gaze occupying such a firm position in our society. It is not only wrong for the other genders, but it is also wrong for all of us as a society as it affects both men and women and all genders equally. It causes them to think of themselves only within the stereotypical gender roles that define their abilities and potential. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the adverse effects of the male gaze in our film industry and how the female gaze attempts to cure these and establish a just and equitable society.

**Keywords:** male gaze, female gaze, objectification, gender roles, sexualization, objectification.

### **Introduction:**

Gina Miller provides a very simple definition of the male gaze in her research article titled “*The Consequences of the “Male Gaze” and Sexual Objectification*”;

*“The “male gaze” is a term that is commonly used among feminists arguing the role of a female for the sexual objectification of a male spectator. The “male gaze” was originally brought up by Laura Mulvey in her essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, and her meaning of the term relates to the woman as a spectacle in film. Other feminists have used the term to describe print material as well as film and multimedia as being a product of the “male gaze”.”*

Cinema occupies a very important place in the lives of all of us. As human beings, cinema is a way of recreation. It is a way of refreshing oneself and finding something to look up to. If a person is asked what is the source of their inspiration to do a certain thing, it is mostly either literature or cinema. This is only an example of the power that cinema holds in our lives and most of us often fail to realize this. Because of the immense power that cinema has in our lives, it is necessary that it does not do anything that could cause any harm to anyone. Cinema has a very noticeable influence on everyone’s lives and this is why we need to make sure that it teaches people good things and not anything that could hamper the development of our society or any particular section of it. Unfortunately, this is not what always happens. In fact, this only happens on some rare and lucky occasions. Mostly, what is portrayed is only beneficial to one part of the population, and the others are often left to suffer at the mercy of the former.

### **The Male Gaze and Its Impact on The Film Industry:**

The male gaze is an example of why we need to control the power of cinema and utilize it for good. The male gaze is the stereotypical portrayal of men and women on the big screen that appeals to the desires and ambitions of men and aligns with the unrealistic and often, baseless, expectations of men. This also leads to the sexualization and objectification of women. Movies tend to show women in roles and positions that men want to see them in. Also, the male gaze only seems to take care of the desires and preferences of straight men and homosexuals often do not find a place in this stereotypical gaze.

The effects of the male gaze are not superficial at all times and it may be harder to see than expected very often. The Indian film industry has a presence of the male gaze that can be observed at all times. Indian cinema has always been male-dominated and the influence of patriarchy has been undeniable. It is as if the film industry is only there to cater to the needs of the male viewers

and it is as if the female audience simply does not exist. Their needs, preferences, and desires have always been secondary to the male ones.

This is also because our society is largely patriarchal and male-dominated and as unfortunate as it is, this has always been so for a really long time. This has led to the film industry, among many other industries, being completely dominated by men. This is the product of patriarchy and it has undoubtedly affected our society in many adverse ways. The fact that the voices of only such a small portion of our population are heard and paid heed to is a very disturbing idea. The male gaze leads to many adverse situations that have long-lasting effects that continue to impact people for their entire lives.

### **The Need to Keep a Check on The Male Gaze:**

TV is the first outside influence in a person's life. Before a child can even speak or read, he is introduced to the television and the internet. Many little children do not even understand the concept of a TV and cell phone when they are introduced to it. This gives a lot of importance and significance to what is shown on these platforms. This calls for increased caution and a sense of responsibility while making shows and movies. A child starts watching and observing before he can even speak or read and this is one of his first senses that develops the earliest and has a huge impact on the child when he grows up. This is why we need to make sure that whatever is shown to the audience is not stereotypical or harmful in any way.

While it is the norm to censor whatever is being shown on the big screen, no one pays heed to the fact that most of the content that is being shown on the big screen is highly stereotypical and prejudicial. No one cares about the fact that we show young kids a very grave form of patriarchy and misogyny from a very young age and this shapes the kind of person they become. Children have very soft minds that are vulnerable to influence and the fact that no one cares about the type of content that is being shown to such young minds is very disturbing. It is an undeniable fact that the male gaze dominates a considerably large portion of the shows and movies that we watch on a daily basis. This is why we need a change in the narrative to be able to change society. If we are unable to change this narrative and continue to preach through such movies and shows that only cater to the ambitions and preferences of men, it is only a utopian dream to think of a just and equitable society.

### **Sexualization and Objectification of Women:**

The male gaze has very complicated and long-lasting effects on the viewers. The Indian film industry is run by the male gaze. Many major movies are examples of the male gaze and its undeniable presence in the Indian film industry. Some of the most famous and well-known movies are completely narrated from the male perspective. This is only a small example of how the male gaze controls our society. One of the most visible and noticeable effects of the male gaze is the sexualization and objectification of female characters.

The movies that are narrated by the male gaze view women as objects of sexual pleasure and desire. For them, sexual desires and fantasies are synonymous with sexualization and objectification. It is as if the former can not exist until and unless they are understood in the light of the latter. If we look at movies, we can observe how the camera excessively focuses on the physical features of the female characters. When the female character enters the screen, the camera only shows the audience her physical features and keeps zooming in on certain body parts, like her hips, her waist, and her neck. It is very obvious that the camera is trying to show us the bodily perfection of the female character.

This might not seem so harmful in hindsight. But if you look at it more carefully, you will understand that this leads to people thinking that a woman's only rewarding characteristic is her beauty. Men start seeing women for their physical appearance and all of a sudden, their personality, nature, and other traits are lost somewhere beneath the mask of their physical appearance. The only thing that is visible at this point in time is her body. We all know that humans are called humans because of all these characteristics that the audience and filmmakers find very easy to ignore and move past. In fact, the only thing that differentiates living and non-living beings is the presence of a personality, thinking capacity, etc. in the former, and when we ignore that in a human being, what is left behind is nothing more than an object.

This leads to the objectification of women. The fact that the camera only focuses on the bodies of the female characters and that these are the only things that are so strangely shown while describing a female character shows us how women are only desired for their bodies. This leads to the sexualization of women. This is because a woman's worth is measured in terms of their beauty and sexual appeal. Men start seeing them as objects of desire and sexual pleasure. Movies always show a man describing a woman's physical appearance when he is talking to his friends about her. It is never her potential and her personality. It is just her body. He will go into great

detail while describing her bodily features and her appearance. This is what women are viewed for by the world and even their lovers. On the other hand, this is not the same for men. When women describe their lovers, they usually talk about their behavior, their personality, and the way they treat them. This is why the male gaze only objectifies and sexualizes women while men are not only allowed to keep their human features, but they are also glorified for some of the most basic things. Sarah Rieken talks about the objectification of women in her article titled, *“The Male Gaze and Its Effects on Women”*;

*“Psychologists have coined the term “self-objectification,” or “the process of habitual body monitoring, wherein women monitor their bodies as they believe outside observers do,” to describe how women deal with being under the male gaze. The Objectification Theory looks at the consequences of women being treated as a sexual object rather than a human. This theory is nothing new, yet the subsequent studies of how this unwanted objectification can lead to self-objectification are slowly being uncovered.”*

The female gaze is a way of defying this and changing the narrative. The female gaze is not some sort of revenge for the male gaze. Instead, simply put, it only tries to undo the negative effects of the male gaze. The female gaze does not attempt to sexualize men or objectify them in an attempt to give women the sort of power that men have in the male gaze. Instead, it states that it is unjust to give this sort of power to anyone to sexualize someone as it is against all the principles of equality and justice. The female gaze talks about how women, men, and all the other genders, can have sexual fantasies without having the need to justify the sexualization or objectification of anyone. The whole phenomenon of objectifying someone is very degrading and demeaning in itself. The female gaze not only stands against it but it strongly condemns it. The whole motive of the female gaze is to ensure basic human dignity and respect for everyone just for the sake of being human.

### **The Male Gaze and Body Image Issues:**

Another really harsh effect of the male gaze is body image issues. The male gaze dictates how a person is supposed to look. Every single movie only focuses on the physical traits of a

woman that make her “desirable”. The word “desirable” is very subjective and often misleading but the male gaze fails to acknowledge this. As stated earlier, women are led to believe that their beauty is their only desirable characteristic. The matter gets even worse when the standards of this so-called beauty are laid down by a few male filmmakers who have the narrowest vision and the most outdated mindset. These standards are not just hard to achieve, they are in fact unachievable and unrealistic. It is not possible for almost ninety-nine percent of women to look like what is shown on the big screen. Not everyone is born with perfectly clear skin, a surprisingly thin body structure, and perfect hair. In fact, the rarest of people are born with all these features.

We never see movies where the lead female actress flaunts her natural skin with acne and scars. We do not see movies where women are not thin like paper. This is what leads women to think that if they have their natural features, they are not beautiful. These beauty standards are very toxic and harm the viewers for a really long period of time. It teaches people that they are supposed to look a certain way. And this certain way is very often unachievable and unrealistic and unsurprisingly, many people fail to meet these standards. This failure causes them to think less of themselves and causes body image issues. Young girls are shown models and actresses with the perfect figure, skin tone, hair, etc. and they are made to believe that this is what makes them desirable. They try their best to meet these standards and compromise on their mental health. The depression that is caused by the failure to meet these unrealistic beauty standards is really concerning. It kills the self-respect and confidence of many women all around the globe. Aloy Deb Berma addresses this issue in an article titled *“Female Bodies and the Harmful Impact of the Male Gaze”*;

*“Another way in which the male gaze is perpetuated is through societal expectations of women’s bodies. Women are often expected to conform to a certain standard of beauty that is defined by men. This standard includes thinness, large breasts, and an hourglass figure. Women who do not conform to these standards are often shamed and stigmatized. This pressure to conform to a certain ideal can lead to eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and other mental health issues.”*

The female gaze teaches us that these beauty standards are hollow and shallow and it means absolutely nothing to achieve them. The female gaze teaches us that beauty is not a term small

enough to be confined by the looks of a handful of people. It is quite irrational to expect every single woman in the world to look exactly like the model or actress that they show on TV. not only is this unrealistic, but it also kills all the diversity that is actually one of the most beautiful things about our species. The female gaze shows us how beauty lies in each and every individual and there is no particular set of bodily features that can be said to decide if you are beautiful or not.

### **Male Validation: A By-Product of The Male Gaze:**

The male gaze also teaches young women and girls that their worth lies in male validation and the attention that they receive from men. If we look at it, we see that in almost every single movie in India, the female lead is always a beautiful woman who is chased after by many men. This is considered to be a sign of her importance and worth. In the movie, *Laila Majnu*, the female lead, Laila, has many lovers. In the first scene of the movie, we see her going to her college in her car and we see how so many men await her just to be able to look at her for a small second. This is shown as an indication of her beauty. Her whole identity is her beauty and her beauty is decided by men. This is romanticized and glorified. In reality, it is not just hollow but also very degrading.

Women are taught to obey and respect their male counterparts. They are expected to love them through anything and everything and always be loyal and committed to them. This is very utopian. Very often, we see that the man is abusive and just a bad partner and the woman just sticks by him. From a very young age, girls are always taught to be soft-spoken and tolerate everything just to keep their husbands happy. No one teaches the same thing to a man. It is because our society thinks that a woman has no individual existence or importance if a man does not approve of it and hence, they are constantly taught to please men and seek validation from them. On the other hand, men are always placed on a pedestal and instead of seeking approval, they are taught to give approval. Apparently, there is nothing wrong that can be done by a man.

The female gaze talks about how this is not only irrational but also very stupid to even think of. It talks about how no one should be taught to seek validation from anyone, especially on the basis of their gender because that gives uncontrolled power to one while subjugating the others. The female gaze changes the narrative and teaches women to seek validation from within themselves instead of searching for it in their partners.



### **The Male Gaze and Its Support for Gender Roles:**

The male gaze is also derogatory because it supports gender roles and stereotypes. It continuously shows men and women in stereotypical positions. This leads people to associate roles and other characteristics with genders and this dictates their behavior and expectations in the long run. Most movies show women in a role subordinate to men. They are shown as extensions of their husbands and their most important characteristic is being obedient and loving. It dictates how people are supposed to act and behave at all times. It ignores all other aspects of one's identity and treats gender as the only important feature while listing down the expectations from a person. It is very absurd to expect a whole group of people to act and behave in an exactly similar way. Similarly, it is also absurd to label a whole group as one with the same characteristics.

A very good example of this is how we see in movies that men are always there to save their wives and other female characters. It is supposed to be a man's duty to be brave and strong and fight for his loved ones. It is simply and very conveniently assumed that all men are strong and brave while all women hate violence and are afraid of fighting. There is no rational explanation behind this. The male gaze glorifies the pre-existing gender roles and makes us think of them as the only way a person is supposed to act. An article in the *Psychologists Magazine* highlights this problem very appropriately;

*“Additionally, by promoting the notion that men inherit the power gaps between men and women, highlighting the male gaze, and upholding sexism in a variety of contexts with an infinite range, the active approach is normalized. As women are portrayed as inheriting the passive position, this leads to the genesis of numerous aspects of gender inequality. This leads to the origin of several elements of gender discrimination and the perpetuation of sexism in various aspects with an innumerable range.”*

The female gaze helps dematerialize the effects of the male gaze by giving examples of both men and women who are different from what they are expected to be. The female gaze shows us how it is completely normal to be whatever one truly wants to be and that characteristics, qualities, acts, and emotions have no gender.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, we see that it is very evident that the male gaze impacts our society in very adverse ways. There is no rational explanation that can be given to justify the effects of the male gaze in any way possible. The presence of the male gaze in our media and film industry is only an indication of the downfall of our civilization. It is very clear that the male gaze impacts many people in their daily lives and changes their lives only for the worse. The female gaze is nothing but an attempt to neutralize the effects of the male gaze and establish a just and equitable society where both men and women can feel safe and grow and develop together.

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