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Male gaze and Indian cinema

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Abstract:

The term "male gaze" is a concept coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her influential 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The male gaze refers to the way in which visual media, such as films and advertisements, are often created from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying women as passive objects of desire.

According to Mulvey, mainstream media tends to present women as objects to be looked at, catering to the presumed heterosexual male viewer. This gaze often involves the camera positioning the viewer as a male observer who gazes upon female characters who are typically presented as sexualized objects. This objectification can perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce power imbalances between men and women.

Mulvey argued that the male gaze is deeply ingrained in the film language, with techniques such as close-ups of women's bodies, voyeuristic camera angles, and the objectification of women's bodies for the pleasure of male viewers. She further highlighted how the male gaze positions women as passive and denies them agency and subjectivity.

The concept of the male gaze has been widely discussed and critiqued in feminist theory and media studies. Some argue that the male gaze is not limited to visual media and can also be observed in other forms of media and everyday life. Critics of the male gaze advocate for more diverse and inclusive representations of gender in media, challenging the objectification and sexualization of women and promoting more empowering and complex female characters. In this paper we want to understand the male gaze and its presence in Indian cinema. The paper's major goal is to show how Indian film is impacted over time by the male gaze.

Key words: Gaze, Laura Mulvey, male Gaze, female Gaze, feminist film theory, Indian cinema

Introduction: The male gaze is a sexualized style of portraying women, claims feminist theory. The male gaze represents women through the sex needs of heterosexual male viewers by objectifying them. It presents the female personality and body as something that males can view, take control of, and dominate.

Throughout history, women have frequently been objectified in literature, film, and the visual arts. For instance, in movies, the camera frequently uses close-up shots to emphasise the bodies and sexualized features of female actors. The goals and ideas of the female characters are treated as subordinate to those of the male characters in this type of filming.

Women are harmed by the male gaze because it forces them to conform to patriarchal ideals of what it means to be a woman. It affects how women see themselves because it places a lot of emphasis on physical appearance, which can be harmful to their mental health and cause them to have lower levels of self-esteem. Female empowerment is subordinated to male sexual impulses and the patriarchy by placing women in subservient roles to appease the male viewer. Young girls embrace this viewpoint as the norm when women are portrayed as sexual objects in ads, TV shows, movies, and artwork. Women who compare themselves to these sexualized representations of female characters in the media experience body shame as a result of the male gaze. The masculine gaze limits how women define themselves.

Understanding the effects of the male gaze enables you to raise awareness and start crucial feminism-related conversations. The following three actions will help you begin to avoid being scrutinised by men:

Use a critical eye. You can approach different visual media more critically if you know how to recognise the masculine gaze. Recognise the misconceptions and damaging images that some individuals identify with the male gaze so you can contribute to eradicating the false narrative.

Put women in positions of power. By putting women in positions of authority and empowerment, we can combat the male gaze. Young girls can see themselves in more positive light by modifying the stereotypes of female characters and eradicating the clichés connected with the male gaze.

The male protagonists, who drive the plot and are energetic and in charge, are, portrayed in a way that appeal to the male viewers. When they watch a glamorous, successful, and ideal character on film, viewers (subconsciously) aspire to be like him. They relate to the man. Women also identify with the feminine characters, objectify themselves as sexual objects, and wish to be desired in a similar way. For audiences, these processes largely take place subconsciously. Though such forms of depiction are problematic, the cinema (and we may say audio-visual media more generally) answers to our biological desire for gazing, particularly for looking at bodies. Raising awareness. A wonderful way to resist the male gaze is to engage in fruitful dialogues. By going over the

Historically, female characters in Indian films have often been portrayed as passive objects of desire, with their appearance and sexuality prioritized over their agency and individuality. Women have frequently been depicted in glamorous and provocative roles, with a heavy emphasis on their physical attractiveness.

However, it is important to note that Indian cinema is not a monolithic entity, and there have been notable exceptions and progressive changes over time. There have been filmmakers who have challenged and subverted the male gaze, presenting female characters with depth, agency, and complex narratives. These films have sought to depict women as more than just objects of male desire and have explored their perspectives and experiences.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and critique of the male gaze in Indian cinema. Filmmakers and audiences have been calling for more diverse and authentic representations of women, with an emphasis on their empowerment and agency. This has led to the emergence of films that focus on female-centric narratives, highlighting women's stories and experiences.

Moreover, the rise of independent cinema in India has opened up new avenues for diverse storytelling, providing platforms for female filmmakers and narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and representations. These films aim to present a more inclusive and nuanced portrayal of women, challenging the objectification and male-centric perspective that has dominated Indian cinema in the past.

While progress is being made, the male gaze is still present in certain aspects of Indian cinema. However, with the growing awareness and changing landscape of the film industry, there is hope for a more balanced and inclusive portrayal of women in the future.

With the rise of OTT platforms in India, there has been a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female characters and narratives. OTT platforms have allowed for greater experimentation and diversity in storytelling, giving opportunities to filmmakers to explore different perspectives and challenge traditional gender roles.

Many Indian web series and films available on OTT platforms have been successful in depicting more nuanced and complex female characters. These characters are not solely defined by their appearance or relationships with male protagonists but are given agency and depth. They have their own ambitions, strengths, and weaknesses, making them more relatable and realistic.

Furthermore, OTT platforms have also provided a platform for female filmmakers and writers to share their stories and perspectives, which has contributed to a broader range of narratives and representation on-screen. This has led to a reduction in the objectification and sexualisation of women that has often been associated with the male gaze.

However, it is important to note that the impact of OTT platforms on the male gaze in Indian cinema is still evolving. While there have been positive changes, some content on these platforms may still perpetuate gender stereotypes or objectify women. It is crucial for filmmakers and audiences to continue pushing for more inclusive and diverse storytelling that challenges and subverts traditional gender norm.

Some Indian cinema and its obsession about male gaze:

"Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham" (2001): This film, directed by Karan Johar, exemplifies

the male gaze through its portrayal of female characters. The camera often focuses on the female actors in a way that objectifies them, emphasizing their physical appearance and catering to the male gaze. This obsession with the male gaze can be attributed to a combination of factors, including societal norms and expectations that place women primarily as objects of desire. Additionally, the commercial success of such films has further reinforced the perpetuation of the male gaze.

"Parched" (2015): In contrast to the aforementioned example, "Parched," directed by Leena Yadav, subverts the male gaze and challenges patriarchal norms. The film delves into the lives of four women in rural India, highlighting their struggles, desires, and agency. By presenting a female-centric narrative, "Parched" aims to dismantle the male gaze and provide a more nuanced and empowering portrayal of women.

"Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge" (1995): Directed by Aditya Chopra, this iconic Bollywood film is considered a classic in Indian cinema. While the movie is celebrated for its romantic storyline, it also perpetuates the male gaze to some extent. The camera often objectifies the female lead, Simran, played by Kajol, by focusing on her physical appearance and emphasizing her beauty. This aligns with the traditional idea of a male protagonist pursuing and desiring a visually appealing female counterpart, catering to the male gaze.

"Cocktail" (2012): Directed by Homi Adajania, "Cocktail" explores the complexities of modern relationships. However, the film has faced criticism for its depiction of female characters through the male gaze. The camera tends to objectify the female leads, played by Deepika Padukone and Diana Penty, focusing on their physical attributes and presenting them as objects of desire. The film received backlash for reinforcing traditional gender roles and reducing the female characters to mere love interests.

"Pink" (2016): Directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, "Pink" stands out as a significant departure from the typical male gaze prevalent in Indian cinema. The film tackles important social issues, including consent and victim-blaming. Through its narrative and portrayal of female characters, "Pink" challenges the male gaze and subverts traditional stereotypes. It empowers its female characters and confronts societal prejudices, promoting a more inclusive and progressive perspective.

The obsession with the male gaze in Indian cinema can be attributed to several factors:

Cultural and societal norms: Indian society has historically been patriarchal, with gender roles and expectations deeply ingrained. The male gaze reflects the dominant societal view that positions women as objects of desire and passive subjects, meant to be looked at and admired. Filmmakers, often catering to popular tastes, have capitalized on this perspective to attract and entertain audiences.

Commercial considerations: The prevalence of the male gaze in Indian cinema is also influenced by commercial considerations. Filmmakers often cater to the mass market, and there has been a long-standing belief that objectifying women and catering to male fantasies leads to commercial success. As a result, the male gaze has become deeply embedded in the industry's narrative and visual language.

Lack of diverse perspectives: Indian cinema, like any other film industry, has been predominantly male-dominated in terms of filmmaking and storytelling. The absence of diverse perspectives and voices, especially from women filmmakers, has contributed to the perpetuation of the male gaze. With limited representation behind the camera, it becomes challenging to challenge and subvert traditional narratives and perspectives.

However, it is important to note that in recent years, there has been a growing awareness and pushback against the male gaze in Indian cinema. Filmmakers and audiences are actively questioning and challenging these norms, leading to more inclusive and empowering representations of women on screen.

The male gaze in Indian cinema often arises due to various factors, including cultural and societal norms, the influence of popular tastes, and the commercial considerations of the film industry. The male-dominated nature of the industry, both in terms of filmmaking and storytelling, has perpetuated this gaze over time. Additionally, the historical objectification and sexualization of women in Indian popular culture have further reinforced the prevalence of the male gaze.

However, it is important to note that Indian cinema is evolving, and there has been a noticeable shift in recent years. Filmmakers and audiences are increasingly questioning and challenging the male gaze, seeking more nuanced and progressive representations of women. This includes narratives that explore female agency, challenge traditional gender roles, and promote more egalitarian relationships. While the male gaze still persists to some extent, there is a growing recognition of the need for change and a push for more inclusive and empowering portrayals of women on screen.

Conclusion: The portrayal of the male gaze in Indian cinema has been a subject of significant debate and scrutiny. While it cannot be denied that Indian cinema has historically perpetuated and reinforced patriarchal norms, there have been noticeable shifts in recent years. Filmmakers and audiences are increasingly questioning and challenging the objectification and stereotyping of women on screen, seeking more nuanced and progressive representations.

Indian cinema, like any other film industry, has reflected and influenced societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality. The male gaze, characterized by the objectification and sexualization of women, has often dominated narratives and visuals in Indian films. Women were often depicted as mere objects of desire, with their agency and individuality taking a backseat.

However, in recent times, there has been a visible shift towards more diverse and inclusive narratives. Filmmakers are exploring varied perspectives and telling stories that highlight the agency, strength, and complexity of female characters. This includes narratives that challenge traditional gender roles, examine women's desires and aspirations, and promote a more egalitarian vision of relationships.

Moreover, audiences are demanding and appreciating films that portray women as multi-dimensional individuals, rather than reducing them to mere objects of male desire. Social media has played a crucial role in giving voice to these concerns, allowing for discussions and debates on the representation of women in Indian cinema. As a result, filmmakers are increasingly conscious of the impact their work can have on society and are striving to create more inclusive and empowering content.

While the male gaze still persists to some extent in Indian cinema, there is a growing recognition that it is not the only lens through which stories should be told. Filmmakers and audiences alike are pushing for narratives that challenge the status quo, break stereotypes, and promote a more egalitarian and respectful portrayal of women. This shift is encouraging and offers hope for a more equitable and inclusive future in Indian cinema, where the male gaze is gradually dismantled and replaced with a more diverse range of perspectives.

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