

Male and Female Gaze in Bollywood Films

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Abstract: The flourishing film industry based in Mumbai, popularly known as the Bollywood is one that is enormous in its dimensions. This industry worth millions, is food, shelter and luxury to many. The influence that Bollywood, where actors become stars and then transcend to achieve the status of gods, has is astounding. Visuals have a great impact on most people, especially children, and hence films as tools of mass communication has a huge potential. It is interesting to know what goes into it, and the psychology it is based on- the very primary human instinct and affinity to see. In this paper, I have tried to analyse male gaze and the lesser known female gaze in the context of Bollywood.

Keywords: Male gaze, Bollywood, Visual pleasure, Laura Mulvey, films

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Male gaze is a term coined and popularized by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey through her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. It refers to the “tendency of filmmakers and films to assume the point of view of a heterosexual male” according to Collins Dictionary. The field of visual media is one that objectifies the female body in various ways, according to feminist theories. One gets frustrated time and again by the way a woman is shown to own nothing, not even her body, and by own I mean possess something of worth or value. At the same time a man is appreciated for his smartness,

or talent or his achievements. *Pretty Woman* a 1990 film starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere and directed by Garry Marshall is a classic example of how popular film industry perceives being an eye candy as the highest goal a woman can achieve. Julia Roberts who plays the role of Vivian, the female lead is introduced to the audience in fragmented close up shots of her face, buttocks, legs etc. and this way of presentation is maintained throughout the film, that too only for her. Nowadays, even video games portray a stereotypical notion of a sexually attractive woman- petite, fair with large eyes, luscious hair and a “feast for the eye”. Popular films, which are supposedly a reflection of popular culture at least in the Indian context, is mostly a narrative seen from the perspective of a heterosexual male. Everything about the story would be in relation to him, and the females in such a narrative, are almost always represented in relation to one such male.

Laura Mulvey makes use of Freudian psychoanalysis and his idea of *Scopophilia*, the nearly voyeuristic pleasure received by an individual by looking, or gazing to discuss the popularity of cinema. She combined this “curiosity and the wish to look” (Mulvey, 3), with the narcissistic tendency to recognize and to identify with the characters. According to her,

In film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of ego libido. (Mulvey, 4)

A patriarchal society almost always tends to give agency to the man while the woman is the one subjected to his actions. So is the case with the sexually charged desire to look. Mulvey says, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 4).

Movies a few years before and after Indian independence can be contrasted with the ones following the so-called Westernization of the Indian film industry, both in terms of technology and production and in terms of narratives and characterization. However the fact remains that the position and the roles played by women have not seen so much of a modification, bar a few superficial ones. There are only a few movies in which female characters are given more or even equal agency, and solid characterization. According to actor Tannishtha Chatterjee, male gaze dominates Bollywood, even today. “Most of our films hardly have strong women characters and the idea is to have women either in bikinis or to focus the camera on their b***bs. There is no liberation on screen in an industry where female actors are mostly relegated to being sex symbols” (Dasgupta). It would seem as if the only thing interesting about a woman is her *choli ke peeche kya hein* (a song from the Bollywood movie *Khalnayak*). This gross eroticization of the female body is to be seen as the result of a male centered and dominated society of which the film industry is part of. Even when a strong woman character is represented in a movie, she is seen as someone who has been forced to ignore her family for the sake of her career, or as someone who sacrifices her career for the happiness and well-being of her family.

According to Laura Mulvey's view on phallocentrism, men feel subconsciously threatened by the female body. They perceive women as fear inducing reminder of the possibility of the absence of a penis and castration, which makes women a dangerous object- one which evokes anxiety. Therefore, they subject the threatening object to their gaze as one of the ways to escape said anxiety.

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the film noir); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented

figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star). This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. (Mulvey, 6)

Bollywood item song sequences are the biggest example of how the female body is fragmented into thighs, breasts, face, stomach and other body parts that are sexually arousing, enhanced by costumes that very obviously are designed to emphasize a woman's genital areas and breasts. The choreography in such songs is highly sexualized and even the lyrics either spreads a message of stereotypical beauty or that of objectification. Bollywood films almost always need to include at least one "item number" to create a ripple in the film going crowd and make the bill desks overflow with cash. Examples of this are *Baby Doll* (song from the Bollywood movie Ragini MMS 2, starring Sunny Leone.), *Exercise* (a song from the Bollywood movie Prem Aggan, starring Meghna Kothari) and *In aankhon ki masti* (a song from the Bollywood movie Umrao Jaan(1981), starring Rekha.). To add insult to injury, if a female character has a role to play in the movie, it is almost always narrated in close relation to that of a strong masculine figure. She is either the lover, the wife or the mother or daughter of a man, but a male character is shown as someone with many distinctions who doesn't require the presence of a member of the other sex to validate their existence.

Ananya Sensharma says that while oppression and discrimination are still rampant, with modernization, education and female empowerment in the Indian society, things have become better for the women of India. Hence films have started to narrate the story of empowered and confident women who are self-reliant, reflecting the real women of present time. One would have to agree that trends that created an idea of a very restricted sense of womanhood is changing in the Bollywood film industry. Women are sometimes portrayed as owners of careers and life goals other than wooing the main hero. Even female centric movies are being made these days, that too, ones which are successful

commercially, for example, *Queen* (2014), a Bollywood movie starring Kangana Ranaut.

Laura Mulvey's essay completely disregards the possibility idea of a counter to the male gaze- a female gaze. According to her, the society is so firmly situated in male dominance that any act of agency can only be committed by a male. Her idea of the spectator is always a white heterosexual male. A female viewer needs to adopt transvestism- they need to masquerade as a male in order to enjoy such a film. What is actually interesting is that Bollywood has seen shifts that has led to the objectification and fragmentation of the male body also. Six pack abs, chiseled features and a muscular body type is as mandatory to a hero as a size zero with breasts and buttocks is to a heroin. The mega-stars of Bollywood, whose earnings are stated to be in billions, like Shah Rukh Khan or Salman Khan have all worked very hard towards achieving looks worthy of Greek gods. Evidently, heterosexual females too enjoy beholding a sexually arousing male body. This shift has happened quite recently, around ten or fifteen years ago. Whether it is because Bollywood industry suddenly woke up to women's sexuality or capacity for arousal is an interesting question to ponder upon.

There have been many movies in Hollywood which use the female gaze to advantage, the *Twilight Saga* a Hollywood film series starring Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, for example. An example for the existence of evident female spectatorship in the Indian context is the song sequence in 2012 film *Aiyya, 'Dreamum Wakeupum'*. In the video of this song, while the lead actress Rani Mukerji is swaying her body to the beats of the song, dressed in full blown Bollywood item song sequence attire, by her side, the hero Prithviraj Sukumaran too is wearing an outfit that reveals his well contoured upper body. Interestingly, this film features a heroin who openly lusts after the hero's body, and her gaze is one that could be equated to the average Bollywood hero's when he sets his eyes on the object of his desire. Another example would be the closing credits of the movie *Happy New Year* (2014), a Bollywood movie starring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone, where lead hero Shah Rukh Khan lowers his shirt to display the words "Just For Farah" on his bare skin, Farah being Farah Khan, the

very successful director of the movie, who interestingly, also happens to be a female. Sensharma says, “Women are objects of spectacle in everyday life as in films, but they are also spectators, women are caught up in relations of desire for, as well as identification, with the female figures in film” (Sensharma, 37). At the same time, it can be argued that the female gaze has been directed by the patriarchic notions of an ideal man and an ideal woman, and the way a woman is expected to act, speak and even look. In that case the female gaze itself becomes an extension of male power. Therefore, whether or not the position of the spectator gives a woman as equal an agency as a man, would be an interesting question to ponder on.

Objectification of the female body, rising from male gaze has many psychological repercussions on women. This results from the body image issues an average female would face from self-comparison with the ideal female body that the male gaze approves of. A woman is pressured to try to look like the model figure and they put themselves through torturous diet and exercise regimes and beauty enhancement techniques. Anorexia Nervosa (an eating disorder), obsession with looks, self-hate and low self-esteem have been reported to be rising more than ever among women of all age, particularly adolescents. Women generally spend many times more than men on skin and hair care products, resulting in them suffering from economic consequences. One only needs to look at the number of times advertisements for beauty care products appear in the middle of an average television program. Psychologists are raising their voice in concern against this dangerous trend. What is usually not talked about is the results of the female gaze on members of the male gender. Wouldn't the same sort of psychological and economic disturbances haunt the male members too?

We have seen how women are portrayed just as pretty faces or erotic objects in movies-Hollywood and Bollywood, while men too, though portrayed as masculine characters have to go through objectification to a certain extent. Whereas a large majority of Bollywood films portray female bodies as objects for the dominant heterosexual male gaze that Laura Mulvey speaks of, there has been

a rising tendency to objectify male leads along with them. The effects of female gaze in the context of Bollywood have not been discussed enough, in comparison to the male gaze and its consequences. Queer, bisexual or homosexual gaze and their results have not been mentioned by Laura Mulvey, and neither by Bollywood. The differences in race, class and ethnicity too contributes to the different types of gazes and objectification. In conclusion, it can be said that the concept of gaze is not just male, as Mulvey puts it, but rather multifaceted.

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