

***I am a Woman Not an Exhibit: Analyzing the Male Gaze in Manu Joseph's
Serious Men***

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Abstract: *Manu Joseph is a prolific writer who speaks out about many of the most critical societal problems of our day. His novel Serious Men is a compelling tale of caste conundrums, war of intellectuals, and the struggle of an educated high caste woman to make her way into the all-male Institute of Theory and Research. There is a lot of criticism available about Serious Men, mostly with regards to Dalit character Ayaan Mani and Brahmin Scientist Arvind Acharya. However, not much has been written about how the novel reflects exploitation of women at workplace. A feminist analysis of the female character Oparna Goshmaulik is undertaken here to examine the prevalence of the male gaze in society. The paper aims to examine Manu Joseph's Serious Men within the framework of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze.*

Keywords: male gaze, look, scopophilia, fetish, voyeurism

Discussion: Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and poststructuralist Michael Foucault pioneered the theory of gaze. The concept of gaze is based on the relation between the observer and the observed. The theory delves into the complicated process of watching and being watched. Lacan describes the gaze from the perspective of psychoanalysis as a relationship between the subject and its desire to look. Therefore, the gaze involves the subject's desire and fantasy to control the object it sees. In the 1970s this term became popular in the field of women's studies, social sciences, and film studies.

Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of male gaze in her famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Although the major theme of the essay is the oppression of women, it reveals how classical narrative films reinforce this objectification through exploitation of human psychology, which socially privileges masculinity. The essay depicts how the patriarchic subconscious shapes the films and the film-watching experience. Mulvey criticizes the classical cinema of voyeurism and scopophilia, through which the male

figure search out visual pleasure by looking at the female body. Mulvey draws on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jaques Lacan. She condemns the visual focus on the female body in cinema, which objectifies the female under patriarchal societal orders. The current paper similarly explores and challenges the male gaze in the selected novel.

Serious Men tells the story of Ayyan Mani, a Dalit (lower caste) man, who assists a Brahmin scientist, Arvind Acharya. Besides the story of Ayyan and his big dreams, there is also the story of Oparna Goshmaulik, the first female scientist at the Institute of Theory and Research. Her story revolves around the theme of woman's struggle to fit into the field of research which is often dominated by men. The current paper analyzes the male gaze from three perspectives: that of the author, the reader, and the characters. The driving force of the theory is that the gaze contributes in the objectification and eroticization of the female. Additionally, the gaze is biased towards women, and female gazes are generally passive. In the course of the paper, we will see, the male characters look and Oparna becomes the object of multiple gazes.

The character of Oparna is codified by the author as a sexual object subjected to the controlling male gaze. Her major role in the novel is to create erotic impact through striking images. The novel contains several instances where the male characters are ruled by scopophilia (sexual pleasure derived by watching the object). Sigmund Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* claimed that scopophilia is associated with objectifying others and subjecting them to the controlling gaze. As part of the current storyline, Ayaan Mani is engaged in voyeuristic activities, particularly with the Institute's only female scientist, Oparna Goshmaulik. Mani is the Peeping Tom who gains sexual satisfaction just by watching Oparna through his controlling gaze. Despite of the fact that Oparna belongs to a high caste and is out of reach for the Dalit assistant Ayaan, the assistant does not miss the opportunity to objectify Oparna to his controlling gaze. When Oparna first comes to the Institute for her interview, she is deliberately made to wait in the anteroom by Ayyan as he "wanted to take a good look at her"(Joseph 29). The novel creates the "illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey 836) and thus engages the reader in scopophilia to experience erotic pleasure.

As we see, the story of Oparna Goshmaulik runs in the background of the plot along with the main plot of Ayyan and Arvind. Her presence however is an indispensable element of the spectacle. As she occupies the spotlight in the story, she works against the development of the action. However, her presence must be integrated into the narrative's overall cohesion. Mulvey rightly quotes Budd Boetticher to describe this practice:

"What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concerns he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance"(Boetticher qtd in Mulvey).

Joseph's words are enough to demonstrate how Oparna has been cast in an exhibitionist role. A strong, erotic visual image emanates from her appearance. In Mulvey's words Oparna contains "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 837).Mulvey's words are evident in Joseph's description of Oparna's first appearance:

"The moment Oparna Goshmaulik had walked into the institute, three months ago, for the interview, in a blue sari that the stenographers thought was a devious masterstroke, and with her wiry black hair tied back in a fierce knot, she was a commotion" (Joseph 29).

Oparna's character is styled by the author to flatter both the male characters and the male readers. The primary purpose behind the construction of her character is to exploit the sexual urges of the male characters and male readers. This action is testified by John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* in the following way:

"But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (Berger 90).

Oparna serves erotic purposes on two levels: as an erotic object both for the characters in the novel and for the male reader. Oparna's appearance briefly takes the story outside its own time and space. Mulvey, challenges this tradition of representing woman as an image to be looked upon by men.

Mulvey points out two aspects of scopophilia: objectification of the other for erotic pleasure and identification with the other to secure the ideal ego. Mulvey links narcissist scopophilia with Lacan's "mirror phase". This aspect of the male gaze can be linked to the ego-reinforcing operations of the novel. The novel focuses its attention on the human form in its most glamorous form arousing the reader's narcissist desire to gaze at the other who reflects his ideal ego. In Lacan's view, this desire reproduces the formative moment of recognition in the mirror image. *Serious Men* offers a structure strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while also reinforcing it. The two aspects of scopophilia create tension between subjectivity and objectivity. According to Sigmund Freud, one is the function of sexual drives while the other is of the ego drives. Both of them are coded in the interest of male desire. While the image of women offers "a beautifully complementary fantasy world" (Mulvey 837) for man's desires and scopophilia, it also symbolizes the threat of castration. Thus, the objectified other represents both pleasure and threat to man. In *Serious Men*, the leading male character Ayaan is involved in what Mulvey refers to as fetishistic scopophilia. Ayaan is a mediocre assistant from a low caste, whereas Oparna is an Astrobiology scientist from Stanford. The fact that Oparna is a woman signifies castration threat, yet her presence creates "castration anxiety" for Ayaan. However, the fetishistic scopophilia becomes evident when Oparna becomes a member of the Institute: "Ayaan was watching her surreptitiously as she stared thoughtfully at the floor. Another high-caste woman beyond his reach" (Joseph 29). Oparna is like an unattainable star for Ayyan but he is distracted from the "castration anxiety" because of Oparna's physical beauty and looks at her without fear: "Oparna Goshmaulik was an enchantment that was always beyond his fortunes" (Joseph30). The representation of a woman's image signifies castration and thus, displeasure. Nevertheless, the narrative structure diminishes this problem by one of the two ways pointed by Mulvey: first relies on voyeurism and second on fetish which she associates in Freudian terms as "castration anxiety". According to Mulvey voyeurism involves sadism where "pleasure lies in ascertaining

guilt- asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey 840). Fetishistic look involves “the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone” (Mulvey 840)

Another point raised by Mulvey, is that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (ibid. 837). The male characters of the novel have the power of spectatorship while Oparna becomes a spectacle for them:

“OPARNA GOSHMAULIK WAS still not granted the peace of anonymity, but she was now an insider. Those cold gazes when she went down the corridors in the wooden beat of her low heels, the number of old scholars who wanted to show her the right path while staring at her breasts, and their wives, some of them, who arrived to have an accidental meeting with her and see for themselves the talk of the Professors’ Quarters—those days were over. Only minor assaults remained” (Joseph 74).

The male characters in the novel are not burdened with sexual objectification. Thus, the narrative structure and the female spectacle, contribute to adding power to male characters. They have an active role in taking the story forward. The aforesaid situation is signified through Joseph’s words: “The stares would always follow her here and she would grow to accept that she was in the world of men”(ibid 40). Mulvey’s point can be further elaborated in following way:

“For him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other”. (Beauvoir 26)

Serious Men relies on the subjectivity of male characters to rise above the unsettling effects of a woman’s image. While the reader perceives Oparna as an erotic object, she is also objectified by the male characters of the novel. Oparna plays a passive role of spectacle; Ayyan Mani becomes the active subject of the novel: Ayyan has the power to control the events. Ayyan has all the characteristics of patriarchal super ego. This takes the reader in a false sense of legality by his substitute and sees through the look of Ayyan. Thus, Ayyan becomes the leading figure with whom the reader can identify. And throughout the novel Oparna remains sidelined, an object of fantasy for both characters within the novel and the male readers.

Conclusion: The current study shows how *Serious Men* produces a gaze, a world and an object that creates an illusion planned and prepared as per male desire. The author has coded the female character in the language of dominant patriarchal order. It is a clear example of objectifying female and forcing the reader to perceive women through the male gaze. The novel indicates that women are completely forgotten as readers.

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