

Seeing Through Her Eyes: Using Literary Analysis to Reimagine Female Gaze

Jaenia Mukherjee

M.A. Applied Sociology, Dept. of Sociology, Christ University, Bangalore, B.A. Sociology Hons., Dept. of Sociology, Shri Shikshaytan College, University of Calcutta

ABSTRACT

This study uses poetry analysis to investigate the idea of the female gaze from a sociological standpoint. The female gaze is still undertheorized, particularly in sociological contexts, whereas the male gaze has been thoroughly examined in disciplines like sociology, art, and film. By analyzing poetry works that provide complex insights into gender dynamics and power structures, our study fills this knowledge vacuum. The study places the gaze within larger discussions on agency, subjectivity, and representation by drawing on the seminal theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Bell Hooks, Laura Mulvey, and Michel Foucault.

The goal of the study is to think of the female gaze as more than just a contrast to the masculine gaze. It enhances sociological understandings of power relations in gendered areas by presenting the female gaze as a unique and perceptive perspective that provides empathy, agency, and resistance. The study makes a case for the inclusion of the female gaze in sociological discourse by using poetry as a lens to show how poetic narratives actively affect gender perspectives in addition to reflecting them.

INTRODUCTION

The gaze originated in philosophy but has become a mighty instrument through various disciplines, such as sociology and literary analysis. It transcends the naked eye of seeing. Instead, it goes into psychological and social planes of vision. Involvement is also power plays that are always conjoined with a look-that is, who is seeing and how he sees what he sees. The act of seeing can be conscious or unconscious in which sense it ripples and influences not only the seer but also the seen.

The Gaze in Different Disciplinary Fields:

Sociology: Examines how the power structure and social norms shape or influence how we see ourselves or others around us (such as gender or race relations).

Literature: Concerns the way characters use the gaze to reveal their own agency, desires, or perception of the world.

Art History: Concerns the way people are composed in paintings and sculptures with regards to their power dynamics or social expectations.

To this aim, the seminal works of Laura Mulvey and Michel Foucault are discussed, to among other things, highlight that the gaze, specifically the "male gaze," repeated and consolidated social inequalities. Those insights, though by no means less useful for interpretation, call increasingly for a more differentiated analysis of the gaze, particularly the redemption of the female gaze as a strong tool in sociological interpretation.

This research project will fill this gap through reexaminations of the gaze through the lens of literary artworks. Literature is a good source of a rich tapestry of views, where we can understand how characters see themselves and their world.

To this effect, ultimately, the research project will prove the fact that the female gaze is not contrary to the male one, but a very vivid, and insightful perspective on its own.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed helps analyze the story and acquire a deeper understanding of the power dynamics within the social fabric as these are gendered.

The gaze of Michel Foucault is quite fundamental to sociology and, especially, to the study of power relationships and social control. The works on the gaze by Foucault allow the sociologist to study power mechanisms in the social field in a way, supposedly quietly, though undeniably invisible. Institutions and social norms become ways of molding behavior and subjectivity when underlined by the gaze. Sociologists can study how people internalize structures of power and are therefore complicit within their own control. The literary definition of the "gaze" has been fervently skewed along a masculine vision. It was partly made possible by the famous book "Ways of seeing" by John Berger published in 1972. In spite of Berger's interpretations and readings having changed since 1972, the core of his work, "The way we see the way we see," remains very similar. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is a seminal text that examines the gaze in art specifically within Western European oil paintings. Though not a sociologist by specific calling, the work he does holds sociological import in describing gender roles. Berger says that these works of art represent women only through a masculine eye. Women are invariably presented in such contexts as objects of the (masculine) eye of the viewer and are created to be admired and desired. He refers to the relationship thusly as "men act and women appear". Berger's ideas stress how art embodies and legitimates the power structures currently in place within society. It makes you think about how you envision yourself and other people in society, especially as they relate to gender.

However, it is Laura Mulvey's 1975 paper "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" that coined the phrase and gave birth to a whole new theoretical field of research. Mulvey derived these basic concepts from psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and stretched the theory further to accommodate political goals for feminism. Mulvey's work offers insight into the role that visual media plays for us in perceiving gender roles, entrenching inequalities, but also exercising power over images and, most of all, women. It expounds upon the balance of power in the process by which we see an image, especially a woman. Through the analysis of the male gaze, the power of media can be understood in the production of a culture of looking that favors the male view and gender's sexual objectification.

Bell Hooks in her essay 'The oppositional Gaze' speaks about the power dynamics of gaze. She says that Black women were projected as an object of male gaze but the black men could be free of the white supremacist idea. She states that black women should have a critical lens towards the cinema but does not provide any solution to her arguments. Many works of hers resonate with the studies of Mulvey on cinema and male gaze. This can be likened to how woman, according to Beauvoir in her classic book *The Second Sex* (1949), is the "Other" to man's self. It follows that men are the action/emission states, defining themselves and the world about them.

Women, on the other hand, are defined in terms of man, usually as the object of his sight. Beauvoir's ideas thus imply that women can also take up a kind of male gaze: judging themselves and other women based on how much they resemble the social constructs of beauty and womanhood. In truth, De Beauvoir

provided a framework for feminist researchers to study the female gaze when Mulvey started questioning the theory of the male gaze.

In the documentary *Sisters of the Screen: African Women in the Cinema* (Beti Ellerson 2002), a vox pop with women from Africa illustrates that some women are 'unequivocal about there being female perspective' (Valérié Kaboré Silga and Oumena Mamadali); others think it exists but it 'is fragmented along national and racial lines' (Ngozi Onwurah and Florentine Yaméogo), and, in contrast, Fanta Régina Nanco points to the 'female perspective' of a male directed film on Algeria to identify what she simply calls a 'human sensibility' (Kelly 2007, 66).

Sciamma has directed five feature films in France since 2008, and described "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" as a "manifesto about the female gaze," which is indeed true about her film and its continuous subversion of masculine ways of looking into feminine ones.

This is an extremely rare scene wherein more than one man will be in the film, and if they do appear at all, it will be with their backs. When the men do come into a close-up frame, their features are badly out of focus; and when a man's face is clearly shot, it feels like an intrusion.

The book by James D. Bloom, "Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology", explores the idea of the masculine gaze in great detail, elucidating its historical foundations and current significance in literary and cultural debates. It examines how cultural narratives are still impacted and shaped by the male gaze, as well as how it has changed and been understood over time. In their discussion of their own experiences, the author frames male gazing as a fixation that started throughout adolescence and was impacted by both personal growth and social forces. Through a variety of literary works by authors such as Golding and Solzhenitsyn, as well as commentary from modern authors like Alice Munro and James Salter, the text explores the male gaze. These allusions draw attention to the inconsistencies and complexity of male gaze behaviours. As argued by the author, male gazing must be read in more complicated ways instead of being dismissed categorically as bad. They argue that staring by males can be attributed to mental and intellectual exercises and thus could involve careful reading of books and paintings. The author also narrates their journey towards self-discovery and attempting to gain entry into a group focused on aberrant staring behavior. Ultimately, the research challenges common negative perceptions of the male gaze and encourages readers to consider its multifaceted implications and social significance. This entails being aware of the ways in which male gazing can affect both male and female readers as well as the larger intellectual and sociological contexts that both influence and are influenced by this behaviour.

The paper on "The imagery of eyes and concept of male gaze in Shah Abdul Latif's poetry," examines the idea of the masculine gaze in poetry, with a particular emphasis on the writings of well-known Sindhi Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. The study question focuses on how Shah Latif's poetry uses eye symbolism to achieve spiritual connection with the creator, challenging the conventional idea of the male gaze.

In "The Fundamentals of the Gaze in Life and Writing," Lindy Warrell studies the gaze as a means of power and control. She discusses how the gaze is employed in daily life, ranging from the objectifying male gaze to the cultural gaze that excludes some groups of people. Warrell also explains how the gaze may be employed in writing to construct characters and outlooks reflecting these power relations. She contends that authors are obliged to consider the gaze and employ it in such a way that results in comprehension and empathy.

Matthew Stroud's paper, "Gender and the Gaze: Sor Juana, Lacan, and Spanish Baroque Poetry," examines the tangled relationship of gender, the gaze, and poetry in the frame of Spanish Baroque poetry with specific attention given to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's work. Stroud applies Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to an examination of the way in which the gaze as a social and symbolic power molds subjectivity and artistic production. He contends that Sor Juana, in putting herself in and against the dominating patriarchal sight, establishes space for women's voice and epistemological agency. The article explores Sor Juana's poetry in a negotiation with male sight, tendentially objectifying women, as well as employing language for subversion and contest of the power relationships. In effect, Stroud is arguing that Sor Juana's work becomes a place of resistance, where she regains control and restructures the dynamic of the gazer, the one being gazed at, and the act of writing itself within a limiting social framework.

Garcilaso's Soneto VIII is a splendid illustration of this relationship between love, eyes, and the soul:

De aquella vista pura y excelente
salen espíritus vivos y encendidos,
y siendo por mis ojos recibidos,
me pasan hasta donde el mal se siente;
encuéntrese el camino fácilmente
por do lo míos, de tal calor movidos,
salen fuera de mí como perdidos,
llamados d'aquel bien que 'stá presente.
Ausente, en la memoria la imagino;
mis espíritus, pensando que la vían,
se mueven y se encienden sin medida;
mas no hallando fácil el camino,
que los suyos entrando derretían,
revientan por salir do no hay salida. (Rivers 44)

Here the love object is clearly feminine ("la imagino," "la vían"). Traditionally, because most poets of the time were men, it is assumed that the point of view is masculine and that the relationship between love and the eye most often described is that of a man captivated by the sight of a woman. (Stroud, 2003)

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of research is a concise statement that outlines the specific goal or desired outcome of a research project.

- To conceptualize gaze from a gendered lens.
- To explore the concept of female gaze as a sociological perspective through poetry.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This research primarily focuses on the concept of gaze and particularly, female gaze as an area of interest. After the review of literature, it was found that the concept of male gaze has been taken up by a lot of sociologists who tried to explain it in terms of how men view women or how women allow themselves to be viewed by men. The female gaze was found dominant as a literary perspective explaining it to be just empathetic and emotional instead of a sociological perspective.

The gap found was the under theorization of female gaze as a sociological perspective. But female gaze is dominant in literary artworks like poetry or films or paintings and there are a lot of works based on that.

Gaze has been just looked at as a general concept or as male gaze but there are actually various other types of gaze which go beyond the conventional idea of gaze.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

Thus after the research of the sociological theories and the literary works these are the following questions which this paper would try explore:

- How can the female gaze be theorized in sociology with the help of poetry?
- How is poetry playing a part in shaping gender dynamics ?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Poetry is a sociological reality. Poetry shapes and is shaped by the active use of language in our culture on the respective paths of authors, speakers, hearers, readers and Etcetera. The relevance of poetry can escape this tragically imagination when sociologists frame the social world too narrowly. As JP Ward says, “on the face of it sociological and poetry are hardly compatible. The science of poetics cannot nor tries to contribute to the science of society for a science of society understandably has to take language as something of a datum used for social needs and fulfillments.” (Hill)

I also don't completely agree with this statement by JP Ward and would try to relate sociology and poetry in examining the female gaze.

Poetics is concerned with how poetry renews and refreshes language in any kind of a poem and is capable of endurance while socialists are concerned with the study of language but only as to how language enables social interaction, social conflict and social coherence. Although I agree with the statement that sociality studies language to understand the social interactions and the structures, language shapes the poetry and poetry itself is shaped by the society and the current social structures. There have been many instances in history where poetry has been used as the symbol of protest and to spread the message of the movements which thus can be related to sociology and understanding the changing sociological context and social structures.

Pierre Buddhu expresses how there is a rise of the classical sociological view among the independent writers who are unconstrained by patronage and other external forces.

This paper majorly uses the framework of feminist theory to understand the male and female gaze. The objective of feminist theory, a comprehensive and diverse structure, is to understand, study, and resist the social, political, and cultural injustices that women and other marginalized genders experience. Feminist theory, rooted in resistance against patriarchy and structural oppression, analyzes how gender constructs people's identities and experiences by combining with other social categories like race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and others.

There are a few more sociological theories which can be used to understand the variations of male and female gaze and those are mentioned in the analysis and discussions .

METHODOLOGY

Methodology refers to the systematic, theoretical analysis of methods applied to a field of study. The concepts, theories, and the principles and methods employed in designing studies, related to the collection and analysis of data correctly reflect an understanding of the rationale behind, and philosophical assumptions that underlie, any given research approach.

That would be a qualitative study. Qualitative research is the only way that one could understand human interaction, social institutions, and cultural events nuances. It is not about counting or measurement but is more about understanding "why" and "how" social interactions function. Qualitative research aims at explaining how people experience things subjectively and in groups. The goal is to understand how individuals interpret their social situations and circumstances and make meanings out of it.

Sources of data

The research will be based on secondary data and primary data. It would include analysis of primary texts like the poetry pieces and films and secondary texts on the theories of gaze and classifications.

Research Design

This research employs an Exploratory research design that is a specific research methodology used to explore the extent of a problem or situation when there have been few or no earlier studies to refer to or depend on to predict an outcome. Such research is normally utilized when the scope of a problem is vague and not clearly defined. The principal aims of exploratory research are to gather insights and familiarity with the subject of the study for further investigation.

Methods for data analysis

The primary method of data analysis to be used in this study is textual analysis. Textual analysis is a research method used to interpret, analyze, and understand the content, structure, and meaning of texts. It involves examining written, spoken, or visual material to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the text. This method is commonly used in disciplines such as literature, cultural studies, communication, linguistics, and social sciences.

Cultural studies rely heavily on this research strategy. McKee 73 emphasizes the importance of uniqueness, creativity, inspiration, history, and culture. Textual analysis is a qualitative method that examines a text's ideological and cultural assumptions using interpretive methodologies. Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology- a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. (McKee 1)

Textual analysis aims to extract meaning from the text rather than just its structure.

This research would use textual analysis to explore intro themes and understand the use of language by the poets in order to express the desired feeling.

There are certain words which I have looked into particular words

This research would only examine the poems composed by other poets which are chosen based on careful considerations to answer the requirements set for the research question. The literary works which can be considered for analysis can be classified under the following headings

LITERARY ERA	TIME PERIOD	POETS
Romantic	Around 1798-1837	William Wordsworth Dorothy Wordsworth
Victorian	1837-1901	Robert Browning

		Elizabeth Barret Brwoning
Modernism	1910-1945	D. H. Lawrence Anna Wickham
Postmodernism	Late 1950s - present	Tony Harrison Carol Ann Duffy

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SELECTED WORKS

- The poems are intentionally chosen from British literature to explain the historical and political contexts in which they were written.
- Poet's Gender and Perspective:**
 - Female Poets:** Poems written by female poets may offer an authentic perspective on the female gaze. Female poets often explore themes such as identity, body image, sexuality, and personal experiences, providing insights into how women view themselves and others.
 - Male Poets Writing about women:** Analyzing this can provide a contrast to poems written by women, offering a broader understanding of the gaze. Male poets adopt a different viewpoint and positionality towards the similar issue which is important to analyze.
- Historical and Cultural Context:**
 - This is important to understand the socialization and the themes of the poem, where they belong to and what was happening in that place socially to analyze the poem and the motive behind it.
- Literary Movement or School:**
 - Feminist Poetics:** Poets during the upheaval of the feminist movement will provide a different picture of the society and the issues dealt by women.
 - Postmodern or Postcolonial Poetry:** Poets here, deconstruct the traditional ideas adopting a more expressive way of writing about gender and sexuality.

Even female poets end up objectifying men and questioning the idea of masculinity like Sylvia Kantaris in her poem "The Tenth Muse" mentions:

If I were a man I would enjoy
such grace and favor,
tuning my fork to Terpsichore's lyre,
instead of having to cope with this dense
late-invented eunuch
with no more pedigree than the Incredible Hulk,
who can't play a note
and keeps repeating 'Women
haven't got the knack'
in my most delicately strung and scented ear. (Kantaris, 1985)

DATA ANALYSIS

• ROMANTIC ERA IN LITERATURE:

The Romantic Era dated from approximately 1798 until 1837. This era was greatly impacted by the political and economic climate of the time, and the French Revolution served as an inspiration for many authors. This was a time of significant social transformation. More people wrote publicly about their objections to slavery at this time, and calls for its abolition grew louder. In addition to criticizing the aristocratic social and political conventions and advocating for greater attention to nature, romanticism was a response to this industrialization. In literature, romanticism brought about a revolution of its own during the "Age of Revolution." Political liberalism, social reforms, philosophical idealism, and a growing interest in spirituality, myth, and mystery all emerged at the same time.

The context of women in the romantic era:

Social Roles: Women during the romantic era were frequently restricted to traditional gender roles. They were supposed to be loving and domestic, concentrating on their responsibilities as mothers and wives. Their lack of legal rights and educational possibilities served to further solidify their inferior status.

Literature and Art: Women writers from this era, such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters, came into their own, crossing the barriers.

Individualism, nature, and love were common topics in their writing. However, because of societal prejudices, many female authors were forced to publish anonymously or behind pseudonyms.

Love and Relationships: Women were portrayed as the objects of men's desire, representing ideals of inspiration, beauty, and purity. It was common to portray love as an all-consuming force.

Nature and Freedom: Emotions and freedom were often symbolized by nature. Women were occasionally linked to the natural world, signifying their alleged innate emotional intelligence and intuition.

1. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH- ENGLISH POET

Introduction to the poet: English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) co-wrote *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which contributed to usher in the Romantic Age in English literature. The *Prelude*, a semi-autobiographical poem from Wordsworth's early years that he repeatedly rewrote and developed, is often regarded as his greatest work. It was commonly known as "The Poem to Coleridge" prior to its posthumous title and publication by his widow in the year of his passing. Wordsworth served as Poet Laureate from 1843 until his death on April 23, 1850, from pleurisy. He was an important member of the Romantic poets and is now one of the most well-known figures in English poetry.

Wordsworth's philosophy of poetry: Wordsworth aimed to evoke the fundamental emotion that a human heart contains and expresses, as noted by Behler [35]. By "creating the characters in such an environment so that the public feels them belonging to the distant place and time," he had inverted the philosophical stance taken by his friend S. T. Coleridge. And Wordsworth's philosophical epiphany did in fact enable him to select the language and poetic structure that the average person would employ on a daily basis. [36] According to Kurland, a language's conversational component develops out of social necessity.

Analysis The Perfect Woman:

This poet addressed the poem to his wife before marriage. The poet here talks about the figure and the behaviour of a woman (his wife). The woman's presence or appearance is described by nature's characteristics. In the first stanza, the poet describes the woman as a "phantom of delight" which typically means ethereal, something that might not even be real. He is astonished by the beauty of his wife.

The poet further compares the body of the woman with the nature by using phrases like:

“eyes as stars of twilight fair”

“Dusky hair”

The initial part of the poem explores the body of the woman and the beauty of it. The latter half of the poem, the poet realizes that his wife is a real person who feels human emotions, feels sadness, love, anger, etc. He states how she is ensured with kindness and soft nature.

The poet basically describes his wife and thinks of her as a perfect woman with all the feminine charms like beauty, kindness, solitude, softness and body like nature. According to the poet a perfect woman is someone who is smart, good natured, patient, wise, capable, and can offer advice and solace. There is a continuous conundrum in considering a woman to be ethereal and then realising that she is also a human with normal human characteristics.

In the last line also he mentions how she is full of “angelic light”.

This poem is a very vivid example of how the male gaze views a woman as something to be not real and to have extraordinary characteristics. It shows how women were idealised and how certain characteristics describe a perfect woman and it is still relevant in the present day.

Sartre’s theory of existentialism is used in the analysis of the poem. Sartre states how existence comes first and then the essence, which clearly explains the poet’s portrayal of being taken aback by the body of the woman and then finding her spirit and other human characteristics.

Feminist theory also comes in this context justifying how women at the time period were not independent and were taught to be just a good wife who had to obey everything the male figure says.

2. DOROTHY WORDSWORTH

Introduction to the poet: Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855) was an English writer, poet, and diarist, best known for her prose writings and deep influence on her brother, William Wordsworth, a key figure in the Romantic movement. Although she never thought to be a literary figure, her writings capture deep emotions, beauty of nature and rural life. Dorothy’s poetry focused on the female perspective on nature and domestic life

Although she is best known as William Wordsworth's partner and muse, contemporary scholars recognize her as a great writer in her own right, whose writing provides insight into women's roles, domesticity, and the Romantic period's affinity for nature and emotion.

Analysis of The Cottager To Her Infant: The poem is a lullaby written in the 19th century which depicts the love and care of a mother towards her restless infant. The poem is an example of the gendered expectations from a woman and the struggles of working class women and domesticity. Dorothy explains the invisible struggles of motherhood which goes unseen in a male dominated society. The poem shows the love of a mother who creates a cozy and comfortable atmosphere for her child. Similar to William Wordsworth here also we can see how women are often restricted to motherhood and nature and related to comfort, love and softness.

The following lines continuously reinforce the idea of comfort a woman can provide:

- All merry things are now at rest,
Save thee, my pretty love!
- There's nothing stirring in the house
Save one wee, hungry, nibbling mouse,
Then why so busy thou?
- Then, little darling! sleep again,

Sociologist Ann Oakley discusses how motherhood is often romanticized, but in reality, it involves physical exhaustion, emotional labor, and economic precarity—themes subtly present in the poem.

The influence of William Wordsworth images a perfect woman who is soft, beautiful, filled with love and nurture is prominently visible in Dorothy's poetry where she is also socialised into thinking how women can provide the comfort to the child and they are restricted to childrearing and taking care of the domestic sphere. The lines:

Then hush again upon my breast;

All merry things are now at rest,

shows how a mother has to complete all the daily household chores and simultaneously look after her child who finds comfort in her.

This poem becomes an example of all the practices that the later feminist scholars and poets have challenged. Belonging to the romantic era where women were conditioned to be domestic, this poem presents the female gaze which is dominated by the practices taught to them in a male dominated society where they are supposed to serve, be vulnerable and obey to the others.

This poem had further romanticized the idea of motherhood and softness of a woman which most of the poets at that era were writing about. The female gaze here is portrayed in the stereotypical way which I am trying to explore and unveil.

• VICTORIAN ERA OF LITERATURE

The Victorian Era in Britain (1837-1901), defined by Queen Victoria's reign, was a time of swift industrialization, social transformation, and the development of the British Empire, distinguished by a rigid class system, shifting social values, and notable achievements in technology and culture.

Women were denied the rights to vote and litigate, while married women faced restrictions on property ownership. Concurrently, following the Industrial Revolution, an increasing number of women entered the paid workforce. During the latter part of the Victorian period, the women's suffrage movement grew, discriminatory legislation was abolished, and feminist thought gained currency among educated middle classes. Middle classes at the time perceived women to be domesticated and saw them in the domestic sphere, which imposed austere expectations on them to stay at home, cook, and rear their children.

Due to their physical and cultural location to their world, Victorian women wrote about flowers as opposed to botany and about cottage gardens as opposed to wild country.

3. ROBERT BROWNING

Introduction to the poet:

English dramatist and poet Robert Browning (7 May 1812 – 12 December 1889) was regarded as one of the greatest Victorian poets because of his theatrical monologues. He was renowned for his use of difficult terminology and syntax, historical settings, social commentary, characterization, irony, and black humor. Browning was a Liberal who sympathized with the North during the American Civil War, favored women's freedom, and condemned slavery. [19] [20] Later in life, he even wrote a number of poems criticizing vivisection to support animal rights. Additionally, he was a strong opponent of anti-Semitism, which sparked rumors that Browning was Jewish.

The usual Victorian society is shown in his poetry. Dramatic Lyrics, a volume in his Bells and Pomegranates series, featured his poem "My Last Duchess" for the first time in 1842. Male supremacy in Victorian culture is depicted in this poem.

Analysis of My Last Duchess: The poem is a perfect example of the power struggle and the male dominance in the Victorian era where women were restricted in every category of their lives. They were taught how to eat, sleep, what to wear, what to do- everything was controlled by the patriarchal society. Women in the Victorian era were considered to be an object and a possession, which Browning vividly describes through the whole poem.

The poem is a monologue by the Duke who writes about his last wife after her death. Thus the name “the last duchess” is a portrayal of the Duke’s late wife- her behaviour. The entire poem can be considered to be a warning to the guests who visit their house and see the painting, so that they don't get lost in the eyes of the Duchess.

In the following lines, the Duke criticizes the Duchess for being too welcoming and smiling at everyone as she may not be a one who discriminates between classes or genders.

“Such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.”

The poem has a recurring theme of male dominance, chauvinism, class structure and patriarchy.

“Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E’en then would be some stooping;

The Duke makes comments on being disgusted by the kind behaviour of the Duchess whom he may have just wanted to be locked in the house. “

The lines:

“ Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.”

Can be interpreted as if the Duke got the Duchess killed for not meeting his expectations and obeying to him. This theme is not uncommon in the aristocratic society, where there are many reports of oppression against women if they don't obey the rules set by the patriarchal society. The poem even becomes a depiction of paranoia, where the Duke is threatened by nature and the influence of his wife who deviates from the gendered roles in the society.

I would like to emphasize on the word ‘my’, in the title “My Last Duchess”, which can be an example of the idea of ownership or possession, representing how the Duke thought that the Duchess was an object that is owned by him.

This poem again gives a critical depiction of the male gaze in the Victorian era which was dominated by the ideas of control, possession, strength and agency of men and oppressing the women. As we know, Foucault’s famous work on History of sexuality, and how it talks about the transformation of discourse and

the conditioning of women in Victorian society. Women were considered as status symbols who needed to maintain themselves in every way- physically, emotionally, socially.

Browning impressively puts forth the cruel and toxic masculinity of the Victorian era through the Duke's perspective in this poem.

4. ELIZABETH CHARLOTTE BROWNING

Introduction to the poet: Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) was one of the most prominent poets of the Victorian era, known for her deeply personal poetry and her bold engagement with social and political issues. Her work explored themes of love, gender, power, oppression, and spirituality.

Born in England, Elizabeth showed extraordinary literary talent from a young age, but her life was shaped by illness and a strict, overbearing father. Her early poetry reflected her intellectual curiosity and emotional depth, tackling subjects such as injustice, grief, and personal struggle

Analysis of “A Woman’s Shortcomings” : The poem critiques the social limitations and expectations placed on women in Victorian society. Browning indirectly criticizes sexism, gender norms, and emotional sacrifices demanded of women in this poem. The poem calls out the superficiality of the speaker's relationships as well as critiquing her evasive and dishonest behavior. This poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning is critical of the lack of sincerity in contemporary culture, a contrast to other poems where she celebrates passionate and enduring love.

The directness and concision of the poem produce a sense of urgency on the page. It is a response to the social norms of Victorian England, where real emotional expression was generally suffocated by society. The emphasis on appearance and the accretion of things works to signify the hollowness of the relations in the poem.

Of Browning's poems, "A Woman's Shortcomings" is a unique and stinging social critique. Unlike the idealized and passionate love affairs of her earlier poems, it is a denunciation of the pretentiousness and superficiality of shallow love.

• MODERN ERA OF LITERATURE:

The Modern period ranges between 1901-1939. When Queen Victoria passed away, the political stability that her reign had ensured changed, marking the end of the Victorian Era. Rapid changes in Western society, such as urbanization, the expansion of industry, and World War I, are addressed by modernism. Although it is a challenging concept to define, at its most basic level, it was an avant-garde literary and artistic movement that aimed to reject commercialism, conventional social ideals, and the "genteel" literary heritage that came before it. This movement was heavily influenced by theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Ernst Mach, and Friedrich Nietzsche. These men rejected old ways of thinking, something that distinguished the individualism of the Modernist movement. In reality, a large portion of modernist literature is antimodern, reflecting modernity as a loss-related experience. The modernist artist was a critic of both the society they were a part of and the art that had come before them. The fundamental tenet of modernist art was the assumption that the once-sustaining facets of human existence, such as religious views, social mores, and artistic convictions, had been destroyed or shown to be flimsy or false. As a result of this feeling of fragmentation, literature was created using bits and pieces of myth, history, firsthand knowledge, or previous artwork.

Although there are still obstacles to overcome, particularly in areas like workplace representation and gender-based violence, women in contemporary Britain have made great strides toward legal equality and political involvement.

5. D. H. LAWRENCE

Introduction to the poet: D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) was an English novelist, poet, essayist, and critic, best known for works like *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. His writing often explored themes of industrialization, nature, sexuality, and human emotion, challenging societal norms of his time.

Lawrence grew up in a coal-mining town in England, and the tensions between the working class and industrialization shaped much of his work. His writing was controversial, especially for its frank treatment of sexuality, and some of his books were banned during his lifetime. Beyond fiction, he wrote poetry, travel essays, and literary criticism, showcasing a deep interest in human relationships and the natural world.

The poem takes for analysis is mentioned below:

Analysis of the poem “These Clever Women” : Lawrence known for his themes on sexuality, love and emotions writes this poem showing a distrust towards women who reason and dissect or question things as for him the true woman should just surrender the body and be given to the sensual response of the elemental mating call. In his opinion, women who are intellectual question the existing gender dynamics and disrupt the traditional system.

He expects women to be an object of desire for men in the lines:

- I would kiss you over the eyes till I kissed you blind;

If I could—if anyone could!

Then perhaps in the dark you'd get what you want to find:

The solution that ever is much too deep for the mind;

Dissolved in the blood. ...

That I am the hart, and you are the gentle hind.

In the previous poems we can see how women are also writing about obeying to the gender roles and caring for her family, but as we step into modernism we can see women take up new roles and stand up for themselves. Lawrence seems to criticize this particular thought of women creating an imbalance in the society between men and women. From a sociological and feminist lens can be seen as a clear example of the changing nature of society and the feminist movements emerging, while there is a continuous reinforcement of patriarchy and criticism towards women empowerment. Lawrence's perspective as a male gaze shows his fear towards the women challenge the power dynamics by the use of phrases like:

- “Now stop carping at me! Do you want me to hate you?”
- Close your eyes, my love, let me make you blind!

They have taught you to see

Only problems writ on the face of things

Here he vividly expresses his desires and wants the women to be suppressed and follow the patriarchy and the male domination.

6. ANNA WICKHAM(1884-1947)

Introduction to the poet: Anna Wickham (1883–1947) was a British poet known for her bold, unconventional voice and exploration of themes like female autonomy, societal expectations, and personal freedom. Born Edith Alice Mary Harper, she adopted the pen name Anna Wickham to separate her literary life from her personal one.

Wickham's poetry often reflected her struggles with gender roles and the limitations placed on women in

early 20th-century society. She challenged the institution of marriage, patriarchal control, and the emotional repression of women, making her a pioneering feminist voice. Her work, marked by sharp wit and emotional honesty, drew from her own experiences, including a difficult marriage and a brief period of institutionalization.

Analysis of the poem “Woman and Artist” : While we see Lawrence being a man questioning the new found freedom of women, Anna writes about the individuality, empowerment and challenging gender norms and societal expectation from women. This poem is a clear depiction of the contrast between the male gaze and the female gaze in the society. While the female gaze is challenging the gendered roles, self sacrifice of women and domesticity, the male gaze was hating it. She questions the gendered division of labour and advocates of equal division in the lines:

There’s no excuse for expression from a woman

Unless she be a representative human.

Anna further questions the societal policing of women’s sexuality in the lines

If an artist must suppress sex too much is lost;

The product, thought, is purchased at too high a cost.

While we see Lawrence's poetries to be very open about the male desires and putting the men on a pedestal when it comes to sexuality while women are just supposed to surrender, Anna stands against the idea by stating how a woman is judged for doing the same. This in turn reflects the double standards that exist in the society and as with the modern era we see how the female gaze has started to question it instead of just agreeing to it or accepting it. There is a change from poems about nature and motherhood by female poets to poems about questioning societal norms. The metaphor of the “*intellectual hermaphrodite*” speaks to the idea that women artists must embody both masculine and feminine traits to be taken seriously. This reflects sociologist Judith Butler’s theory of **gender performativity**, where gender is not innate but performed according to societal expectations. In Wickham’s time, intellect and creativity were considered “masculine” traits, forcing women to navigate conflicting identities to gain legitimacy as artists.

With the feminist movements, we see women standing against the practice of alienation and advocating for individuality and it is also portrayed in the poem when Anna mentions,

“The singer must stand proud alone

And claim a little eminence that is her own. “

● **POSTMODERN ERA OF LITERATURE:**

Just as Neoclassicism was spurned by the Romantic Era and Modernism added its own variations, Postmodernism either built upon or spurned some of the traits of Modernism and added some new ones. One of the features of postmodernism is a rejection of Modernist cultural standards. It prefers relativism and self-awareness to great narratives and absolute truth. Postmodern culture puts great importance on various perspectives, with each contributing its own unique view. It is keen on relative facts instead of believing any absolute reality. In literature, the Postmodern Era is a time that is complex but fascinating in its rejection of traditional narratives, its embracing of intertextuality and self-consciousness, and its influence of technological advancements. Beyond expanding one's appreciation of literature, the study of this period provides insight into the complex, interconnected world we live in today. In attempting to deconstruct hierarchies and subvert traditional binary oppositions (e.g., man/woman and culture/nature), postmodern feminists argue that reality is shaped through language and that power is embedded in social conventions and constrains agency and creates identity.

The context of women writers:

In literature and the arts, postmodernism significantly enhanced heterogeneity of voices and opinions. It concentrated particularly on women's voices. Among the leading women writers who challenged the norms of society and explored women's views were Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, and Toni Morrison.

Role shifts: In the postmodern era, the roles of women have shifted a great deal. Feminism and other social movements have opened up new avenues for women in public life, work, and educational life. In addition, gender roles have shifted, which have gone beyond conventional assumptions.

Relationships and Love: Postmodern literature frequently questioned conventional ideas about relationships and love. The intricacies of human connection, individual agency, and autonomy are given more weight. Love is frequently depicted as complex and not always idealized.

Intersectionality of identity, including gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other attributes, was increasingly highlighted during the postmodern period. Therefore, representations of women and their existence are increasingly diverse and representative.

Narrative Deconstruction: Postmodernism often challenges traditional narratives, including gender narratives. Consequently, critical examinations of the construction of historical images of women and how they impact have been undertaken.

7. TONY HARRISON

Introduction to the poet: Tony Harrison (b. 1937) is a British poet, playwright, and translator known for his powerful explorations of class, language, and identity. Raised in a working-class family in Leeds, Harrison's poetry often reflects on the tensions between his roots and the academic world he entered through education. His work gives voice to the marginalized, challenging social hierarchies and examining personal and collective histories.

Harrison's signature style blends formal structure — often using traditional verse forms like sonnets — with raw, direct language. Notable works include *V.* (1985), a controversial long poem addressing class conflict and social division, and *The School of Eloquence*, a collection exploring language as a tool of power and exclusion.

In addition to poetry, Harrison has written for theater and film, using his art to probe political issues and human experience. His work remains deeply relevant, offering insight into working-class life and the complexities of personal and cultural identity.

Analysis of “Divisions” : Harrison wrote this poem during the crisis in North England in the 1980s, when the reforms made by the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher led to closed-down industries, dried-up investment, unemployment and run-down cities. This poem is a support towards the unemployed, poor and suppressed. Harrison mentions how streets were filled with drunken men with aggressive masculinity. The poem deals with the duality of the aggressive and negative nature of men on one side and a sensitive poet and the hidden emotions within the outer layer of strong masculinity on the other.

Harrison puts forth the aspect of masculinity in this poem where he states that the power of men is in the clothes or the outside which hides the deep emotions and sadness. He portrays this in the lines

“All aggro in tight clothes and skinhead crops
they think that like themselves I'm on the dole.
Once in the baths that mask of 'manhood' drops.
Their decorated skins lay bare a soul.”

Here, he says that once men come out of their clothes, their masculinity drops. This is a portrayal of hegemonic masculinity, where men are taught to hide their emotions and be strong, aggressive with no sign of weakness.

This poem depicts the societal expectations from men and the divisions of social classes that force men to hide their vulnerability. In the lines,

“The Brewery that owns this place supports
only the unambiguously 'male'

Northern working class spectator sports
that suit the image of its butch Brown Ale,
that puts hair on your chest, and makes you fight,
and when you're legless makes a man of you!”

Harrison depicts how society supports those men who are strong and who have power while presenting a picture of the hardships faced by certain social classes. The use of the words, “unambiguously ‘male’ ”, portrays how there are stereotypes of how man should be, he cleverly puts the word ‘male’ in quotes depicting the hypocrisy of society, and uses phrases like ‘puts hair on your chest’ which is considered another symbol of masculinity.

Previously, male poets can be seen writing more about the glorification of masculinity, but with the postmodern era we can more and more shift towards the acceptance of the vulnerability of men and not strong and oppressive nature. They are no more just the bread earners who are supposed to be strong but also the realization that they have feelings and sadness which is hidden behind the outer layer of hegemonic masculinity.

In the last couplet:

“The Brown Ale drinkers watch me as I write:
one front door orange in a row all blue!”

The poet describes how he is apart of the society even after being someone who is in the society. He portrays himself as a sympathetic and sensitive poet, showing his support to the poor and oppressed and does not fear from showing his emotions which makes him a deviant in the world of “strong and aggressive” men.

8. CAROL ANN DUFFY

Introduction to the poet: Perhaps Britain's best-known contemporary poet is Carol Ann Duffy, born in 1955. She was appointed in 2009 as the first openly LGBTQ+ woman and Scottish-born Poet Laureate, a role she served until 2019. With sharp wit, evocative imagery, and a strong narrative voice, Duffy, widely recognized for her accessible yet deep poetry, explores themes of love, memory, feminism, language, and power.

Her work frequently subverts conventional thinking, speaking on behalf of marginalized or forgotten figures, particularly women. One of her most well-known collections, *The World's Wife* (1999), reinterprets histories and myths from a female point of view, those women being overshadowed by men previously. Her other important works include *Mean Time* (1993), *Rapture* (2005), and *The Bees* (2011). Duffy's style blends lyricism, humor, and social critique, making her poetry both emotionally resonant and politically sharp. She remains a major figure in modern British literature, using poetry as a means of storytelling, social commentary, and personal reflection.

Analysis of “Little Red Cap”: There is already a clear transformation among the female poets, we can see poets from the LGBTQ community coming forward, female poets talking about their desires openly and challenging the traditional norms. Ann Duffy takes a different route in this path, her pattern of poems is dominated with modifications of myths, stories we read in childhood and older movies where there is gender discrimination. Carol challenges those patterns and reverses the gender roles in her newly created poems, one such poem is LITTLE RED CAP. The children’s story of Little Red Riding Hood has been modified by Carol into a poem which glorifies female agency identity and taking control. The poem is a growing off age story where the protagonist is critiquing the patriarchal structures and the traditional power dynamics. This has a personal relation to the poet’s life also. When she was sixteen she met someone in poetry who was 23 years older than her and was in a relationship with him for a few years. The ‘wolf’ in the poem depicts that older man and the poem revolves around how instead of giving in to the norms and dominance of the older man, the woman is taking charge of her sexuality and life decisions, while the traditional fairy tale shows little red riding hood as a victim.

Carol portrays in the lines,

“I crawled in his wake,

my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer

snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes”

that she is not an innocent young girl from the story and took control of her agency showing the emerging feminist theories of agency.

Carol’s poetry depicts her owning her sexuality and writing about it which was rare in the previous eras of poetry where only male poets could be seen expressing their desires about the female.

In the lines,

“But then I was young—and it took ten years

in the woods to tell that a mushroom

stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds

are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf

howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,

season after season, same rhyme, same reason.”

Carol expresses, although she was fun taken in by the wolf in the first part of the poem, now she’s old enough and experienced enough to realize that he is less interesting than she might like. He sings the “same old song at the moon” every day, season after season. It’s, in the end, uninspiring, the opposite of what she was looking for. It’s clear at this point that she’s gotten everything she came for from the wolf.

The young girl in this poem breaks the gendered conditioning while exploring her identity. This aligns with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is a social construct reinforced through repeated behaviors rather than an inherent identity.

DISCUSSION

As I observed there is a transformation in the way poets- both male and female- have written poems, which may be about society or may be about personal desires- from the romantic era to postmodernism.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth are siblings but while one openly writes about his desires and is able to state how he wants a ‘perfect woman’ to be, Dorothy is seen to write about emotions, motherhood, domesticity and particularly all the characteristics that William describes in a perfect woman. Here comes the first difference between the male and female gaze in poetry. The male protagonists are portrayed with

words like ‘aggression’, ‘strong’ while women to be ‘soft like nature’, ‘kind’, ‘beauty’, etc etc. But before criticizing the poets in the romantic era, I would like to draw attention to the fact that it was a time where women could not even think of breaking shackles and a lot of women writers took up male names or went by anonymous names in order to avoid further issues.

The male and female gaze cannot be understood without an idea of the then social and political contexts. The male gaze has also gone through changes, starting from writing about just the female body and expectations from, criticizing women for their individuality to a more expressive view of their vulnerability. More and more male poets are writing about the reality of the society where the men are also socialised into being a strong independent person who should be the bread earner of the family.

As we move from one era to another, the female poets take a more radical and liberal approach in their writings, where they come forward and talk about the real issues and express their own desires, agency and identity. The two poets in the Victorian era that I have taken are a couple, where Robert Browning is writing about the Duke who is disgusted by his wife’s kindness, and Elizabeth Browning in a time where women were oppressed and locked indoors writes an enlightening poem about the struggles faced by women and appeals them to come forward and challenge the traditions. The way one’s gaze is shaped also has a lot to do with their socialisation, the environment they have grown up in and their education. The more women got the legal rights, access to education and the realisation of their oppression, the more they started to challenge the traditional norms. Thus started the transformation in the way we perceive the female gaze- it changed from one that was just talking about women being mothers to one which became the advocate of women creating their own identity and taking control of their lives.

The female gaze, as already discussed, has always been considered as something to be soft, it is fascinating to see how female poets use their power and language to change the society and uproot the patriarchy.

As we step into the modern era, the feminist movement begins, and poets and artists start using their agency to spread the message of movement. The female gaze thus turned to a symbol of revolution. The female gaze was understood by revolts, strength, power, challenging gender dynamics. On the other hand we see some male poets and writers, writing against the liberation of women. Lawrence in his poem uses a satirical tone to describe how women become clever with education and modernism and are questioning the practices in the society. He still talks about how women should be just an object of desire for men portraying the exact problem about male gaze that this paper tries to criticise.

With postmodernism, I would not say poets stopped objectifying women but male poets started to write openly about vulnerability as shown in the poem by Tony Harrison, thus making an effort to change the idea of male gaze and challenge the concept of hegemonic masculinity. If women were oppressed for generations and are oppressed still now then I would have to say how men are also forced to wear the coat of valour and hide their true feelings.

One common theme about the female gaze is that it is always about liberation of women. It is no more a gaze which is shaped by the male gaze and accepts the roles and responsibilities given to them. It has transformed into a gaze that has its individuality and is used as a weapon of protest.

This paper focuses on the gendered gaze and I have tried to explain the difference between male and female gaze through the poems written by male and female poets in the changing social contexts. Both of the types of gaze have gone through transformations but the male gaze is still considered to be one which objectifies women and the female gaze to be just about love and emotions which Mulvey also describes while explaining the concept of male gaze in cinema.

In my opinion female gaze thus is about individuality and liberation, which is again a reaction to the years of oppression and a continuing sign of struggle. Female gaze is used by the poets to talk about the positionality of the women, the suppressed.

Women and the lower class people have been dominated by the patriarchal society and the upper class people, thus according to me female gaze is not just about women but anyone who challenges the oppressive society. It's a way of portrayal through the eyes of a woman instead of a man. Rather than seeing women as objects of desire, female gaze sees them as fellow humans who also have the same feelings, same rights but separate stories.

Thus the poems and the analysis explains the various ways the female gaze can be used to describe the actual situation and feelings of a woman instead of a dominant male gaze portraying them as possessions. When we talk about the male gaze, it deals with how women are objectified, how any category of art or literature portrays women from a lens of desire. While female gaze is different from that since it does not really objectify the other gender. Gaze as we know is a way of seeing, seeing the society or the world around and interpreting it. Female gaze which emerged as a reaction to the objectification of women by the male gaze deals with seeing society through empathy, kindness, connection and critique. I am trying to debunk the idea that female gaze is all of seeing through empathy. Female gaze is a way of seeing the world through the eyes of a woman, a woman who has been deprived of her/their agency, independence and authority throughout history which continues. The transformation of the female gaze as a counterpart of the male gaze to a separate concept which is used to critique the practices and the very main objective of the male gaze and the society is very well portrayed by the changing poems written by the female poets. From writing about women being a symbol of comfort and domesticity to writing about protests, standing for rights, identity, shows that the female gaze is a way of critiquing society. It goes beyond the main idea of gaze that we have about just seeing and interpreting, it becomes a way of seeing, that questions and critiques.

I would like to connect the conflict theory by Karl Marx here where the proletariat fights against the class restrictions. Female gaze is a way of realising your own positionality in the society and fight against it.

I would define female gaze as: A way of seeing the society that is adopted to critique and deals with creating your own space and debunking the ideas. Even though it is called female gaze, I would not restrict its point of view just for women, it is the point of view of the ones who are suppressed, who are in the process of creating their own agency.

The title I chose “ Seeing through her eyes” is just a way to explain that “her eyes” are not just soft, kind, maternal but filled with agency, challenges and individuality. Thus female gaze is not just a literary concept where you show women writing just about experiences a but has a deeply embedded sociological relation to it.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the evolution of the male and female gaze in poetry is a reflection of larger historical social and political changes. Originally based on objectification and expectations of women, the male gaze has progressively broadened to encompass self-reflection and vulnerability, upending conventional ideas of masculinity. On the other hand, the female gaze has changed from being a patriarchal norm-shaped viewpoint to one of empowerment and resistance, claiming women's autonomy and uniqueness.

Therefore, to differ from the whole concept of incompatibility between sociology and poetry, I would like to point out how both of these go simultaneously. On one hand, Sociology deals with the society which

shapes the poetry and on the other hand poetry shapes the societal views by providing a new way to perceive an issue. Poetry is not just used to question the gendered gaze but also social cohesion, conflict, progress etc. Female gaze has been a dominant concept in media but just like the male gaze it deserves its position as a sociological concept. We have been criticising the male gaze in theories but female gaze as a theory should be used to study the portrayal of women by women and not by other members of the society.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- I had to be respectful of the poets and their background while analysing the poems and giving my views
- Being a woman myself I had to be mindful to not have affected my unbiased research
- It was difficult to choose the appropriate poems and understand why the poet wrote the way they did
- The changing social contexts made it challenging to bring all the viewpoints together

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