

Looking or Being Looked: The Power Dynamics of Looking

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ABSTRACT: The article explores the connection between the power dynamics and the process of looking. Looking is not an innocent process of gathering information. The social, cultural, political and economical factors influence our processes of looking. What we look and how we look are the matter of the power dynamics of the given time and space. This article surveys some of theoretical issues related to power dynamics that influence the process of looking and some possible extensions of gaze theory with critical discussion of selected poems.

KEYWORDS: Gaze, panopticon, feminism, post-colonialism, orientalism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been aware of the pleasure and power looking or gazing? How do you feel when you are being looked at? Do you think your looking process involve in the whole ideological, cultural, and political relation of your society? Obviously, these questions call for an analysis of looking or gazing process and the inherent power relationship within this process. Jeremy Hawthorn (2007) in his essay “Theories of the gaze” lists out a number of characteristics of interpersonal looking:

- The exchange of looks between two individuals is interactive, two way process: in looking and searching for information or contact, we reveal things about ourselves, including things we may not wish to reveal or which we are not aware.
- Looking is a cumulative process: each look we give is informed by- and displays- the fruits of the previous looks. As the narrator of Elizabeth Bowen’s 1923 story ‘All Saint’ comments: eyes that have learnt their lesson never forget.
- Looking is far more being a neutral process of information gathering: our looking activities are saturated with the residues of our social and cultural existence-for example, those relating to our class sexuality, economics. (p.508)

These characteristics are of literal look of two persons. The way we look metaphorically to the texts or movies has only the second and third characteristics of the list. The cultural, historical and social contexts influence how a reader observes the novel or a viewer watch the movie. It is not an interactive process. Thus, our looking process is not an innocent, neutral, and natural process of gathering information or contact. There is an interaction and revelation of different things of which we may not be aware of sometimes.

Some theorists have tried to develop ways of exploring the interactive process of looking. Such theories are known as the theories of gaze. Some of the concerns of gaze theory overlap with traditional narrative theory and psychoanalysis reading. The gaze theories are very much occupied with culture, history, politics and power dynamics of a society these factors.

II. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT GAZE THEORY

Gaze is a psychological term made popular by Jacques Lacan (1966/ 2006). It describes the anxious state that comes with awareness that one can be viewed. The psychological effect is that the subject loses some sense of autonomy upon realizing that she or he is visible subject. This is related with her/ his mirror stage in which a child encountering the mirror realizes that he or she has an external appearance. In theoretical discussion, the term ‘gaze’ does not donate a well defined theoretical or critical movement. It is like a discourse; a means to encourage a particular way of considering a text or an utterance and relating it to a broader socio-historical and ideological matters. It does not have any single trace of origin and time of birth. It develops by incorporating a number of ideas from psychoanalysis, discourse analyses and film studies.

John Berger’s book *Ways of seeing* (1972) is an important work for the development of gaze theories. He criticizes traditional western cultural aesthetic by raising question about hidden ideology in visual art. He asserts

that the way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe. The historical traces of class based power and gender inequality can be found in painting and illustration. The book has contributed to feminist reading of popular culture on depiction of women in advertisement and oil painting.

Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1986) helped gaze theories to provide a special position in academia. She takes a number of ideas from psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and uses them to further political aim of feminism. She argues that cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. In his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' Sigmund Freud (1905/1910) isolated scopophilia as one of the component of instincts of sexuality which exists as drive quite independently of the erotonic zones. He associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects; subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. His particular examples centers on the voyeuristic activities of the children. In adult life also, it continues to exist as the erotonic basic for pleasure in looking at another as object.

Laure Mulvey (1986) expands the passive role of women in cinema to argue that film provides visual pleasure through scopophilia and identification with the on-screen male actor. Jeremy Hawthorn (2007) comments that Mulvey believes in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that can be said to connote "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p.510). As a result, a woman is the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning in a film. Mulvey (1986) argues that Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the key to understanding how film creates such a space for female sexual objectification. The patriarchal order of society and looking process exploit the females in the movies. Looking in itself is a pleasurable act of voyeurism. So, the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking.

Mulvey (1986) identifies three "looks" or perspectives that occur in film which serve to sexually objectify women. The first is the perspectives of the male character on screen and how he perceives the female character. The second is the perspective of the spectator as they see the female character on screen. The third look joins the first two looks together: it is the male audience member's perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective allows the male audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate himself, through looking, to the male character in the film.

Panopticon – Foucault and Jeremy

In *Discipline and Punishment: the Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault (1975/1977) talks about Panopticism. The term Panopticism which means 'all-seeing' is taken from the writing of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1995). Bentham used the term Panopticon in a proposal for prison in which all of the prisoners has individual cells in a ring like building and could thus be observed from a tower placed at the hub of this ring like building. Such a torture of placing prisoners in dungeon was used for centuries in monarchical states around the world. The progressive modern democratic state needs a different sort of system to regulate its citizens. The Panopticon offered a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion, which was achieved through the constant observation of prisoners. The prisoners were separated from the other and were not allowed for interaction and communication. Such structure would allow guards to continually see inside each cell from their vantage point in a high central tower, unseen by the prisoners. Constant observation acted as a control mechanism; a consciousness of constant surveillance is internalized. The constant fear of being watched presents in the prisoners mind. Absolute surveillance leads to absolute self discipline. Foucault summarizes the inmates should be caught up on a power situation of which they are themselves bearer. Foucault suggests that such an arrangement is crueler than system of physical torture.

The Panopticon was a metaphor that allowed Foucault to explore the relationship between systems of social control and people in a disciplined situation, and the power and knowledge concept. In his view, power and knowledge comes from observing others. It marked the transition to a disciplinary power. Suitable behaviour is achieved not through total surveillance, but by panoptic discipline and including a population to conform by the internalization of this reality. The actions of the observer are based upon this monitoring. It shows that the more one observes, the more powerful one becomes. The power comes from the knowledge the observer has accumulated from his observations of actions. The knowledge and power enact in a circular fashion reinforcing each other. In this sense, the observer or the person who looks possess power over the object being looked at. Such theorization of looking has repercussion in other theoretical fields also.

III. EXTENSIONS OF GAZE THEORY

Gaze theory which involves in analysis of looking process and its inherent connection with the power relationship between the subject and object of looking has influenced the theoretical debates of mainly Feminism and Post colonial theories. The both critical discourses: Feminism and Post colonialism involve in the critical debates of the power relationship between the powerful and powerless, and dominant and dominated. In a patriarchal social structure, male and female, and in colonial relation, the colonizer and colonized are part of the process of looking and being looked at. In such power dynamic, the male and colonizer enjoy the privileged

position of looking over their subjects: female and colonized people. The connection of gaze theory with Feminism and Post colonial theories are briefly discussed below.

Feminism and Gaze Theory

Both the literal and metaphorical gaze is inseparably connected with unequal and differential gender role. It is often assumed that men look and women are looked at. If the owner of the gaze has power, it is the male who possesses the power. Thus, this gender relation of gaze is both product of patriarchy and a way of reinforcing patriarchy. In many psychoanalytical theories there is little say to the gaze of the woman. The desiring gaze is constituted as the gaze of a male subject at a female object. Little room is left for active gaze of a desiring woman and no place for her desire. Feminist critics demand the need to resist such male centered gaze. There is the pressure on female readers to adopt the view point of male while reading text. If there is interactive gaze of a man and a woman, only then there is the space of mutually perceived quality. There is democracy in unaggressive shared look. Such democracy serve real model of man and woman relationship which is quite rare. Feminist critics also pointed out that traditionally women has to be more skillful in using their eyes and observing the eyes of others and that such skill can be traced in the works of women authors.

John Berger (1972) remarks that men enact as an observer upon their object: women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male and the surveyed is female. Such gazing can be found in the poem, "This is the Photograph of Me" written by Margaret Atwood (2009). She often writes about social roles of female as daughter and as mother, and the power relations between man and woman. In the poem the speaker is describing a photograph literally. It was taken sometimes ago. It seems smeared print with blurred lines and gray flecks. The speaker explains: "It was taken some time ago/At first it seems to be/ A smeared/Print: blurred lines and gray flecks" (1-4). Then, the speaker invites readers to "scan" the photograph. After scanning, a part of a tree, a small farmhouse and a lake are visible in the background of photograph. On the second part of the poem, the speaker seems more revealing. She says that the photograph was taken after she was drowned in the lake. She is in the lake; under the surface. It is very difficult to locate her location and size. It needs enduring and constant effort to view her. Thus, this poem presents how existence of female is almost invisible (under surface) in male dominated society. Scanning is needed to trace their existence. They are drowned. The water which symbolizes different mediums of presentations, distorts the photograph. Such mediums are the product the patriarchal male gaze upon female. These mediums possess power to define who female are.

The poet of this poem is female. So the speaker who is describing her photograph might be a female. Hence the owner of the gaze or the surveyor is female; not male. The object which is being gazed is female. However, the surveyor can't properly see the photograph. The power and domination of male dominated society has conditioned females to view themselves. It is not only male who distort the photograph of females but even females also internalize male's perspective and distort the photograph of female. Such distortion makes us aware about unequal power relation and its influence on the process of looking. Such practices are apparent in colonizer and colonized relationship also.

Post- colonialism and Gaze Theory

It is not just men look and women are looked at; it is also colonizers looked and colonized people were looked at. Colonized people were forced to adopt the colonizer's perspectives of gazing. Even they look at them from the perspective of the colonizers. Edwards Saïd's book *Orientalism* (1978) discusses the use of look to empower colonizer and disempower the colonized. Saïd insists that the orientals look at themselves from the perspectives of the Westerns. E. Ann Kaplan's (2010) concept of imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the White Western male subject. Kaplan opines that imperial gaze is one way looking of the colonizer. It involves the oppressors defining how the oppressed are to be seen-including how they are to see themselves. Returning the gaze of the oppressors can thus be seen as a challenge to oppression, a claim of equality. Roy Campbell (2001) in a poem "Zulu Girl" shows the power of colonizer's gaze. Zulu is a member of South African people living in Kwazulu Natal province. The poem begins with the description of "sweating gang" working in the sweltering sun "down" in the field. There is a Zulu girl working in the gang. She is carrying a child on her back. The child is evidently undernourished and is tormented by flies.

When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder,
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies
A girl flying down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslung her child tormented by the flies (1-4)

The word "down" shows that the position of the speaker who is sitting "up". He might be the colonizer White master riding on the horse back or sitting in the farmhouse and watching the 'gang' of the black Zulu

labourers working down in the field. This “up” and “down” position shows the unequal power relations of the person who is gazing and who is being gazed. The colonizer is gazing. Thus, he holds the power to define the colonized.

The speaker, who occupies the privileged position of observer, defines the black labourers as “gang” having no individual identity and personality. Their personal likes, dislikes, attitudes etc. have no place. The girl (no women) is carrying a child on her back. The word “girl” suggests that she isn’t married yet. She might be an unwed mother who has nobody to look after the child at her home. She might have been sexually exploited by colonizer. The native girls are taken as object of their pleasure. They can be used and thrown away. Moreover, the child is undernourished. The Zulu people are living in such pathetic condition in their own land. None from the “gang” dare to look up and return the gaze of the colonizer. Rather the girl feeds “curbed ferocity of beaten tribe” and “sullen dignity of their defeat” the child. They are presented as “beaten tribe” having “sullen dignity”. It shows how they are conditioned to view themselves. Such portrait of Zulu people logically leads us to raise certain questions: is such presentation of Zulu people neutral and innocent? does it have nothing to do with unequal power relations of colonizer and colonized? And what is the motive of such presentation of native people? These are certain issues the gaze theorists will try to address. Such presentation has political motif of rationalizing and perpetuating the unequal power relations. The colonizers are placed “up” and have the power to look down and to define. The colonized people are “down” to be looked at and to be defined. They are not able to return the gaze of the colonizer hence incapable of resisting.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have belief that ‘seeing’ is ‘believing’ in spite of the fact that many images can now be created and manipulated technologically. Theorists of gaze make us aware that what we see is not what is there. But, it is what we have been led, at least partially, to expect or believe, will be there. As a literary criticism, the theories of gaze help draw connection between a number of literal and metaphorical looking processes. This includes the mutual or one way look directed by fictional characters at one another, the gaze of author or narrator at these fictional characters and their actions and the gaze of reader at characters and events of text. Analysis of such gazing process unfolds the inherent power relationship between and among them. In fact, looking is not just a matter of gathering information. It is informed and influenced by the unequal power relationships in our world.

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