

Feminism and the Question of Male Gaze in K.S. Maniam's "The Loved Flaw"

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the Male Gaze in K.S. Maniam's "The Loved Flaw." The study demonstrates how Maniam sheds light on the social circumstances that affect the position of women in a male-dominated social milieu. It attempts to interpret the story's female characters who suffer from the sequences of male gaze which leads to their marginalization or position as being subaltern and passive. Hence, the discussion of this marginalization accentuates women's ability to cope with their patriarchal circumferences in order to search for equality and subjectivity since they lack strong voice to express their voice regarding their right. As such, the study polarizes feminism as a way to delve deep into the story's narrative depiction of women's plights restricting their voices and potentials. Therefore, the study's methodology depends on feminism to interpret the effect of male gaze upon the selected work's female characters and how they resist it through self-autonomous subjectivity.

Key words: Feminism; Male gaze; Maniam; Society; Women

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist critical disciplines approach male gaze in the

light of the contiguous relationship between males and females with regard to their complex gender and social role. During the sixteenth century, and even before, women were totally deprived of gaining any property; than that men were able to own everything they need. Furthermore, the domestic affairs were imposing heavy requirements on women. They had to achieve anything related to home and agricultural needs (Storkey 1). In its simplest sense, the concept of male gaze refers to the restriction of women's capacities and equality to men. Furthermore, it denotes the search for subjective self-autonomy which enables them to be free of any male-dominated society where they could not be effective and productive.

The concept of male gaze also implies the negative perception of the role of women, especially in the traditional inherited notions regarding their feminist identity. In this sense, male gaze exemplifies the social and gender obstacles facing women in their way to prove themselves as being efficient and capable of being equal (Abu Jweid and Sasa 325). Here, feminism looks into male gaze as an outlet to women's ability to emulate males through rejecting the inherited ideas created about women and their role in society and family. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to interpret the portrayal of male gaze in the light of feminism and its conceptualization of males who restricts women's self-autonomy in K.S. Maniam's "The Loved Flaw" (2001).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Manimangai Mani studies the ethnic minorities in the story. She further says that the Indians, especially the Tamils of the Southern parts of India are the third biggest ethnic minority in Malaysia after independence. The mass migration and the evacuation of the Indians, namely the Southern parts of Indians started with the occupation of the British Malaysian and Indian lands. As a result

of this colonial occupation, Indians, including women, were taken to Malaysia for labor and other social inferior jobs (p.1). Additionally, Mani claims that the Malaysian independence was a great factor of creating loyalty in the social peripheries. Loyalty could bring about commitment to the new social manner after the independence. Accordingly, society would change drastically on the grounds of political changes. Thus, the new cultural customs and traditions would affect the perception of women. This new perception is tackled in the story's narrative levels (p.1). These Indians "harder indeed, have broken their nationality of Indian origins" and they tend to have a social and political autonomy. The essence of this migration is that the new Malaysians women began gradually accustomed to the socio-cultural norms of Malaysia. The new homeland provided them with opportunity to be equal to other women. But the problem is that they did not gain a proper equality to men as they wanted to be. They suffered a great deal at in the new homeland. They did not become suitably equal to men (1).

Mani's study focuses on the postcolonial dimensions of the story, while the feminist side is neglected. On the other hand, Peter Wicks approaches the Malaysian landscapes in "Malaysian Landscapes in K. S. Maniam" (2000). Wicks (2000) claims that Maniam's story raises critical questions about the female identity. Women are emotionally suppressed by males. This issue, according to Mani, is treated in the technical structure of the story (18). The technical elements of the story, such as plot, characters, and setting are the definitive features of male superiority over females in Maniam's story (18). The male is exemplifies the traditional image of the husband who controls home and wife. In this sense, the female is deeply inferior to male (18). As such, Maniam's story has technical elements which offer an allegorical depiction of the relationship between male and female in the story. The story has a figurative technique that portrays the inferior position of female. This allegorical figuration presents the story's male protagonist as a superior male who suppresses husband, and his wife as a suppressed wife who is destined to family and domestic life (18).

3. MALE GAZE

Male gaze is considered the highest feminist narrative authenticity, this connection remains undividable (Abu Jweid, p.206). The famed feminist narratives within any text construe the ostentatious form of the fictional plot. But if this is true, time temporality interferes between the authorial subject and his fictional feminist agent. Christine Delphy and Diana discuss the authorial position and intervention into his/her textual structure. They juxtapose the authorial position and the feminist piece with female position in the text. Time sequence then probes the social scope since "if females are, as it must be, human time-

consciousness, male gaze, as its contrary, appears to take on the role of something more objective or cosmological here: something that exists on the outside of society, of discourse and of the mind" (p.96). In "The Loved Flaw," this gaze haunts the narrator in the opening sentence "my first thought is to expose her" (p.172). This sentence exemplifies the narrator tendency to see a female, even for a short while.

Additionally, the male gaze has "chronological temporality" necessarily entreats the momentous insinuation that the author reflects his interference with the narrative. The chronological priority, forthwith, designates plot order "once seen as aberrant, the appetite to encounter a female and the random are now understood as prevalent, and physical behaviors once disregarded and dismissed are now considered legitimate areas of inquiry" (Delphy and Leonard, p.98). For example, "The Loved flaw" comparatively entrusts the main plot then it gradually includes male gaze, especially the narrator's. This is the basis of feminist narratives i.e., male gaze originates in a male character to encounter a female; the narrator, again recalls the wife image when she came at night "that was the feeling she gave when she came to me in the nights" (p.172).

The interruption of male gaze in the main plot harmonizes the thorough assimilation of the author's narrative astuteness and the feminist fragments (Abu Jweid, 2021a, p.6). That thought by what I can now relate to the authorial consciousness about female position in "The Loved flaw." Chris Rojek contends that authorial consciousness complements the story's feminist traits. There is somewhat a fundamental narrative constituent entailing the interrelation between the author and the female characters. This constituent underlies the authorial self-consciousness as long as "the genre [feminism] establish an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about 'plot,' 'character,' 'authority' and 'representation'" (p.10). Authorial "feminist" self-consciousness, presumably, falls in the category of male gaze narrative devices. This resembles the narrator's feelings in "when she [wife] put her hands on my body" (p.173).

Feminist plots appraise the factual connection between the author and the female characters (Rojek, p.15). They are the adumbrative formation of the authorial self-consciousness. The case of the narrator's feelings and Maniam's narrative interventions are of paramount importance to the principal narrative feminist ties. Accordingly, factual events become fictional in plot texture in order to "present not only that the 'writer' is a concept argued through previous and critical literary and social contexts but that what is normally taken to be 'fact' is also structured and contemplated in a similar male gaze. 'Fact' is to this extent 'literary' and can be grasped through a proper 'reading' mechanism" (Rojek, p.16). Females, in this manner, produce no patent anecdotal equilibrium with males. Consequently events and plot get more congruent when there is

a difference between males and females. This is evident in the narrator's phrase "I'm decisive" (p.177); as a reference to his hegemony over his wife.

In a similar way, the male characters are rather one-dimensional when they conform to one narrative point of view. However, authorial feminist self-consciousness correlates "the male respond to the problem of how to provide impermanence and a meaning of feminist entity, in the permanent and ordered terms of feminism, has had a much more significant influence on the development of the novel as genre" (Rojek, p.12). This indicates Maniam's ability to depict male gaze in her story when the narrator gradually becomes interested in his wife.

The most far-reaching judgment of authorial feminist self-consciousness which frame story offers us is the patterns of order emerging spontaneously out of random fragments. Therefore, the narrator's impersonation falls under the category of feminist unreliability. We can conceive this impersonation explicitly because "unreliable male characters, like character narration more generally, is a mode of indirect communication with females" (Rojek, p.9). The narrator aspires to have a family of personal body's "well-being" (p.177).

A challenging pressure on a critical evaluation of the author's implied effects in his/her story is subject to polemic interpretation. In feminism, perhaps the emphasis of male gaze is appropriated in terms of allusion to family life perceived in literature. This is because feminist fiction "takes as its starting-point the classical male representation and female position in literary works" (Hoing, p.3). The analysis of the feminist point of view emanates from the focalizing aspects where the narrator occupies a distinctive position in the story. The narrator's distinctiveness comes from the author interpolation with the formal knot of which the story is made. In the following excerpt, a fruitful analysis of the narrator's predilection to contemplate her body's "regions": "was it my wife's trust that compelled this voyeuiring into unexpected regions" (p.172).

As this example suggests, Maniam is mostly concerned with the narrative position which is typically the narrator's male position in the story. This is another aspect of the male gaze factors. The male level requires a connection between the contextual perspectives. These perspectives include the internal events as recounted by the narrator and the external events where the author forges an adjuvant connotation for the possible spotting of the author's narration about his male position. The narrator's requirement here interlopes with a semantic overtone by which the reader can locate the author's position in the novel. Such position designates the presence of the author by allusion to females suppressed positions, or as Bonnie Hoing puts it simply "the connectivity of the elements of a text is essentially a matter of meaning and reference; but we are interested, here, in the formal

means by which these connections between males and females are signaled" (p.244). On the smaller scale, too, parallel perspective dually recounts the male-female interconnectedness in a united manner. This is apparent in the narrator's insistence to be with his wife's side all the time.

In this manner, the explicit shift in male gaze events in "The Loved Flaw" begins with the author's intervention. Rojek posits a crucial link between the author's and the narrator. To connect this point with the novel, Maniam's charge is that his male gaze writing can construct a narrator only by accumulating material and economic details imagining a whole fictional world so that we can infer its functionality. We can also be familiar with the typology of its characters who mimic real human consciousness by devaluating the significance of the exterior real life, or how the world looks from the inside out. The deduction of this example relates strongly to Maniam's style which compiles to postmodern relative vision of reality. If the aggregate feminist mentality aligns reality in limited extremes, the story also limits its narrative point of view. According Hoing, the accomplishment of this limitation can be obtained by "a second meaning, less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of feminist content, has narrative refer to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this male-oriented discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc." (p.25). This is true to the narrator's voice in "The Loved Flaw" when he controls the life of his wife. This enables him to become more interested in her body.

This argument reveals Maniam dual feminist technique. By doing this, he introduces his feminist voice in the novel. Moreover, feminist discourse formulates the necessary events since "the most tangible basis for framing consists of a text's immediate, material environment of male gaze. One looks at the surrounding items that situate, label and sign it, consisting one's perception of its outside and inside" (Hoing p.44). To connect this to "The Loved flaw," Maniam considers the successful way of writing feminist fiction when the narrator "looked at Viji" (p.181). Consequently, Maniam creates feminist innovation "because story and plot are the means whereby experience is understood as a relation, as a comprehensible or coherent sequence or chain or relations, they make the experience of female characters" (Rojek, p.6).

In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2011), Saba Mahmood treats male gaze within the representational tools of feminist narrative: "male gaze reveals, and thereby facilitates a discussion of, the nature of the feminist text concerning both male and female characters" (9). Maniam explicitly uses feminism to tackle the fictionality of her work. In order to convey

his purpose, she uses an male narrator a first person narrative point of view because "the idea of 'male' is misleading and it implies that the narrative world and its inhabitants have a feminist reality beyond the narration itself" (Rojek, p.40). The narrator expresses that when he says: "I was deeply committed to her" (p.177).

Hoing discusses the "obvious" and "hidden" male discourses in literary works. The obvious discourse incarnates the real textual discourse. On the other hand, the hidden discourse refers to the implicit meaning intended in the text; Hoing argues: "To draw a clear-cut boundary between hidden and obvious open male gaze in any concrete instance sometimes proves quite difficult. But the semantic distinctions here are very fundamental. Overt male gaze is quite simply directed at another's discourse, which it refutes, as if at its own referential object" (p.196). Accordingly, we have two different discourse manifestations. One can be located direct in the text, and the other can be reached by analyzing the latent author's discourse. Maniam's voice is expressed indirectly in "The Loved flaw." She tries to expose the negative sequences of male gaze upon females.

In line with this, Hoing tackles the male discourse in relation to the development of discourse in *Speech Genres* (1986). In addition, he maintains that fictional discourse exerts influential effects on discerning the textual implied meaning. However, Hoing emphasizes that the development of male discourse contributed to literary creativity; "this process of preparing for the disclosure of male mainstream position in the text took place more rapidly, completely, and profoundly in feminist creativity than in the abstract philosophical and strictly feminine, ideological views of enlightenment thinkers" (p.26). This is similar to the narrator's discourse in "The Loved Flaw"; whereby he looks at his wife's face: "her face was swollen" (p.177) because her body is very important to him.

Male discourse culminates in its inclusion of individual thought which unravels the author's allegorical "artistic techniques" (p.156). The authorial abstract notion could be expressed in the fictional text because the text must abound with narrative clues about the disposition of women by means of female gaze: "moment constituted by the feminist validity of a thought judgment, that is, an evaluation of the validity of the judgment constitutes a necessary moment in the composition of the performed act, although it does not yet exhaust the female character" (Bakhtin: 1993, p.3). Here Hoing emphasizes the 'validity' of thought because it is the center of the male gaze modes in the text; the narrator, in "The Loved Flaw" tells us about his preference to Viji because he loves her with passion: "I'd committed myself to Viji through passion and surrender" (p.180).

In the same manner, the authorial presence in the story gives a critical path to the genuine construction of the

male gaze. This is the "rhetoric" quality of the authorial incarnation in the text. The author intervenes in the text in order to pose some ideological insights about his/her writing's purpose. In *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric and Ideology* (1993), Stephen Bygrave connects the rhetorical dimension of male gaze to the stylistic depiction of the male characters: "the beginning of any inquiry into rhetoric rather than its end. To insist on the self-enclosed male gaze rhetoricity as a means of evading the negative questions of the ends it may serve" (p.2). Male gaze rhetoric, moreover, is the "activity of persuasion. It is also the study of that activity, and we shall need to return to that double sense, but it should be noted here that rhetoric is necessarily transitive. Even where rhetoric is a static repertory of tropes, these are tropes which aim to persuade someone to do something: persuasion itself might be defined as 'male gaze priority'" (p.4). In "The Loved Flaw," the male gaze appears when the narrator loves to look at his wife and Viji at the same time.

This interpolation is forged in terms of feminist "reference." Hoing argues that feminist narration is "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood of female body" (p.428). Hoing idea is a postulation of feminist reference of male position in literary works. Accordingly, female reference is the implication of mimetic feminist devices since "mimetic art involves the creation of a feminist illusion which only simulates a male reality" (Rojek, p.40). More precisely, feminist fiction provides literary references where "some fictional references are directed towards the depiction of women in feminist literature" (p.117). Casting a feminist plot, thus, brings off an male narrator. In the concept of male gaze, the narrator appears from inside the literary work. It has a considerable affinity to the author's parody of real life stories. In "The Loved flaw," for example, there is a connection between the characterization of the narrator and the author, Maniam. The narrator embodies the author's social perspective over the suppression of females in societies; the narrator informs us indirectly of this fact: "I know she can't go beyond the limits I set for her" (p.180).

Rojek ascribes the male narrator to "thoughts or perceptions" (p.192). In like manner, these thoughts or perceptions are the determining aspect of the narrative events as "internal factors which include not only the narrative female position within the feminist texts, but also attitude as well as cultural, moral, and ideological orientation" (Hoing, p.71). In addition, Joan Nordquist maintains that the "internal characterization is explained by a hypothetical spectator or a point of view in the radical, pictorial sense of the male characters, the places, and the events. This typology is in harmony with the male gaze with respect to its authorial narrative stance" (p.25). In "The Loved Flaw," the author, Maniam, portrays this

gaze by means of visionary “touch” when the narrator says: “her touch had a different feel” (p.170).

The male narrator connects the real world to the author who composes a story about feminist reality. Fictional actions, therefore, are the proper strategy used by the author to depict the world according to his ideological insights. Then, the story is the concrete demonstration of fictional actions. At the center comes the male narrator who attends to all these narrative components. The central role of the male narrator is to condense the authorial ideological perception within the text about the exploitation of female bodies for passion (Hoin, p.57). Maniam, in “The Loved flaw,” uses the narrator as an agent for exposing the negative picture of male gaze.

The limited access of the male narrator is restricted to the relationship between reality and fiction. The author stands in reality, while he infiltrates such reality in feminist fiction for “the distinction between ‘real and imagined experience would be useless if all experience was equally past” (Rojek 43). The perfection of the male narrator “occurs of representation, or rather of the simulation of imaginary actions and events; unless language serves to invent stories, or at least to transmit stories that have already been invented about females” (Rojek, p.7).

In “The Loved Flaw,” the story of the narrator exemplifies the male dominant presence in society. Therefore, the satiric simulation relates pertinently to the male narrator. In *Narrative*, Nordquist asserts that satiric simulation of females’ inferior position “usually has a male narrator who can take responsibility for the narratives he or she constructs. While describing oneself as a male ‘narrator’ admits that one’s conclusions are interested, by confessing this bias a writer can indirectly increase the ethical force of his or her claims” (p.192). This simulation announces the authorial narrative perspective for “internal representation which is fully realized only in the narrative of ‘interior depiction’ of male and female relationship” (p.193).

Satiric representation, by means of feminist discourse, appears in the narrator’s story. He is a incarnation of Maniam, and he conveys the essence of the subject of male gaze. This subject lies in the writing “limitation” which the narrator suffers from the lack of seeing women other than his wife, like Viji. The narrator, in this sense, carries out Maniam’s perspective over females’ limited social life. In feminism, this is considered as “one of the feminist techniques of male gaze by which male reveal their awareness of the context-dependent nature of their dominance over women, of the importance to signification of the circumstances surrounding any female life” (Hutcheon, 2000, p.85).

Similarly, Nordquist appropriates the use of satiric with feminist discourse. In feminist discourse, the feminist nuance of “the male gaze does, with the most tedious

precision, register all the minutest movements of the male hero, not sparing endless repetitions. The narrator is literally fettered to his hero; he cannot back off from him sufficiently to give a summarizing and integrated image of his deeds and actions” (Rojek, p.78). The male gaze here is the utmost representation of feminist discourse. In the same way, Maniam echoes the role of male discourse “to rediscover validly the artifices of male superiority... if one goes about it the right way, aware of what male superiority has been up to” (1984, p.68). For this reason, Maniam utilizes a male narrator who inspects the presence of every female’s body around him.

The feminist factors of male gaze, furthermore, compromise the present status of fictional texts and their future. Therefore, the present status of male narrator becomes authenticated by virtue of feminist relations in “an inauthentic way of relating to the female position, just as there is both an authentic and an inauthentic way of relating to male and female interactions” (Nordquist, p.39). Nordquist argues that discourse is vital for accentuating the author’s voice. However, the author’s voice is interpolated in the male characters’ voices. fictional discourse is thus a depiction of life: “male discourse dominates, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the female object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the male gaze, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given male status” (p.292). The narrator, in “The Loved Flaw,” is always concerned with women around him regardless the other events occurring in the story: “I could have had more beautiful women” (p.173).

The most visible factor of male gaze of this narrative initiation is “the male consistent watching of female characters in feminists texts” (Nordquist, p.14). Literary plot depicting feminist the efforts by females, Rojek claims, is typically “dictated by the effort to help the reader grasp their weak positions” (xiii). The author’s notions of the concept of female gaze are projected in realistic texts. The author’s self-reflexivity in feminist fiction is the effects of male gaze per se. By the same token, Maniam allows her narrator to contemplate the bodies of a number of women in the story to tell us about the fact that male characters are superior to female characters because they represent the male mainstream in patriarchal societies.

In this regard, feminist weak perceptibility leads us to the authorial self-reflexive dimension highlighted in this study. Maniam exploits the position of the narrator to critique the male-dominated societies. The male dominated societies suffer from this phenomenon because there is no balance between male and females in societies. The narrator, for example, expresses his passionate feelings when Viji touches his chest: “her figures on my chest broke that Gordian knot of discipline in me and set

loose that wavering need to be free" (p.173). This is the essence of male gaze when the narrator looks at Viji in a passionate way.

The feminist references to male gaze are stylized illusive components of reality, a reality confronted by the narrator during his life with women. The factual composition lying between fiction and reality is the feminine dimension of male gaze objective fact. Consequently, the feminist intrusion into male portrayal permits authors to comment of the reality of women suffering from the male gaze (Abu Jweid, 2021b, p.9). Such manner locates the frequent standard of fictional writings including textual hints about their technical construction of the author's vision in the text. The kind of authorial intrusion into the textual fabrication could be located in the author's tendency to be critical of social retarded manners, like suppressing women. In "The Loved Flaw," Maniam intrudes her authorial voice in the plot to inform us of the fact regarding the suppressed position of exploited women at the hands of male characters.

Furthermore, the authorial depiction of women's negative feelings created by male domination represents "the insight that the agent that sees must be given a status other than that of the agent that narrates the male gaze" (Hoing, p.101). In this sense, the literacy manifestation of the male voice "is here not just narrating the general sensibility of the community but also depicting its shared field of male vision and thus providing an unusual and fascinating collective perception of females" (p.104). In this way, male gaze is used as a narrative mediation by the author who expresses his/her fictional critiques in the text. Maniam similarly exposes the defects of male dominated societies. Yet, she uses the negative position of male characters in the story to express her authorial visions in the text. She uses a male narrator to incarnate the male gaze and admiration of women bodily interests; the narrator describes this to us: "on the other hand, a relationship, even a physical one, lasting that long must have some hidden support to it" (p.177).

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has focused on the male gaze depicted in Maniam's "The Loved Flaw" (2001). The study has explored the position of female characters in male-dominated perspectives as being perceived in marginalizing male gaze. Maniam uses her male character to tell us about the defects of male gaze regarding female

characters. The essence of this gaze is the female body and physical features. Therefore, male gaze has been used to expose the negative characteristics of males who look at females as being inferior to them, which is rarely tackled in previous studies on the selected work.

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