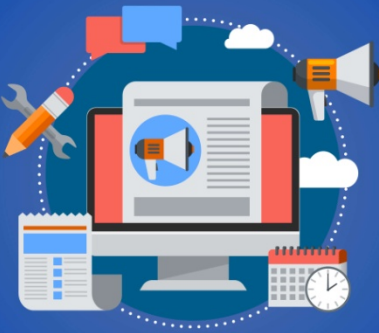


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“Male Gaze” Foreshadowing Fourth-Wave Feminism in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John Keats

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Abstract:

Media and film studies have brought up the concept of objectification of women to the forefront, which further has given rise to the fourth-wave feminism where the condition of women is analysed with reference to their representation across digital platforms such as films, social media accounts, and web series. The theory of “male gaze” developed by Laura Mulvey and psychoanalytic theories analysing male psychology such as studies by Freud and Lacan offer revolutionary findings how phallogocentric ideas are still rampant in 21st century but in different forms. In this paper, I will critically analyse nineteenth century Romantic poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John Keats as a precursor to the fourth-wave feminism and the notion of “male gaze,” and elucidate how deconstructing a classic work in new light offers a fresh critical insight.

Keywords: male gaze, fourth-wave feminism, patriarchy, cinema, psychoanalysis, narrative, John Keats.

Critical examination of classic works from modern perspective plays revolutionary role in broadening the mind of the society and makes way for inclusion of the marginalized and forgotten segments. Each epoch is made up of its own different ideologies and the literary works written in a particular era are a reflection of the thinking of the people at that time. Thus, it becomes crucial that classical works see a critical revision with each changing phase of the century to make them relevant to the current and future generation. Thus, in this paper I aim to critically analyse classic Romantic period poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John Keats through the lens of “male gaze” theory propounded by fourth-wave feminist Laura Mulvey. Mulvey is a well-renowned name in the film and gender theory as she was the

first one who came up with the idea of describing the male audience in a cinematic ambience through the thought process of what she termed as the “male gaze.” The perception of scrutinizing the visual display is very relevant for the feminists of the current generation as digital media is a part of everyone’s lifestyle and has become the mode that dictates one’s thoughts and ideologies. In Keats’ poem too we are presented with visual scenery where the gaze becomes the driving force of the narrative. Therefore, the analysis of the poem is very significance to broaden the critical potential and to see the composition in a new light.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci(1819), literally meaning “one beautiful lady without pity” is a ballad by John Keats set in the medieval period. It dwells on the theme of love and war, an exciting adventure, a loss, and contains supernatural elements. In the Middle Ages, many legends were current concerning the beauty of the femme fatale. These women were often presented as enchantresses, witches, sirens, mermaids, or serpent women (Medusa), who lured men by their strange wild beauty to their ruin or death. In this ballad, Keats has depicted a cheated soul: the knight-at-arms. He flies into a trance and comes back to real life after an encounter with a supernatural lady, which has echoes of psychoanalysis. The chance meeting of the knight and the lady mirrors the hidden entrails of the knight’s psyche itself. Mulvey’s research about “male gaze” included a lot of references to psychoanalytical makeup of the male audience in the cinema hall where the visual pleasure that is derived by seeing an attractive female object is reflective of the unconscious and suppressed desires that a male cannot exercise openly in the society.

The concept of a male’s desire for something unattainable or part of the imagination brings to the forefront the idea of male desire and women being the beautiful object cherished and sought to be possessed. This doctrine drives the theme of the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973) by Laura Mulvey in which she gives the theory of “male gaze” describing how male’s unconscious has a voyeuristic tendency and the media thrives on feeding on this hidden psyche of the males. The knight in the poem goes into a fit as soon as he encounters the enchanting lady and his obsession further drives him into frustration, exclusion, and anguish. The risky adventure is shown both ecstatic yet frightening at the same time as it is not at par with the doctrines of the real world. There is a blurring of the boundary that separates the conscious self from the unconscious self and the knight is shown vulnerable to his hidden pursuits. The experience becomes indescribable and incomprehensible. The knight is the persona of the poet himself who is yearning to fulfil a desire that is supported by real society in his imagination through the vision he gets under the influence of opium.

Sigmund Freud's theory of "scopophilia," which Mulvey uses as a "political weapon," is quite relevant in understanding her argument about "male gaze" as both ideas hinge on the idea of deriving pleasure on looking at something beautiful (833). Women are assumed to look as delicate beautiful creatures since times unknown and this whole effort that goes into making women appealing attracts the gaze of the male subject and the entire arrangement comes full circle with woman's body becoming a real extension of male's psyche. There is a pressure on women to look flawless and fashionable and thus digital platforms such as movies and social media handles are stuffed with women as decorated artefacts and performing side roles just to fulfil the sexual interest of the male protagonist. Michel Foucault attributes the gaze as an embodiment of the power structure and calls an "inspecting gaze" the strongest weapon under which an individual "will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising his surveillance over and against himself" (Foucault 155). In this way, the right to gaze and that too with a predetermined conception takes a tone of dictatorship through which the person who is the target of the gaze becomes a subjugated object automatically and the person who is mastering the gaze in turn takes the position of the supervisor. This offers a complete eradication of the aesthetic aspect of feminine beauty since the burden to look alluring to the observer eye is what results in the ultimate game of being the seducer, with the one who is passive ending up getting all the blame without even being an active participant in the process.

The poem is a dream sequence with mysterious elements and has the structure of one dream being a part of another dream, which again is reflective of Freudian levels of brain psychology and the attempt of the individual to find a standing point among them. Mulvey describes that movie theatre produces an "illusion of voyeuristic separation" through "darkness in the auditorium" and offers a sense of "private world" to the audience for "playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (836). Like in dream, in cinema hall too there is a joining of the ethereal and the real. The knight yearns and wastes for the lady love and his desire further develops into a disease. The problem is that the knight cannot easily accept the rebuff by his love interest, a typical trait of males with patriarchal mind-sets who cannot easily digest any rejection by a female they have desire for, and this psychological frustration takes on dangerous repercussions. Mulvey brings up the notion of "ego" developed by Jacques Lacan and describes that when the male child understands his self, the "I", "he imagines his mirror image to be more complete" (836). Thus, the pain that arises on no reciprocity on the side of the object of desire becomes symbolic of a lack that the ego of the

male tries to satisfy. The bleak, wintry landscape in the poem becomes objective correlative for the “haggard” and “woe-begone” knight. Keats presents a pastoral setting in the poem with references to a lot of natural surroundings. The dark, raw, untamed force of nature symbolises the basic instinct that is insurmountable and at the same time it is a mirror reflective of the knight’s state of mind suggested in the dead silence of the birds. The knight is presented in a pitiful condition as betrayed by his lady love. So, we see that the woman’s agency is not paid any heed and knight’s desire is given complete attention, as often we see in modern scenario too with instances such as victim shaming in case of rape victims, acid attacks done on women who rejected the proposals of interested males, and single women seen as dangers to the thread of the society. The society inculcates in male’s mind to take a woman’s persona for granted and by default a woman is always available to be cherished as one desires as per the male’s psyche.

In the poem, the lady figure is not Cynthia or the Mother Earth, but “a fairy’s child” with “wild eyes.” She is given outworldly qualities and also not portrayed in an authoritative light or as a goddess one must pay his prayers to. The narrative is focused on the features that enhance her attractiveness and physical beauty and there is not a hint of reverence. She is dangerous and possessive with destructive overtones. She is shown as an object of passion and lust. Her beauty is not described in intellectual but physical terms: “Full beautiful, a fairy’s child/ Her hair was long, her foot was light.” Thus, Keats’ idea of beauty is patriarchal in his attempt to delineate her to her world and ultimately control her. The Self is separated from the Other in order to satisfy the egotistical persona of the male observer. She is depicted as a seductress who coaxes the knight into her arena. Her bending, swaying, and singing “A fairy’s song” echoes the image of the evil sirens who lured adventurous sailors towards themselves. The mysterious, inconstant, and illusory nature of the lady presents her persona as a danger to the world and something that needs to be tamed. The knight “made a garland for her head/ And bracelets too, and fragrant zone.” These ornaments are symbolic of his attempts to enchain her and make her a captive, a practice quite prevalent among different parts of the world where wearing jewellery or a certain kind of attire is considered part of being a woman and the women who do not stick to these roles are stigmatised by the majority of the society. The knight’s attempts to ensnare the lady is in fact the real cause of his misery as he tries to gain physical control over the body of the woman and totally ignores a potential for meaningful discussion or rapport. The idea to chain the female body in bonds has been a part of male’s psychology since times unknown and is also the main reason for suppression

of freedom of females. The urge to dominate is quite animalistic and is a big hurdle in the progress of human civilization, a point strongly made by fourth-wave feminists. Since 2012, fourth-wave feminism marks its noted inception and the right of a female over her own body is a major statement in terms of seeking female rights whether it is related to the right to prevention of sexual assault, gaining bodily autonomy, abolishing body shaming, or right to abortion.

The real reason behind the knight's futile ventures into the lady's domain is his inability to decipher the other world and not letting the lady to introduce her empire herself. The knight seeks a fulfilment of his desire but without an amalgamation of the rigid constructs. Keats' version of real relationship is when the opposite poles find a resolution, something that feminists strive to this day. To liberate one does not mean enchaining the other, a lesson the knight needs to learn to win the heart of the lady. All attempts of the knight to subjugate the lady go in vain as he is too unwilling to let loose his own guard that protects his male ego. The lady is a silent statue-like alluring figure who is just meant to be looked at. Knight's attempt to objectify the woman is the cause of his downfall. Keats shows love as not a mechanistic but spontaneous phenomenon. Through the unconsummated love affair of the knight and the visionary lady, Keats not only illustrates the destructive potential of desire solely based on the foundation of lust, but also insinuates the need for an internalization of the Other and not delineating it. Thus, Keats propounds the fourth-wave feminism without being aware of it. The signing of the pact of love by the lovers is accompanied by a "sweet moan" from the lady's side. The sexual and orgasmic connotations of this phrase are related to the facts that the knight is only considerate of the carnal aspect of the relationship and pays no heed to the spiritual aspect of the union. At their departure, the lady weeps, a lamentation for an incomplete bond as its origin was itself a stunted mind-set. When the knight rides with the lady on a "pacing steed," he becomes completely unaware of the surroundings and becomes entirely engrossed in her beauty as for him the ownership of the object of the desire becomes supreme necessity. We find the same concept of medieval romance involving male as the voyeur and female as the object of desire to be looked upon in sixteenth century collection of sonnets *Astrophil and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney. The sonnet sequence too articulates the helplessness and hopelessness of the unrequited love of Astrophil whose love interest is a star and is beyond reach and all he can do is gaze upon its beauty. She is separated, otherworldly, and alluring. The idea of being distant is what drives the urge to attain and thus we do not find the object of desire at a closer distance. The desire to gaze

the unachievable female object residing in the unconscious of the males is what is earning the bread of the major percentage of the film makers: “The voyeurism, the place of the male star protagonist in fighting off being the object of the gaze and creating the energy of the story. The woman as spectacle...” (Mulvey’s interview with *Another Gaze*). The Other is seen as the medium through which the Self can feel a sense of wholeness.

Feminists are very much concerned with the idea of identity and what in fact makes a person’s identity. Intersectionality problematizes the gender identities as it brings to the showground the value of context. In the poem, the lady does not belong to the mainstream. She is a marginalized figure with a different nationality and language. The politics of identity let the knight take up the role of the one who defines her world; he is the one who gives words that differentiate her world from his own. The postcolonial resonance again brings to the limelight the woman’s body being accredited the qualities of a vanquished and colonized land mass. Yuval-Davis states that “the point is to analyse the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities” (205). We do not get to hear the other side of the theory in the poem and all we know about the lady is just the knight’s version. Instead of providing point of view of both sides, there is a “focus on male fantasies and projections, including the projection of sex and death instincts” (Al-Abbood123). The female desire is completely out of the question and her body is shown as an escape for the male ego. Both sensuality and death disrupt the linearly organized social order and thus both forces are quite prevalent in the poem.

The knight is shown as blindly following the lady. He is a slave to his inherent ego and his unconscious unknowingly turns him into a hunter, an instinct learned since the beginning of the civilization. No question is made on the idiotic pursuit of the knight and the lady bears the brunt of the censure. Her world is alluring and enigmatic. The knight is alien to everything he observes there and he is fed by the lady strange delicacies such as “honey wild, and manna dew,” which has Biblical connotations and takes us to Milton’s “Paradise Lost.” She is portrayed as evil figure of Satan, who allured Eve to eat the delicious apple which resulted in the fall of humankind. Here Keats foregrounds the evil nature encapsulated in pleasure principle and fantasy. There is a warning to not completely rely on one’s unconscious desires as these may be threatening to the civilization. There is a focus on the Dionysian rather than the Apollonian aspect of union. Thus, it insinuates that the true road to salvation is one beyond the physical beauty and thus one should focus on going beyond the

carnal beauty itself as the concept of gaze only exists as long as there is a beautiful object to be looked upon. For fourth-wave feminists, it is a medium to give message that a woman's body is not a site of carnal desire and thus not only men but women themselves too should distance themselves from offering their body as a display:

Women's bodies are constantly on display and mass media seems to be mandated to recite incessantly the story of this display. The ironic part of this story, following a Foucauldian position, is that women must self-monitor this display and alienate themselves from their own body, becoming compliant with the power structure, becoming complicit with the source of their oppression. (Ponterotto 147)

Feminists have been very adamant about the female voice in the society and thus consideration of the lady's speech in the poem becomes very crucial. At one instance, Keats states that the lady says to the knight: "I love thee true." This statement is both absurd and interesting as the knight does not know her language but seems to be very confidently interpreting her words. In fact, the situation is emblematic of the male's desire to hear and interpret a female's words as per his liking and situation. Instead of learning her language, he thinks it suitable to interpret her voice according to what he feels at that particular point of time. Mulvey states that the "[w]oman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (834). The ramblings of a psychotic lover and his hallucinations about being a partner of the lady is his doing ultimately but it is the woman who is termed as "sans merci." She is the one who is named treacherous when the knight feels betrayed on being left alone "on the cold hill side." Turning his dream into a nightmare is the consequence of the knight being a victim of his own mentality driven by patriarchy, but a lady with the agency is shown as the real culprit. The reference to the "pale kings" and "death-pale" warriors is a reference to the past male figures whose advances have been shunned by the lady. The agony of all these male figures is the result of their desire to control the object of their gaze. Here Keats becomes an unaware feminist by explicating the need to accept life in all its binaries. He clarifies this notion in *To Autumn* by representing an androgynous figure of the season rather than bifurcating the real and the ethereal in terms of fixed male and female domains. The lady sucks up the soul of the kings into herself. She is the site for the union of the Self and the Other. In Homi Bhabha's words, Keats' poem is a ground for conception of a "hybrid body" where though a woman is an aesthetic object yet a

person with agency, and a knight is an observing subject but still a frustrated persona who is finally rendered powerless. There is an urge for universal consciousness. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, Keats explains his poetical character as:

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. (Keats 1818)

At the end of the ballad, we see the knight as completely wasted and gradually heading towards death: “Alone and palely loitering.” His only hope for comfort is to search completely for the lady. His gaze becomes an undoing for himself only. The rules that society creates for specific gender roles are shown destructive to males too and thus we find allusion to the fact that our ideologies need not be correct all the time and a revision of identity definitions is required for a better understanding of the social constructs.

To conclude, though *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John Keats was composed in nineteenth century but witnessing it through the lens of fourth-wave feminism shows that the poem is a classic precursor to the Laura Mulvey's theory of “male gaze” and Keats is an unaware feminist whose creation has significance in the 21st century for its relevancy to the depiction of female as an object of voyeurism as presented in the film industry. The lady in the Keats poem is one with agency and the poem celebrates the union of the Self and the Other, something that fourth-wave feminists strongly advocate to create a harmonious world. With fourth-wave feminists not even taking voyeurism and stalking lightly and pressurizing the government to levy strict punishment on the perpetrators, the lady in Keats' poem is way ahead of her time by taking her stand and prosecuting the trespassers in her kingdom.

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