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The Deviant Gotipua: Subversion of ‘Gaze’ in Performance

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Abstract:

The gaze in theory has presented an interesting domain in understanding the sexual politics; it gained significant popularity in the field of Cinema with the path breaking essay of Laura Mulvey. For a long time gaze remained a male phenomenon around which were strewn the responses to it. However, the prospect that gaze might not necessarily be a male prerogative and that there might be a possibility for the women viewers being the subjects of the gaze has not received much attention, Gotipua, a dance form of Odissa proves to be the singular such example known till date that accommodates the dual genres of gaze . This paper intends to show how the “alternative” that is promised by writers in the field of dance such as Coorlawala who, never in actuality explores the possibility of the female gaze and how Ann Kaplan still remains the only proponent of this underdeveloped doctrine while Gotipua acts as a singular exception that amalgamates the two in a conjoined whole.

Keywords: Gaze, female gaze, Gotipua, Laura Mulvey, Ann Kaplan

Dance as an art form inspite of being different from cinematic reproduction is itself an active performance of temporal creation, whose occurrence onstage, in a dark environment, with a live audience, has in many aspects similarity with the ambience of a cinema theatre. This point of similarity forms the cornerstone of the proposition that links it inextricably to Mulvey’s visual pleasure and narrative cinema and brings to notice the prevalent aspect of the ‘gaze’ in both the genres. However, in explication of the inherent politics that emerge from the act of gazing, consideration should be given to the plethora of forms in which it is prevalent. It is but imperative to mention that the pejorative of the gaze can hardly be restricted to a particular domain; therefore the act of representing has to be considered apart from its theoretical origins to explore applicability, as it opens up immense scope for understanding the nitty-gritty’s of the phenomenon at various levels:

Because when one is constantly playing with representations, one is bound to be confronted with such questions such as: What are we representing? For whom are we representing? What is it that is represented and how does it represent what it is supposed to? These are not easy questions to be answered. But the fact that they have appeared at all is promising. If such a self-reflexivity were to manifest in our visual media, it would certainly augur a new horizon of hope.(14 Murali)

Furthermore, since the characteristics of gaze among the opposite sexes are so blatantly related to the instinctual life of humans, the exchange of glances among them form the most remarkable examples of this theoretical premise in application; providing scope for the understanding of the why's and how's involved therein. This further opens up the aspect of the generalized nature of the objects in this phenomenon that seem to belong to the lower strata of power between the parties involved. Therefore, the looked upon feature of the transgender, homosexuals, people with alternate sexuality and societal variants share the same basic power structure where their position of weakness makes them the objects of gaze. In spite of the large gamut of the population who are the partakers of this socio-psychological occurrence, the majority which constitutes the object of gazing come from the so called weaker sex, the power paradigm for whom is not just the only aspect that is deterministic of their position but also the sexual quadrant of their lives. So much has been the effectiveness of this thought that in a world that is guided by criticism this particular referential dimension of their position has come to become the mainstream thought, quite unknowingly. The status of the second sex in this field has come to provide them with an essential tendency where importance is given to critiquing their secondary position. The fault that lies in this construction is the fact that the positions they share have come to be accepted as a theorem which is critiqued but accepted. The fact that the concept can have a brother concept in the acceptance of the existence of libidinal urges in women in ocular dimension in a fashion similar to that of men is disregarded. The reference to the Oedipal that has forever been linked with the libidinal attribute of the gaze brings forth the issue of the castration complex into play, vesting the women with powerlessness due to absence of the phallus and thus theoretically substantiating their looked upon status. Spiraling through genres such as psychology and society, the gaze in theory has traversed multiple dimensions, linking it to the classical dance traditions in India that have most of their origins in the 'devadasi' tradition of north and south India. This age old field of performance too subscribes to the stereotypical positioning of women, as expressed by Aishika Chakraborty:

Within this framed tradition women get frozen in irrelevant stereotypes – as *abhisarika*, *darpanasundari*, and several other enticing bodily images. The dance that perennially traps women within the image of “*nayika*” (heroine) portrays her body, almost without exception, for erotic purposes. Thus Dassiattam, later rechristened Bharatnatyam, developed through the *devadasi* system that was exploitative of women. The darbari dance like Kathak evoked court patronage through “*salam*” catering sensual indulgence to a male audience with an obsessive illustration of the Krishna theme. (189 Chakraborty)

Writers of performing arts such as Uttara Asha Coorlawala and Peggy Phelan have carved their own niches when it comes to the explication of the politics of the gaze in the field of performing arts. However, the genre of Gotipua dance form has a constituency that is path breaking in implication when it comes to the delineation of the Indian dance forms and their participation in the gender defining theory of the gaze. Coorlawala in her writing hails this dance form as the one whose differential rendering of the male gaze is the mouthpiece of a rebellion

that brings forth an alternative to the male gaze with its roots in the Indian context. Coorlawala's proposition is interesting as it significantly differentiates Gotipua from the other dance forms, particularly the western varieties. She attempts at giving the male domination in the field of gaze a second look in the direction of seconding Kaplan's idea of the pre-construed predominance of the male in the field of the gaze and in the process neglecting the female gaze.

However, what is interesting to note about the Gotipua dance tradition is its dismantling of the structured arena of male gaze that has kept reigning the domains of theory with its application, leaving not much scope for the emergence of the gaze as a female attribute as well. In Gotipua, the select dance group comprised of young boys with undeveloped masculine features is brought on stage. The theological perspective of this characteristic in the Indian dance scenario has not received much clarification. But what remains as unique is the fact that when the participation of women in the traditional theatrical performances in various parts of India remained prohibited, the Devdasi tradition remained a profession where the dominance of women folk had remained the norm, albeit in an objectionable context that makes them subjects of exploitation. Gotipua therefore uses young boy dancers in its performance. The predominant reason for this occurrence seems to be the interchangeable gender roles that these dancers had to assume on stage that called for the lithe bodied young men to set the stage. Whatever may be the ritualistic goal achieved by the arrangement, the aesthetic dimension of this remains as a very intriguing field today when with the exposure given by theorists like Lacan, Freud and Mulvey the issue of the gaze in the arena of performance have come to be significant in terms of enhancement of the understanding of the cultural framework that governs any society. It is but imperative to mention that while considering Gotipua as a dance form in the present day context, its presence as an artistic endeavour on stage is studied, against its performance in the temples where it had originated. The very point where the synonymity of a live dance performance with the on screen portrayal is studied, the effective similarity comes from the darkened surroundings that provide the apt setting for voyeuristic tendencies of the viewer: "Scopophilic pleasure involves anonymity. Invisibility and non-relationship empower the voyeur with the capacity to name and thereby manipulate mentally, what is being projected on the screen, while remaining unmarked, unseen."(24 Coorlawala) Keeping this very element in mind, the young bodied male who performs the role of the man and the woman simultaneously in performance, stands for an attempt at subversion, where the viewer who fantasizes man or woman is challenged with a dilemma, since the undetermined features of the boy on stage alters with the different roles in a singular performance, the possibility of fixation is curtailed as the onlooker is kept in a non-deterministic flux regarding the gender of the person to be desired. In one of the famous performances of Gotipua that Coorlawala cites an example of the performance of *Geeta Govindam* by Jayadeva by ace dancer Kelucharan Mahapatra. The description of the dancer that is provided goes thus:

Gradually the frame closes in on the performer's body and then on his upper torso and head. He is dressed in a yellow-orange silk dhoti, with typical silver Odissi dance belt.

His chest and arms are bare except for armlet and chest ornaments. His eyes are lined with kohl and on his earlobes are stud earrings. Though his chest is bare its soft and relaxed contours are very different from the lean hard muscular look one might expect from any European American who would appear bare topped in a public performance. (20-21 Coorlawala)

This sporting of the androgynous look causes a defining shift in the power that the viewer holds over the dancer. Considering the stereotypical gender roles of the active male gazer and the passive female object, the shift in the representation of gender on stage from being Krishna to Radha and vice versa changes the first of the parameters of the cinematic gaze in performance as has been put forth by Coorlawala. The gaze of the male performer at the female performer is undermined as a singular entity acting dual roles presents what appears like a satiric undertone to the masculine outlook towards gaze. Finally, the viewers gaze is intercepted for the pretentious body movements beguiling them is made apparent by the shift of the character the dancer plays.

While talking about the aesthetic conventions that guide the separation of the dance form from the real life experiences, which Coorlawala presents in her essay, it is important to mention that significant importance has been given to the tradition of the Indian classical dance form, along with the ritualistic maneuvers which these had been a part of and the theological insights which consolidated into the detailed implication of Gotipua in the ritualistic domain. It is by the help of these denominators that she aims at attempting to provide an alternative to the male gaze. Here it is interesting to understand that unlike Kaplan, who intends on bringing the female gaze to the fore Coorlawala intends at presenting an alternative, the nature of which is gender exclusive. The similarity that has been previously discussed regarding the aiding of the voyeuristic tendencies by the use of a darkened environment, in case of the Gotipua tradition, acts as an inviting condition that invites and then raising the expectation of the viewers high, makes a mockery out of the impulses that guide them into the spectacle that is created on stage. Thus as she claims:

According to Indian theories of aesthetics and perception, looking (*drishti*) as evident in Indian classical dance is integrally linked with cognizing form(*rupa*) and naming (*nama*). Mastery of *abhinay* necessarily involves the ability to direct the audience's sensibilities towards a particular perception through the use of eye movements. The eyes are used not just for "looking" at or responding to another imaginary character. The focused gaze directs attention to an action, a place or a part of the body. This cues observers to "see" what they are supposed to see. (19 Coorlawala)

Here, it is important to take into consideration the practical possibility of the audience not being comprised of a homogeneous population who are to aesthetically evaluate what they witness, the possibility of voyeuristic tendencies to be completely denounced is not only impractical but would definitely cause confusion. This is specially done considering the fact that the dance in question is no longer restricted to the temple porch but is now in performance throughout the

world. Therefore undermining the prospect of the religious tendencies that Coorlawala talks about as instruments in curbing the libidinal tendencies of the audience not only reduce the acceptability of her proposition in a globalised context but also make it faulty. Coorlawala says “In the dance, oppositions alternate constantly. Suggestive eroticism is the accepted for spiritual union but desiring a dancer while she was involved in this devotional perceived by the devout as tantamount to criminality”(23 Coorlawala)and demarcates the western audience from their Indian counterparts who are aware of the religious guidelines while witnessing the performance:

Thus the performer is empowered not only by the collective empathizing gaze of the devotee-audience but also by ritual associations of the danced images with divinity and by his/her mastery of the form and commitment to its content. This triple empowerment is acknowledged by the audience who is present to receive the gaze of the deity via the performance. (24 Coorlawala)

Finally the farfetched assumption of the religious minded audience to take the dance form as a performance, in which is found, the perfection of the dancer who has perfected the art, dancer as well as the chance of having a glance at the deity; that is the embodiment of God in the performer is faulty on dual grounds. The possibility of the fact that the audience is thus opinionated is fallacious, the outright religious sentiment involved in the audience to catch a glimpse of the almighty smacks of a setup that entails the performance being done in a strictly religious setting mostly as a part of a religious ceremony amidst a significantly theistic population, in which case once again the assumption is flawed because keeping in mind the prospect of the performance taking place in the temple grounds, the desire of the audience in all probability would be to see the idol placed within the temple and not the boy dancer on stage.

The sexual gaze to be bestowed on the dancer as discussed above has its presence in multiple literatures. The best explication of the treatment of this particular theme in Indian context had come from modern Indian dramatist Mahesh Dattani. The revelation of the societal truth and a prick at societal conscience being the strong points of Dattani, his play *Dance Like a Man* emphasizes the significance of gender in a profession like dancing. From the perspective of the gaze, the fact that the play uses stage lighting as an essential prop in order to reveal the various facets of the story is significant. The audience as the fourth wall partakes of the enacting that occurs at all points including the last dance performance put up by the central characters Jairaj and Ratna. Dattani, whose play treats societal issues of gender discrimination, does not show much concern about the psychosexual aspect of the viewer; except for the particular instant that proves Coorlawala wrong regarding the assumptive proposition of the non libidinal viewership. The prospect of the son of the house dancing and the notions harbored regarding the women on stage, while performing even the classical dances become apparent when Jairaj voices his father, Amritlal’s opinion of dancers while defining dance as:

The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares – what business did man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man.(407 Dattani)

While Dattani symbolically enhances the creative whole through the performance of the two genders in synchronized steps indicating the unification of the gender roles, Coorlawala fails at presenting a well-defined alternative which becomes further distinct in consideration of Kaplan's article "Is the Gaze male?" The positioning of women in the context of the gaze as the object of the gaze is stereotyping the previously formed structure of the gaze, something that postmodern feminists are trying to subvert. However, while talking about the theory in particular an essentializing tendency lies at the very base that refutes the existence of women in the audience as well, which would give rise to the possibility of the female gaze. Kaplan clearly signifies this overlooked aspect of the gaze in saying:

With this look at feminist film theories and at the issues around the problem of the gaze and of the female spectator that psychoanalysis illuminates, we can begin to see the large theoretical issues the psychoanalytic methodology involves, particularly in relation to possibilities for change... Julia Le Sage, for instance, argued that the use of Lacanian criticism has been destructive in reifying women "in a childlike position that patriarchy has wanted to see them in"; for Le Sage, the Lacanian framework establishes "a discourse which is totally male." And Ruby Rich objected to theories that rest with the apparent elimination of women from both screen and audience. She asked how we can move beyond our placing, rather than just analyzing it. (43 Kaplan)

Gotipua in this respect opens up a new area not just in contemporary performance but also considering the traditional heritage it comes with. With the shift in the role playing of the dancer it is but evident that not only is the male gaze thwarted, but scope is left for the consideration of the female gaze to be challenged as well. It therefore becomes the only known proponent till date of a performing art form that accommodates the concept of the female gaze in its lattice; a fact that Coorlawala's words obliquely indicate but never delve into:

If Mahapatra's androgynous appearance was at first startling for the uninitiated observer, the significance of this convention is apprehended as the performer shifts his alignment from male to female protagonist. The shift signals a change in the locus of the power to construct the love object. Thus both males and females in the audience can enter the performed narrative. (23 Coorlawala)

The dance form in its captivating the idea of both genders in a single individual signifies the alteration in the concept of Ardhanarishvara (the composite androgynous form of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati) which portrays the fusion of two into one showing just a part of the process where the difference is resolved by dissolution into a singular, by the mingling of two

genders into one. Gotipua on the other hand is a dance form that actually shows the splitting of a singular entity into two individuals; signifying the basic singular from which emerge the dual. This function is aptly carried out in conjunction with the strictly gender deterministic poses and mudras; clearly hinting at the similar constituency of both the genders and in the process bearing in its symbolic self the cosmos of the sexual conflict that dominate the theoretical premise of the phenomenon of gaze.

In this context it is easier to mention the notion of the alternative female gaze that Kaplan provides a new well defined direction to and which has remained under nourished in all the analysis that had taken place in this field. On the other hand Coorlawala's explication of the gaze in terms of the Gotipua dance tradition makes the distinction not in the genders that form the crux of the phenomena of the gaze, but in the form of the western and eastern viewership and the marked difference in their philosophical bedrocks. Thus when she talks about the "darshan-rasa" model as the guiding principle of the dance in question as well as the philosophical underpinnings involved, she significantly draws the line of differentiation in mentioning the European-American postmodern feminism that is hegemonic compared to the less hegemonic "darshan-rasa" position:

If psychoanalytic feminist theories have generated a "male" gaze predicated on the power structures implicit in looking, then *darshan* combined with the *rasa* theory of aesthetics offers a "female" model of a reciprocal activity involving mutual recognition. This *darshan-rasa* model has less hegemonic implications for both viewer and performer. (26 Coorlawala)

Her opposition to the supposedly preconceived notions that cause the alteration in reception of the Indian dance forms in what she claims as the "alien territories" is earmarked by quoting Phelan decrying the female in Indian dance forms. However the point remains that while objecting to the de-contextualizing of the Indian dance forms Coorlawala herself appears inclined to do the same and in the process pays no heed to the context of Phelan's claim. By affecting differentiation in between the western feminisms and what she considers its Indian alternative in the field of performing arts, she refers to the injustice meted out to the indigenous culture that was not credited amply in producing the avant-garde art form. However, she at the same time points out a non-defined "alternative to the male gaze" which she fails to explain. Whereas, Kaplan's attempt at non essentializing the gaze by denoting it as male, automatically shifts in favor of uninstalling the female counterpart from imposed passivity of the theoretical premise, which even though a bold move, remains without a significant successor in the field of theory till today.

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