



From the Panopticon to Petrification: Shifting Paradigms of the Gaze and Moral Surveillance in Select Malayalam Short Stories

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Abstract:

The paper makes a close reading of two short stories written by the emerging Malayalam writer Shahina E.K., with a view to bringing out the shifting paradigms of societal surveillance as far as female sexuality is concerned, and the subversive strategies women adopt to politically navigate such acts of cultural vigilantism. The paper analyses women's experience of surveillance at both ends, being the object and subject of it. It highlights how they traverse the boundaries of patriarchal control by subverting the position of being the object of selective morality into that of the subject of surveillance, assuming agency. Spotlighting the various theories of the gaze, the paper unravels the phenomenological, psychological, political, existential and philosophical aspects of surveillance. Women in these stories adopt multiple strategies of the 'oppositional gaze', proactively upturning the panoptic surveillance gaze into the petrifying Medusa gaze.

Keywords: moral surveillance, female sexuality, the gaze, patriarchy, Medusa.

Introduction

This paper analyses two short stories written by E.K. Shahina, who is an emerging post-millennial short story writer in Malayalam literature. The stories under analysis are “Puthumazha choorulla chumbanagal” (“Kisses Smelling of Petrichor”) and “Olinottam” (“The Peek”), selected from the collection *Puthumazha choorulla chumbanagal*, which was given the Edassery Award for the year 2015. The article focuses on the multiple strategies of the oppositional gaze employed by women to emerge as agential subjects contesting the panoptic mechanisms of patriarchal power. It spotlights various aspects of moral surveillance imposed by the patriarchal society on women and their intimate lives, and how women contest and resist such asymmetrical moral norms and cultural vigilantism. Drawing on insights provided by Cultural Theory, the paper argues that the select short stories reconfigure the politics of surveillance surrounding female sexuality by exposing how patriarchal acts of vigilance position women as objects of control and how women reclaim their agency by adopting multiple gazes of resistance. Using theories of the gaze and surveillance the article tries to highlight the gendered politics of surveillance, and contends that the female protagonists in these narratives disrupt the binary of the subjects and objects of the gaze, upturning their imposed visibility into a site of resistance.

The paper makes use of Michel Foucault’s concept of the *panoptic gaze*, Jaques Lacan’s *psychoanalytic gaze*, Laura Mulvey’s *male gaze*, Jean Paul Sartre’s *existential gaze*, bell hook’s *oppositional gaze* and the mythical *Medusa gaze* to substantiate the argument. The paper makes a close reading of the selected short stories to examine the phenomenological aspect of surveillance in women’s lives and how it is contested. These stories problematize the subjection of the female body and her sexuality to the societal gaze and also hint at the transformation of the panoptic gaze into a synoptic one, where many are watching a few with the active involvement of media technologies.

Analysis

Shahina E. K's story "Olinottam" ("The Peek") revolves around a kid's intrusive peek into the adulterous relationship that her mother, who is also the narrator, has with her paramour. The peek through the small crack in the window is made by the narrator's own nine-year-old daughter. The story is remarkable for the unguilty and unemotional tone of the mother as narrator. However, what attracts the reader's attention is her objective curiosity to know about the child's way of analysing the situation and making judgments. The mother says that the moment the black and white of the small eyes appeared at the crack of the window, they (the lovers) somehow sensed it, or else they could sense it because of the constant fear that people always harbour, of the possibility of such an inquisitive gaze, during such games of hide and seek (Shahina 15).

Even when the mother's lover slips away dressing hastily and starting his bike, and the mother escapes into another room putting her dress back in place, the child remains in the same position keeping her eyes nonchalantly fixed to the small hole at the window, totally indifferent to them having watched her out. She does not even care to enter the house through the door opened by her mother's friend to slip away (15-16). The narrator goes on describing that the hole was accidentally made during the ball throwing games by the children's gang wherein her kid is also a member. The crack was used by the child to watch the rain during the monsoon and the hailstones falling down. Conversely, the very same hole has opened the possibility of the child's gaze into the intimate, private moment of the mother (16). The mother seems worried about the way the scene might have affected the child, not at all feeling remorseful about her own act of engaging in an extramarital relationship.

The story hints at multiple gazes. On the peripheral level, it deals with the outward gaze of the child and the inward gaze of the mother. The mother retrospectively reenacts the

scene in her mind using the child's perspective and gaze and broods over the child's way of analysing the scene. Applying Jean Paul Sartre's concepts of the gaze on the mother and child, it can be seen that the gaze provides the moment of identity formation for both. Sartre uses the famous example of a person peeping through the keyhole and how it affects his/her sense of the self. The moment that person becomes aware that someone is watching, it stirs feelings of shame and guilt in him/her. His/her position from the subject of looking changes into that of the object of the gaze. Thus, for Sartre, the gaze is the moment of one's realisation that he/she is observed. It is the moment of objectification (340). "Shame...is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object" (350).

In the story, the mother is caught red handed in the act by her own child, but she reclaims the subject position by gazing back. She senses that the child's gaze is symbolically charged and finds her only as a metonymic extension of the voyeuristic society and its obscene pleasures of peeping into the intimate lives of others. On the other hand, the objectification does not happen to the child because she is not aware of how being "a peeping tom" becomes a matter of shame and guilt. She is not old enough to imbibe and to naturalize the moral codes of the society fully, and hence is free of getting objectified by the gaze.

The mother's inward gaze carries the potential for a psychoanalytical reading as well. Lacanian psychoanalysis places the gaze as the sensation of being looked at. It denotes the point from which we are observed. The gaze makes us visible objects of desire (72-73). Lacan also mentions the "feeling of being photographed" generated by the gaze (106). He also associates the gaze with the *fascinum* or the evil eye, something that has the power of killing life (164). For him, the gaze forms a part of the Real, disrupting and transcending the Symbolic order (95-96). He contends: "You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see" (103). In the story, both the mother and

the child get arrested by the moment, and it forms a traumatic experience for both, one belonging to the Real order. Both of them look at something they never wish to see, and the gaze transforms them being onlookers.

Though the voyeuristic pleasure might be absent in the child's curious gaze, the lovers are conscious and worried of the voyeuristic intrusion of the moral policing public, which can happen anytime. Foucault's adaptation of the Benthamite idea of self-discipline caused by a feeling of surveillance simulated by the panoptic gaze of society becomes relevant here (216). Foucault further states that the "disciplinary technique exercised upon the body had a double effect: a 'soul' to be known and a subjection to be maintained" (295). The subjection of the female body and her sexuality to the societal gaze is the fundamental question posed by the story, and the child's curiosity is symbolic of the intrusiveness of the society.

In fact, the panoptic gaze and surveillance gaze have become a synoptic one where the media is actively involved in this surveillance, and many are watching a few, reversing the idea of the panopticon (Mathiesen 215-234). The hyper visibility of women's bodies as "the object of a vision that is implicitly masculinised" helps in the moral policing of the society (Heynen and Meulen 11) and constructs a "subjectivity that takes part in its own surveillance" (Albrechtslund 196). Here, the mother is more or less engaged with self-surveillance as she is scared of the intrusive gaze of society. The peek that she attributes to her child is the peek of society into the private intimate life of its female subjects.

When the mother revisits the incident retrospectively, she remembers that the nine-year-old's arrival back from school is usually signalled by her energetic footsteps, shouts to her playmates in the neighbourhood, the throwing thud of her school bag and the long pressing of the calling bell, all of which were absent that day. When she thinks about the repercussions of the gaze, the mother thinks about how the girl might now make a jigsaw puzzle of usual scenes in the past when she would come back from school, and how she might try to solve the

loose ends with the newly given insight from the peek. The scenes are; how the lover would sit on the sofa, casually pretending that he had simply dropped in to see the kid, and to give gifts to her, whereas actually he would have got dressed up in a hurry, interrupted from their love making, hearing the child's footsteps. He would sometimes gift the child with chocolates, or pat affectionately on her cheeks, and take her for a short ride on the motor cycle to cover up the shame of the act. On retrospective thinking, the mother gets disturbed by the intellectual agility of the child in solving such puzzles (Shahina 17).

The mother shuttles from the object position to the subject's and thinks about multiple possibilities of the gaze. She almost gets obsessed with it, thinking of the social shaming it might cause. However, instead of subjecting herself to self-disciplining, she gathers enough mental strength to face the child. She says even otherwise the scope of the sights provided by such a small hole had dwindled to a harmless extreme by then (17).

The story's climax revolves around the tension experienced by the mother, thinking of how to confront the child's questioning gaze afterwards, and her wishing if only the child had asked something about it. When the husband calls from abroad, it is the child who attends her father's call first, accelerating the anxiety of the mother, as she overhears the child's long conversation with her father. The child's final comment looking at her mother's spread bindi that her mom is the dirty girl, just like the woman they had seen in the film the other day (18), disturbs the mother and prompts her introspective gaze into the same scene once again. She shockingly visualizes the child's curious gaze through the hole shedding its childish innocence, and metamorphizing into a sharp, adult, intrusive, societal gaze from the panopticon. She gets shocked as she visualizes the child slowly naturalizing the moral codes of the society and gradually growing judgmental. The vision flashes in her memory absurdly like the crystal pieces in a kaleidoscope (18). The story becomes transgressive in that the mother seems unfazed when she faces the child because she feels unguilty about her act. She is ready to stare

back into the intrusive society, but is concerned only about the way the child is ideologically hijacked.

The deployment of the oppositional gaze becomes more nuanced in the second story titled “Puthumazhachoorulla chumbanangal” (“Kisses Smelling of Petrichor”), where the Mulvean scopophilic gaze is reverted into the gaze of Medusean petrification by the protagonist, who is, remarkably, a nun. The story revolves around the adolescent love of two Class Twelve students and how the class teacher, a nun, deals with the sight of the pair kissing each other. Muhzin Ahammed, is tall, handsome, enterprising and the captain of the school volleyball team, and his lover, Bella Rose Thattekkaran, is equally studious, and belonging to a good family. The nun has never thought of the possibility of such a relationship between them until she bumps into such a “forbidden scene”. The writer describes her reaction that she felt the surging of many waves of blood red colour into her brain when she later thought about that sight of them sipping each other’s lips and hugging, forgetting the surroundings” (25).

The nun’s gaze at the lovers’ kiss has the destructive power of the Lacanian evil eye mentioned earlier. When she sights them kissing, standing in the space behind the boy’s washrooms, she shouts at them, desperately wishing if only some of her own haunting memories had drowned into the marsh-lands of the mind (26). Her flooding memories translocate the gaze into the Real order, which is traumatic and hence, resistant to linguistic expression. The nun wakes into her own past looking at reddish lips of the girl and then brownish lips of the boy; how she was sent to the convent as a punishment for the first act of immodesty during her teenage, that is, her first kiss. She remembers how she was beaten up by her father, how she was sent to another school and a convent later, all because of the kiss. Then she is sent to the white immaculate purity of the convent, the numbness of the verandahs lacking in laughter. She is said to touch her lost lover again in imagination, licking her wet lips, which is said to have never slept because of the memories (28).

The nun's gaze makes the kissing adolescents the objects of desire. The nun looks at the kissing of the teenagers in a scopophilic cinematic gaze which reminds her of her own repressed sexuality. Laura Mulvey opines that "the cinema offers several possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in reverse formation, there is a pleasure in being looked at" (8).

The story also reveals the embodied nature of "surveillance gaze overwhelmingly falling upon the individuals occupying morally laden categories of suspicion: youth, homeless persons, street traders and black men" as Sean P. Hier, Kevin Walby, and Josh Greenberg argue (232). The story offers an unconventional twist where it progresses into a politically subversive tone, revealing the petrifying Medusa gaze of the nun when she sends the girl back home and forcefully makes the boy stay back, finally forcing a kiss upon the boy with her rough lips (Shahina 29). The kiss of the nun, when literally taken, carries some elements of ethical complexity and can be interpreted as an act of sexual coercion of a minor by a person wielding power. However, the thematic setting of the story compels the reader to see it as an act of resistance. The janitor of the school, Margarita, who witnesses the sight, and makes the sign of the cross to bless herself (Shahina 29), is a representative of the panoptic society which is ultimately responsible for the victimisation of the nun. The nun's kiss has to be read as a mocking gesture holding the mimetic potential of subverting the moral codes prescribed by institutionalised patriarchy.

Gillian M. E. Alban describes Medusa as "possessing the powerfully castrating and debilitating gaze and the sexual threat of the phallic mother or woman", drawing upon psychoanalytical perspectives on the Medusa myth (3). Undermining the evilness of the monstrous feminine, she advocates the power for cultural subversion that the Medusa myth carries. Alban argues that instead of getting objectified, the Medusa gaze gives women the power to objectify others, and thus, the access to have sexual agency over others (6). She

advocates that “women embrace the double-edged Medusa gaze, in the aggressive self-assertion necessitated in societies that disempower them, causing them to become monstrous” (7). The nun becomes emblematic of such an objectifying, petrifying gaze, which helps her overcome sexual repression and announce her sexual agency even if it lasts for a moment.

Both these stories exemplify how women manoeuvre surveillance and capillary power by adopting and manipulating methods of “the oppositional gaze” as propounded by the feminist thinker and activist bell hooks. She postulates the gaze as a political act, something that can be manipulated by the onlooker to assert her agency. The “oppositional gaze” as advocated by her has to be cultivated purposely, as part of a conscious learning process. She exhorts the black women audience to ‘stare back’ politically, thus resisting, instead of becoming the consumers and victims of mainstream representations (116). Being active agents of the gaze, the black women spectators have to “contest, resist, revise, interrogate and invent” (128).

Conclusion

The women protagonists of the select stories are seen to be gaining agency by politicising and subverting the surveillance gaze, thus interrogating the asymmetrical power relations endorsed by patriarchy. The mother in “Olinottam” indirectly challenges the unwarranted interloping of society into the private lives of individuals with her imperturbable attitude while defending the child’s curiosity. The nun in the second story, “Puthumazha choorulla chumbanagal”, on the other hand, subversively oversteps the repressive societal rules by kissing the boy. Her kiss signifies not an act of desire, but an instance of the oppositional gaze she deliberately adopts to defy the moral codes imposed by a repressive system. Both women revert their positions, of getting objectified by the gaze, by choosing to look back in

anger. Their petrifying Medusa wrath originates from forced societal repression, which, in turn, transforms them from being seen as objects to becoming onlookers of objects.

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