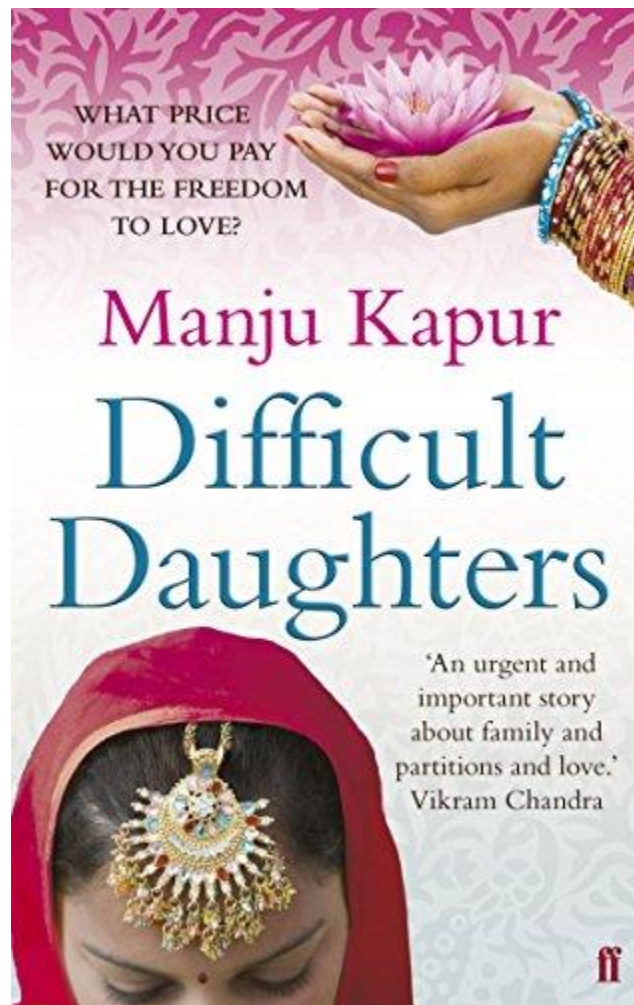


The Power of Gaze – An Analysis of Manju Kapur's
Difficult Daughters

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Abstract

Gaze is a powerful phenomenon which can reveal what words fail to show. The presence, as well as the absence, of gaze has its unique impact on a work of creative imagination. Manju Kapur, an acclaimed Indian Writer in English, has used gaze abundantly in her works, especially in *Difficult Daughters*, her debut novel. Gaze brings out the finer nuances which the story itself does not reveal directly. An analysis of the various gazes present in this novel brings out the power of gaze and its relevance as a suitable tool for literary analysis.

Introduction

Gaze is a powerful theory with its origin dating back to the origin of Psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud. The exponents of psychoanalysis spoke about the power of gaze in kindling desire. The primary preoccupation of psychoanalysis being the therapeutic value of the patient's talk, the gaze of the patient while delivering his talk hardly gained importance. It is in the later years, during the time of Lacan, that gaze received its due significance.

Lacan, in his famous theory of the mirror stage, demonstrates that every child undergoes a dynamic change in his or her perception between 6 months to 18 months. It is during this time that a child encounters the mirror for the first time with due understanding. The image in the mirror makes the child realize that it is a body like all other bodies it sees around. The mirror thus serves to objectify the child. The child realizes its separate bodily existence for the first time. This is the first stage of realization and individuality, as the child now realizes its difference from its mother.

The complexity in the concept of gaze too has its origin in the mirror stage. The mirror itself serves as a complex symbol because it tends to signify the human eye in its ability to gaze back. The child, when it looks at the mirror, is confounded by its own staring image. The child, in reality, holds the dominant position as the holder of the power of gaze, but when a similar image stares back with the same force from the mirror, the child's position of prominence is challenged and the child becomes an object in relation to the image on the mirror. Thus, gaze becomes a dual concept, affording prominence to the one who looks from the subject position, yet holding the possibility of reversal with the reversal of the gaze.

Gaze and its power has been realized and expressed by many scholars. Sartre and Foucault are the chief exponents. Sartre speaks about role play which is primarily playing parts to satisfy the eyes of others. We often act to fulfill the expectation that society has towards our roles. As an individual we play many roles within our family and in the society. Our freedom is minimal while we play these roles because the norms for all these roles have already been framed by the society. We know that we will be criticized and ostracized if we do not play these roles according to the dictates of the society. So, whether we are willing or not, whether we derive pleasure from it or not, we tend to play these roles, which Sartre calls bad faith. To Sartre, our life will achieve its purpose only when we move from bad faith to good faith.

Foucault, in his study about the prison systems of the world, has highlighted the power of the Gaze. He speaks about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which is an architectural model for an ideal prison based on the power of Gaze. Panopticon is a tower like structure in the middle of a large field surrounded by small cubical rooms. The inmates of the cells imagine that they are watched from the center tower and there by self-behave. Irrespective of the presence of the Gaze of the watcher, the tower itself signifies a powerful Gaze, making the inmates self-behave. This system will be ideal for hospitals, educational institutions and corrective centers. Disciplinary action has moved from bodily punishment to self-discipline with Gaze.

The concept of Gaze gained a gender perspective with French feminist critics. Laura Mulvey in her essay, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema speaks about the absence of female

Gaze in movies. She identifies three prominent gazes in movies - the Gaze of the male behind the camera, the gaze of the male character in the movie and the Gaze of the male audience. She argues that the female audience assume the Gaze of the male character in the movie, as they do not have a scope for their female Gaze. Various feminist critics have argued in support of and against her theory.

Literature, from time immemorial, has used the power of gaze to express the complexity of human life with its myriad feelings and emotions. Many are the instances, when though we would, we remain speechless, powerless and thereby live in falseness. There are instances where words fail. They fail in their inability to express the subtler aspects of feelings and fears which can hardly be explained or expected to be understood even when explained. In such cases, Gaze is the only option available. Gaze, signified by a simple, casual look to observing, staring, to an intent, focused look, is available in many different forms for human beings to directly convey and communicate with the mind and heart of a fellow being. The dynamism of Gaze makes it powerful even in its absence. When gaze serves the purpose of kindling desire, as expounded by Freud, the absence of a significant gaze from the woman may speak volumes about her actual desire, though she may be a silent bearer of the male gaze. Thus, the power of Gaze can be studied both in the presence and absence of it, a befitting dual study, as Gaze itself is a dual phenomenon, operating from both ends – the subject and object perspectives. The power of Gaze can only be brought out by such a dual study, which is the purpose of this paper. Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* has been taken for the analysis.

Manju Kapur

Manju Kapur, a famous feminist writer in India, has written six novels to her credit. All her novels have female protagonists. All her stories deal with the life of her protagonists. The plight of an Indian woman can be understood from her novel. *Difficult Daughters* is her first novel and it won her recognition as a feminist writer and created a space for her in the field of Indian writing in English. It also won her the Eurasia prize for the first novel in English. As Manju Kapur has made abundant use of the Gaze in this novel, it has been chosen for this analysis.

Difficult Daughters

Difficult Daughters is the story of three generations of women in a middle class family in Amritsar. The story is narrated by Ida. The chief protagonist is Virmati, Ida's mother. The novel also deals with Kasturi, Virmati's mother. Ida tries to unearth details of her mother's life during her adolescence. She is particularly interested in that period because she was not able to learn anything about it from her mother directly. Her mother's confused expression, when questioned about her earlier life leads to this desire. Kapur writes, "...her eyes looked confused and her face went blank whenever her daughter demanded a story about her Lahore days."(Kapur, 256). This confused gaze is the basis of the plot.

The bond between Ida and Virmati is a weak one. This could be understood from Ida's eyes during Virmati's funeral. "Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shriveled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept."(Kapur, 1) The situation of Ida, after her mother's death, is expressed by Kapur

through the gaze of others. “From time to time they stare openly at me, middle-aged, alone and not eating.” (Kapur, 2)

Ida soon learns about Virmati’s unquenchable thirst for education. Kapur identifies the gaze of Virmati which kindled such a desire. Virmati gaze at Sakuntala, her cousin, who is educated and employed. “Virmati, looking at her glamorous cousin, marveled at the change Lahore had wrought in her.”(Kapur, 16) Her desire to go for higher studies leads her to Professor Harish Chandra, who falls in love with her. Harish remarks about his gaze, “How difficult it is to teach while you are sitting before me! Your face is the fixed point to which my eyes keep returning.” (Kapur, 56) Virmati falls in love with this married man with a daughter. Her reverence for his knowledge, kindled by the thirst to learn, which is the result of her gaze at her cousin, leads to the further complications in the story.

Virmati’s gaze at the professor is conspicuous by its absence. She does not have a direct gaze. She tries to understand his heart from his letters and from his gaze. There is only one instance when she gazes at him with love. It is a furtive female gaze at the back of the dominant man. “She turned her head and saw the professor’s distinguished looking head, hair brushed back from high forehead...” (Kapur, 128). The intensity of her gaze makes the professor turn back and smile at her. Such is the power of gaze and Virmati, being capable of using it, never does use it in her life. It is the lack of her self-assertion that leads to all her troubles. She remains the secret wife of Harish for more than three years. She often asks him to marry her and sometimes even boldly rebukes him, but yet, she is always submissive before the bold gaze of the man.

In Nahan, where she is the Principal of a school, she could not assert herself to the selfish Harish. She has a peaceful and individualistic life there. Harish cunningly visits her at night, spoiling her reputation which leads to her dismissal. She fails to uphold herself. She becomes an easy prey to his gaze. Harish employs different types of gaze to deal with Virmati. When she questions him about their future, he has a faraway expression, and avoids direct answers. He only speaks of hope and a united faraway future. When she speaks angrily to him, he puts on a sad expression and has a hurt look on his face, which forces her to reconciliation. Kapur writes, “Why don’t we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way... Virmati felt trapped. What had she been saying, was it so unreasonable? Why was he looking so sad? How could she leave him like this? Slowly she moved towards Harish...” (Kapur, 149 -150)

Harish is well aware of the power of gaze and uses it in different ways to make Virmati submissive. He does not let her appreciate anything and speak about it. When she comments about a picture depicting the unity of Hindu, Muslim and Christian community, Harish scolds her. When she fails to find any beauty in the graves by the hill side of Nahan, he points it out to her and forces her to accept that they are beautiful. Literally, he forces her to abandon her gaze and substitute his gaze in its place. Kapur points out to this fact, “Virmati followed. Was it charming? She supposed it was. He usually had an eye for the charming, beautiful, lovely, quaint, picturesque. She tried to see through his eyes when he pointed things out to her. After all these years she was getting quiet good at the exercise.” (Kapur, 190)

Virmati's life in Harish's house as a co-wife with Ganga, the first wife is beyond description. Ganga's gaze reveals her feelings to Virmati. "When Ganga saw her, she would turn her face away, or what was worse, would stare intensely at her, her eyes moist, her lips trembling, her big red bindi flashing accusingly." (Kapur, 219) When Virmati conceives, Kishori Devi, her mother-in-law, becomes so worried about the evil eye. When Virmati has an abortion, she thinks of the malevolent gaze of Ganga. Much later, because of partition and the accompanied communal violence, Harish sends Ganga and the children with his mother to his native village. Virmati gets a chance to live alone with her husband. When the tension subsides, Ganga tries to come back, but Virmati asserts herself and makes her stay permanently in the village. Her assertion of her rights could be understood from her gaze. In the absence of Ganga, she gazes at Ganga's clothes, "Virmati stood before Ganga's open cupboard. Just seeing those saris made her sick. Each one of them reminded her of the woman, with her round face, round bindi and black kaajal-lined eyes staring fixedly at her with loathing." (Kapur, 276) The saris represent Ganga and Virmati's throwing away the saris from the house, donating them to the refugees without discussing about the issue with Harish or Ganga, shows her self-assertion and the symbolic ousting of Ganga. So, this final gaze acts as an indicator of what would have happened further in the life of Virmati. As Kapur points out in the Epilogue, Ganga is finally and completely ousted from Harish's house, though not from his life.

To Conclude

Thus, it is obvious from this brief study that gaze plays a significant role in the basic plot of the story. Gaze lends meaning by its mere presence or absence throughout the story. In many places, Gaze reveals the hidden meaning and enables a correct understanding of the subtler feeling and expressions. Harish's use of the Gaze to dominate Virmati from the dominant position of a man, as well as from the dominant position of a subject using Gaze as a weapon, speaks volumes about the power of Gaze. So, it is only too apt to say that Manju Kapur has extensively used Gaze in her novel *Difficult Daughters* and the novel, in its turn, serves to bring out and highlight the power of Gaze.

Work Cited

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