

Gendered Gazes: Feminist Narratives in Modern South Asian Art and Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines how modern and contemporary South Asian women artists and writers employ feminist narratives to challenge and subvert patriarchal and colonial structures of looking and representation. Moving beyond Laura Mulvey's foundational concept of the "male gaze," the analysis explores the complex layering of colonial, nationalist, religious, and caste-based gazes that constrain female subjectivity in the region. Through critical engagement with seminal artworks (by figures such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Nalini Malani, Sheela Gowda, Bani Abidi, and Tayeba Begum Lipi) and literary works (by authors including Ismat Chughtai, Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Kamila Shamsie, and Bama Faustina), the paper demonstrates how these creators deploy powerful counter-gazes. These strategies include reclaiming the body and domestic space, centering female subjectivity and desire, rewriting history and myth from feminist perspectives, confronting gendered violence, and articulating intersectional identities. The discussion highlights how these narratives dismantle objectification, assert agency, and create new visual and textual vocabularies for representing women's experiences. Finally, the paper considers the evolving nature of feminist counter-gazes in the digital age, acknowledging both new platforms for resistance and persistent challenges. Ultimately, it argues that these diverse feminist narratives constitute a transformative project, forging a plurality of gazes essential for envisioning a more equitable South Asian modernity.

Keywords

Mythological retellings, South Asian literature, visual art, postcolonial revisionism, gender subversion, Dalit aesthetics, cultural memory.

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INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE GAZE

The concept of the "gaze," particularly the "male gaze" as theorized by Laura Mulvey, provides a crucial lens through which to examine power dynamics in representation. In the context of modern South Asia, this gaze is not monolithic; it is layered with the complex legacies of colonialism, nationalism, religious patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and rapid socio-economic change. Feminist narratives emerging from the region's vibrant art and literature actively engage with, subvert, and reimagine these gendered gazes. They challenge the objectification, silencing, and prescribed roles imposed upon women, offering instead complex subjectivities, critical histories, and visions of agency. This paper explores how modern and contemporary South Asian women artists and writers deploy feminist narratives to dismantle patriarchal and colonial visual and textual regimes, creating

powerful counter-gazes that assert female presence, voice, and perspective.

Deconstructing the Colonial and Patriarchal Overlay

The modern South Asian feminist narrative is deeply entangled with the region's colonial past. As noted by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Kumari Jayawardena, colonial powers often justified their rule through a rhetoric of "saving brown women from brown men," constructing an orientalist gaze that simultaneously exoticized and pitied South Asian women, rendering them passive objects within both colonial and indigenous patriarchal discourses. Post-independence nationalist movements, while fighting colonialism, frequently relegated women to symbolic roles – Mother India, the chaste bearer of tradition – constraining them within a new, state-sanctioned patriarchal gaze that emphasized domesticity and cultural purity.

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Modern South Asian feminist art and literature emerged as a vital force contesting this double bind. They refuse the passive positions offered by both the colonial exotic and the nationalist icon. Instead, they excavate suppressed histories, articulate bodily autonomy, critique systemic violence, and celebrate female desire and resilience, fundamentally shifting the perspective from which women are seen and, crucially, from which they see themselves and their world.

Visual Counter-Gazes: Reclaiming the Body and Space in Art

South Asian women artists have pioneered radical strategies to challenge the male gaze and reclaim representation:

- **The Defiant Self-Portrait:** Moving beyond the muse or model, artists place themselves firmly as the subject and creator. **Amrita Sher-Gil's** (India/Hungary) early 20th-century self-portraits are seminal. Works like *"Self-Portrait as Tahitian"* (1934) engage with European modernism (Gauguin) but radically subvert the exotic trope. Sher-Gil stares directly, assertively, even confrontationally at the viewer, claiming her space as an artist and a complex woman, challenging both Western exoticism and conservative Indian expectations. Her declaration, "I shall be a painter or nothing," embodies this defiance. Decades later, artists like **Nalini Malani** (India) use fragmented, shadowed, or multiplied self-images in installations and video/shadow plays (*"Remembering Toba Tek Singh"*), reflecting fractured identities under patriarchal and political violence, refusing a singular, easily consumed image.
- **Reclaiming the Body:** The female body, so often a site of control and objectification, becomes a canvas for asserting agency and critiquing violence. **Sheela Gowda** (India), in works like *"And... And... And..."* (2011-2012), uses human hair (traditionally a symbol of female beauty and modesty) woven into intricate, almost architectural forms, transforming it into a material of resilience and communal labor, subtly commenting on unseen female labor and strength. **Lala Rukh** (Pakistan) employed minimalist

drawings and prints (*"Mirror Image"* series) featuring stark, abstracted female forms, often fragmented or constrained by lines, to evoke the psychological and physical restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures and state authoritarianism, using silence and absence as powerful political statements.

- **Challenging Domestic Space:** The domestic sphere, idealized as women's "natural" domain, is critically examined. **Bani Abidi** (Pakistan) uses video and photography to explore the anxieties and absurdities within middle-class homes, often highlighting the surveillance and constraints experienced by women (*"The Distance from Here"*). Her work exposes the domestic not as a sanctuary but as a complex, often oppressive, social and political microcosm. Similarly, **Tayeba Begum Lipi** (Bangladesh) creates sculptures of everyday domestic objects (cribs, beds, high heels) from razor blades (*"Love Bed"* series). This transformation renders the familiar threatening, a potent metaphor for the hidden dangers and violences – physical, emotional, psychological – that can lurk within the home and societal expectations of femininity.
- **Confronting Violence and Trauma:** Feminist art directly addresses pervasive violence – domestic, communal, state-sponsored. **Nalini Malani's** epic shadow play animations (*"Hamletmachine"* adaptations, *"Can You Hear Me?"*) weave together mythological figures and contemporary testimonies of survivors, creating a visceral, multi-sensory indictment of gendered violence and historical trauma. Her work embodies what Griselda Pollock terms the "gaze of the witness," forcing viewers to confront uncomfortable truths. **Seba Chaudhry** (Pakistan), through evocative paintings, tackles themes of honor killings and societal complicity, giving visual form to silenced suffering and resistance.

Literary Counter-Gazes: Voicing the Unspoken and Rewriting Narratives

South Asian women writers have been equally instrumental in forging feminist narratives that disrupt dominant discourses:

- **Centering Female Subjectivity:** Moving beyond being plot devices or symbols, women become complex narrators and protagonists. **Ismat Chughtai** (India), a pioneer of Urdu literature, scandalized conservative society with stories like "*Lihaaf*" (*The Quilt*), which dared to depict female sexuality and homoerotic desire, challenging the heteronormative patriarchal gaze with unflinching realism and wit. **Arundhati Roy** (India), in "*The God of Small Things*", masterfully employs a child's perspective intertwined with adult retrospection to expose the devastating impact of caste and patriarchal "Love Laws" on women's lives and choices, particularly through the tragic figure of Ammu. Roy's fragmented, sensory prose forces the reader to experience the world through the marginalized gaze of her characters.
- **Rewriting History and Myth:** Feminist literature actively reinterprets national histories and religious/cultural myths from a female perspective. **Mahasweta Devi** (India), in stories like "*Draupadi*", transforms the iconic Mahabharata figure into a tribal revolutionary who, stripped by state forces, defiantly confronts her oppressors with her nakedness, turning the gaze back onto them in an act of terrifying power. As Spivak notes in her analysis, Dopdi Mejhen (Devi's *Draupadi*) embodies the subaltern who cannot be silenced. **Kamila Shamsie** (Pakistan), in novels like "*Burnt Shadows*" and "*Home Fire*", traces the intergenerational impact of political violence and migration on women, placing female experiences at the center of global historical events often narrated through male-centric political or military lenses.
- **Articulating Desire and Bodily Autonomy:** Writing openly about female desire, sexuality, and bodily experiences remains a powerful act of defiance. **Taslima Nasrin** (Bangladesh), facing immense controversy and exile, has consistently used her writing ("*Lajja*" (*Shame*), "*My Girlhood*")

to expose religious fundamentalism's oppression of women and fiercely advocate for sexual freedom and bodily autonomy. Monica Ali's "*Brick Lane*" explores the complexities of desire, duty, and cultural negotiation within the body and mind of a Bangladeshi immigrant woman in London, challenging stereotypes of passive Muslim femininity.

- **Exploring Intersectionality:** Contemporary feminist writing increasingly highlights the intersections of gender with caste, class, religion, and sexuality. **Bama Faustina** (India), in her groundbreaking Dalit feminist autobiography "*Karukku*", exposes the brutal realities of caste oppression as experienced by Dalit women, whose bodies and labor are doubly exploited. Her narrative shatters the upper-caste, savarna gaze that often dominates Indian literature. Meena Kandasamy's poetry and novels ("*When I Hit You*") fiercely attack Brahminical patriarchy and intertwine critiques of caste with gendered violence and political resistance. Arundhati Roy's non-fiction, while not literature per se, powerfully connects feminist critique with anti-caste, anti-capitalist, and environmental struggles, demonstrating the inseparability of these struggles against intersecting structures of power.

THE EVOLVING GAZE: DIGITAL FRONTIERS AND NEW CHALLENGES

The digital age has opened new avenues for feminist counter-gazes in South Asia. Social media platforms, online publications, and digital art collectives provide spaces for women to bypass traditional gatekeepers (often male-dominated publishing houses and galleries), share experiences, mobilize, and create alternative narratives. Hashtag movements like #MeTooIndia and #LoSHA exposed widespread sexual harassment, demonstrating the power of collective voice. Digital artists use memes, animations, and online installations to reach wider audiences with feminist critiques.

However, this new frontier also brings challenges: online harassment and misogyny are rampant, digital divides persist, and state surveillance can target feminist activists. The struggle to control the narrative and define the gaze continues in cyberspace, requiring constant vigilance and innovative strategies.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A PLURALITY OF GAZES

The feminist narratives woven through modern South Asian art and literature constitute a powerful and ongoing project of dismantling oppressive gazes. By centering female subjectivity, reclaiming the body and space, voicing the unspoken, rewriting histories and myths, and articulating desire and intersectional realities, women artists and writers have fundamentally reshaped the cultural landscape. They have moved beyond simply reacting to the male or colonial gaze; they have established their own diverse, critical, and creative perspectives – a plurality of gazes.

These counter-gazes are not merely oppositional; they are generative. They offer visions of possibility, resilience, and alternative ways of being and relating. They demand recognition of women not as symbols or victims, but as complex individuals and agents within their societies and histories. As South Asia continues its complex journey through modernity and globalization, these feminist narratives in art and literature remain indispensable tools for critical reflection, social critique, and the relentless pursuit of a more just and equitable world where the power to define, represent, and see is truly shared. The gendered gaze, once a tool of control, is being relentlessly refocused, fragmented, and ultimately transformed into a kaleidoscope of resistance and reclamation. The project, as articulated by countless voices from Sher-Gil to Roy to the anonymous digital activist, is far from complete, but its transformative power is undeniable and enduring.

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