



## Blinding the Male Gaze with Gaze: Exploring the Agency of Gaze in Amrita Sher-Gil's Paintings as Statements Against Masculine Stereotypes

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### Abstract

Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings deploy ocular symbolism that serves as potent tools in dismantling and redefining prevailing masculine stereotypes of Indian society. Her distinctive approach to paintings turns her canvases into eloquent statements against patriarchal paradigms and norms regarding the role and position of women. Sher-Gil adeptly reclaims female subjectivity, proposes incisive discourses disrupting gender-centric power dynamics, delves into the inner recesses of the female psyche, and, notably, provides a poignantly realistic depiction of the emotional struggles faced by subaltern Indian women, as illustrated in her notable works such as *Hill Women* and *Self-Portrait as a Tahitian* where the motif of paired eyes functions as the conduit to convey these sentiments and statements. Her paintings like *Two Women* challenge the male gaze on nudity and celebrate female confidence and autonomy, subverting traditional gender expectations. She further challenges societal norms surrounding marriage in her painting *Bride*, where defiant gazes question prescribed roles for women. Overall, 'gaze' stands as a central motif in Sher-Gil's paintings that serves as a device to expose, question, and challenge the stereotypical male gaze. The current research aims to underscore the way Sher-Gil, through her representation of women incorporating a bold execution of the motif of gaze, provides statements against the oppressive aspects of Indian patriarchy and attempts to defy the repressive male perspective. This study, through a critical virtual culture analysis of the relevant artworks, intends to reveal the gender-based socio-cultural implications embedded in Sher-Gil's oeuvre primarily using Griselda Pollock's idea of the power dynamics, gaze, and representation proposed in *Vision and Difference* and Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze.

**Keywords:** Gaze, Patriarchy, Male Gaze, Female Subjectivity, Gender stereotypes, Amrita Sher-Gil



**Gender Equality**

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The male gaze is a tool of patriarchy that keeps the woman oppressed through implied and indirect means. The influence of such agencies restricts women's expression of the self in ways that are normalized over time. Amrita Sher-Gil attempts to make statements against such oppressive treatment of women through her paintings. In her paintings, the motif of gaze operates in a way that defies the force of the male gaze and celebrates images of feminine agency. The existing work on Sher-Gil discusses the way Sher-Gil embodies feminist sentiments in her paintings. The current study attempts to add to the discourse by proposing that the motif of gaze in the relevant paintings works as a weapon to stand against patriarchal oppression simply through the unfiltered expression of self. This study argues that an indifferent gaze in the face of repression works as a form of protest that denies the demands of the male gaze.

### **Literature Review**

Tillotson puts forward the argument that Sher-Gil incorporates formalist values in her paintings. The author argues that Sher-Gil has successfully amalgamated emotional sympathy and aesthetic formalism within the same brushstrokes. The painter's ability to manifest the poignant aspect of society is apparent in her presentation of the poor. Tillotson's paper is an elaborate attempt to show how Sher-Gil's art career is a mission to interpret the life of the insolvent communities of the Indians (Tillotson, 1997). Among these poor people, Sher-Gil created a separate space for the female community which Tillotson does not talk about in her paper.

However, in recent years, there have been some works directly related to the feminine aspect of Sher-Gil's work. Chadha, in her comparative study of the self-portraits of Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo, deals with Sher-Gil's "Self-Portrait as a Tahitian", where her interpretation is related to the emotional expression present in the painting. Chadha argues that the subject of the painting here expresses social and psychological compulsions. The author deals with different aspects of the subjects within the framework of the autobiographical interpretation (Chadha, 2016).

Sharma and Lama navigate through the integral role of women in society as present in Sher-Gil's work. Their work is related to the dynamic of a female as a subject and as an artist. In this attempt, the notions of women's role in society, their influences, and how artistic creations relate to gender have been pointed out. These discussions incorporate the works of many artists including Sher-Gil. Sharma and Lama talk about the feminist elements found in Sher-Gil's paintings and how these items challenge traditional depictions (Sharma & Lama, 2021). Nonetheless, Sher-Gil has a small presence in this

paper, which does not capture the revolting sentiment the subjects of Sher-Gil's painting contain.

Sharma et al. depict a vivid contrast between Sher-Gil and her contemporaries in Europe particularly focusing on the projection of the body. They also explain that Sher-Gil's paintings represent the socio-cultural aspect of women, which again the author contrasts against the artistic works in the European period. In this attempt, Sharma et al. deeply analyze two paintings, namely "Young Girls" and "Woman Resting on a Charpoy". In regards to the first painting, the paper points out how the painting's depiction of European women in casual conversation is a use of Western techniques. A similar technique is apparent in the later painting which, in addition, depicts rural women and, in turn, brings out the picture of their everyday life. From this analysis, Sharma et al. conclude that Sher-Gil, through her artwork, subverts the traditional representations of women by simply portraying them in a realistic manner and addressing societal issues (Sharma et al., 2016).

Similarly, Rahbani discusses how Sher-Gil's self-portraits work as instruments in constructing her gender and ethnic identity, and the function of which challenges the traditional gender norms. The feminist reading of the painting offered in this paper is particularly focused on the construction and subversion of gender identity (Rahbani, 2021). Yet again, the subversion of gender-oriented power politics is absent here as well.

Russell, while discussing the models and themes of Sher-Gil's work explores the conflicts that are present. While drawing a contrast between the women of France and India, Russell points out that Sher-Gil uses bright colors for the women of Paris while the utilization of muted hues indicates the artist's perception of the existence of Indian women as dull. Russell also discusses Sher-Gil's focus on depicting women in private or introspective moments, particularly emphasizing the indolence and loneliness of women in India's feudal estates (Russell, 2014).

Thompson focuses more on the influence of Sher-Gil on the Indian art scene. He notes that Sher-Gil, on the contrary to her contemporary artists, rejected the romantic image of women. Her realistic and disenchanting portrayal of human figures reflects the sad and uncultivated aspects of life (Thompson, 1982).

Mathur's analysis explores the ways in which Sher-Gil's painting challenges traditional notions of the female nude in art, particularly within the context of colonial and postcolonial India. The author also discusses the influence of Western art and the Tahitian motif on Sher-Gil's self-portrait, highlighting the artist's engagement with diverse cultural

and artistic influences (Mathur, 2019). However, the political implication of the nude body within the context is not discussed here as well.

In addition to subverting gender roles and gender identity, Sher-Gil also subverted sexuality as well. Zvara explains that Sher-Gil's alleged bisexuality is reflected in her paintings. The author analyzes the ways in which Sher-Gil's sexuality is portrayed and the impact it has on her art (Zvara, 2014).

Overall, the existing literature on Amrita Sher-Gil's endorsement of feminist themes encompasses the notions of how Sher-Gil subverted gender identity through the depiction of subject matters and successfully represented a poignant portrayal of the condition of females in India. According to these researches, Sher-Gil subverts traditional perceptions of gender with a bold depiction of not only the female body but also the implication of alternate sexuality as well. However, these works do not take the motif of gaze into account, which is the central point of this research. In Sher-Gil's paintings, the female gaze is a strong instrument for protest against the dominant patriarchal presence in society, which demolishes the power or influence of the male gaze. Though works on Sher-Gil's female gaze are not a new subject, it has not been studied yet in relation to the male gaze.

### **Fe/Male Gaze: Theoretical Framework**

Gaze is a central concept in this research as it is crucial to identify the dynamic of gender in relation to each other. Angela M. Moe defines the concept of gaze in the context of feminist study as "... the realization of being seen and interpreted by others" (p. 1). She further contends that "... the gaze represents the notion that something happens inside of us when we become conscious of others' observations of us, and we often alter our physical presentation" (p. 1) Simply put, gaze, in feminist study, is the stereotypical perceptions grounded in gender.

The concept of gaze within the gendered spaces was introduced by Laura Mulvey who delineated the idea of the male gaze as the perception of males of women predominantly sexual lens (Mulvey, 1975). Simply put, the male gaze perceives women as sexual objects and a source of pleasure from the masculine heterosexual perspective (Eaton, 2008). Griselda Pollock further expounds upon this concept, pointing out that the male gaze objectifies women, reducing women to passivity and as merely eroticized images (Pollock, 2013).

The notion of the female gaze emerged from the concept of the male gaze in the subsequent years. However, the female gaze diverges in function from the male gaze. Lisa French explains,

"...female gaze is not the inverse of Mulvey's male gaze; it is centered on female subjectivities" (p. 53).

She further clarified that,

[t]he key marker of the 'female gaze is the communication or expression of female subjectivity... [It is about] the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body. (p. 54)

Pollock proposes similar ideas in her book *Vision and Difference*. Here she explains female gaze offers a relational mode of seeing that acknowledges the coexistence and difference of multiple subjectivities. Pollock herself applies these ideas to analyze artworks, particularly those by women artists, which challenge phallogocentric norms of representation (Pollock, 2015).

In contrast to the male gaze, which seeks to oppress women through sexualization and objectification, the female gaze disregards and confronts such oppression through the assertion of subjective experience. Thus, the central focus of the female gaze, contrary to the male gaze, is 'subjectivity' or the expression of female subjective experience. The male gaze, as defined, tries to oppress women through sexualization and eroticization. However, the female gaze, as defined, disregards and refuses to confront the male gaze through the subjective experience.

Women's subjective experiences that are raw and unfiltered, as presented in Sher-Gil's paintings, are courageous and strong and are in stark defiance against patriarchal power structures. In the face of oppressive patriarchy, the female subjective experience that French talks about stands as a form of bold protest (Salvianny and Nurcahyani, 2020). The unclothed female body portrayed in the selected paintings can serve as a testament to feminine subjectivity (Jansen, 2016). The patriarchal male gaze dominates women by pushing the naked body into a submissive position through sexualization. On the other hand, the female subjective experience endorses the essence of self through exposing the unclothed female body which functions as a symbolic statement, reinforcing women to escape patriarchal submission. In short, the bold stance of raw feminine expression rejects the dominant force of patriarchy. Thus, the female gaze functions as an agency that stands against the domination of the oppressive.

A similar dynamic of gaze is present in Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings which can be scrutinized further through these understandings of gendered gaze(s). This is the reason the concept of male and female gaze constitutes the appropriate theoretical framework for this particular study.

### **Critical Visual Analysis: Methodology**

This paper employs critical visual analysis as its primary methodology to delineate the selected paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil and scrutinize the intricate power dynamic inherent in the relevant artworks where the gaze functions as an integral feature concerning the female subjects. This paper selected specific paintings of Sher-Gil which serve as vivid examples of how the painter utilizes the gaze motif to explore power dynamics in her work.

Critical visual analysis, in Bayne et al.'s words, is a methodology for "describing and critiquing the image" (Bayne et al. 2010, p 2). This paper meticulously examined the selected paintings, described the presence of the gaze motif, and provided an interpretation of the implications of this visual motif in relation to power dynamics.

The principal objective of this study is to attain a contextual comprehension of the gaze motif in relation to the relevant artworks. This study necessitates a close examination to expose the power dynamic embedded within artistic productions. For this purpose, critical visual analysis is the appropriate approach as this methodology "offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualizing images" (Schroeder. 2006, p 303). It functions to identify the "meaning and power [...] articulated within specific images" (Lister & Wells, 2001, p.63).

The identified power dynamics are examined within a patriarchal context, exploring how the female agency operates here in response to the oppressive domination of the masculine force. This study focuses on the nature of the gaze portrayed in the paintings; particularly emphasizing gazes that appear indifferent. Indifference in the face of oppression, as understood in this study, is considered a form of protest, implying a rejection to yield to dominant power in the face of oppression (MacLure et al., 2010).

### **Gaze as Agency in Amrita Sher-Gil's Painting: Interpreting the Gaze Motif as an Embodiment of Female Strength**

This study discusses a series of paintings by Amrita Sher-Gil. The selected artworks focus on the motif of gaze as a pivotal element within the artworks. These selected paintings have been categorized into specific groups to facilitate a coherent discussion. The correlation between the thematic content of each group of paintings and the role of gaze entails navigating the dynamic of gaze in the respective contexts.

Sher-Gil's paintings often feature groups of girls, which can be interpreted as a representation of the collective challenges faced by women in Indian cultural and societal contexts (Fernandes, 2022). Among these, two paintings with the same title, *Three Girls* stand out. The first was completed in 1930, while the second was created in 1935.

The *Three Girls* painted in 1930 depicts three female figures in a state of undress, positioned against a backdrop evocative of a dream-like atmosphere. They are portrayed with smiles adorning their faces and their hair gracefully swaying in the air. In contrast, the painting bearing the same title painted in 1935 features three girls clad in clothing, with veils covering the top of their heads. However, the expressions on the faces of the female figures in this painting appear indifferent. Simply put, the gaze in the *Three Girls* of 1930 has a pleasing expression whereas its 1935 counterpart presents an antithetical expression. Contextualizing these images (Bayne et al., 2010) can lead to the interpretation that the girls in *Three Girls (1930)* are endowed with the agency to expose their feminine subjectivity, whereas the figures in *Three Girls (1935)* are constrained from doing so. Thus, the female gaze in the latter painting is impeded by the conventions imposed predominantly by the male, owing to the influence of their male gaze (Pollock, 2015). In the former painting, the exposed bare bodies encapsulate the essence of feminine subjective experience (Jansen, 2016), which influences the expressions portrayed within the artwork.

The final painting featuring a group of girls is entitled *Bride's Toilet (1937)*. Here, a child bride is being prepared for her wedding by other girls. In essence, this painting can be considered Sher-Gil's nuanced approach to depicting Indian life and culture (Chitrabanu, 2013). However, the presence of gaze is discernible within this composition. All figures, except for a lone male figure positioned at the right edge of the painting, have their gaze cast downward. This male figure, a young boy, directs his gaze towards the central figure - 'child bride' - who, in turn, indirectly gazes back at the viewers. Notably, her, along with every other gaze in this painting, lacks discernible expressions, suggesting a state of indifference.

Child marriage is a form of patriarchal domination (Alwedinani, 2017), and maintaining such an indifferent gaze at the face of it works as a form of protest that rejects yielding to the dominant patriarchal power (Maclure et al., 2010). The male gaze attempts to perpetuate such domination by utilizing marriage as a tool. The marriage here is basically legalized eroticization and sexualization of the female body (Pollock, 2013). In essence, the indifferent gaze portrayed in this painting signifies a rejection of compliance with the intentions fostered by the male gaze.

A number of Sher-Gil's paintings feature depictions of mothers and children, often portraying the child in a state of innocence through their bare bodies. Among these artworks, the two paintings, *Mother and Child* and *Mother and Son* exhibit a noticeable similarity in the portrayal of the gaze motif. In *Mother and Child*, the gaze is directed towards the viewer through sidelong glances. The mother from *Mother and Son* is

depicted breastfeeding her child while looking directly ahead. A common feature in both paintings is the absence of any discernible emotion or maternal tenderness in the portrayal of the gaze, which suggests a pronounced sense of indifference. This indifference can be interpreted as an acceptance of forced motherhood. Patriarchy utilizes the concept of motherhood as an,

“... instrument for the subjection and control of women, forcing them towards the domestic, private, and invisible environment” (Vivas, 2019).

This acceptance, as depicted in the painting, is not accompanied by joy, but rather by silence. As previously discussed, this indifference represents a rejection of the burdens imposed by patriarchy upon women; thus, such sentiment serves as a form of protest in itself. This strength is palpable in the gaze portrayed in the artwork, reflecting the inner resilience of the women depicted.

The self-portraits by Sher-Gil endorse similar thematic aspects. Sher-Gil's self-portraits often feature the exposed body of the artist while gazing directly at the audience. The *Self-Portrait (1934)*, and *Self-Portrait (1938)* depict the central female figure making direct eye contact with the viewer, portraying a bold and assertive gaze. However, the body of the figure is not fully covered, deviating from traditional Indian cultural norms. The juxtaposition of a bold gaze with a bare body in these self-portraits serves as a statement that advocates for acceptance and fearless self-presentation. This portrayal challenges societal norms and conventions, particularly the attempt by the male gaze to control women by sexualizing the female subject. However, the subject that the male gaze attempts to sexualize is itself a form of strength here that negates the endeavor of the male gaze.

In another notable painting by Sher-Gil, *Self Portrait as a Tahitian*, the artist's depiction of the female body challenges the stereotypes and fantasies fostered by the male gaze (Nooruddin, 2021). Similar to her other works previously discussed, the gaze portrayed in this painting is devoid of discernible emotion or is indifferent. In the socio-cultural context of India, the female nude body is often associated with shame. As discussed previously, the sexualization of the female nude body, the male gaze attempts to constrain a woman's expression of self. However, by denouncing shame and maintaining indifference, as evident in the portrayal of the gaze, the naked body stands as a form of female agency against patriarchal domination. It is noteworthy that unlike the previous self-portraits discussed, the figure in this self-portrait turns away from the viewer, representing a deliberate attempt to subvert the male gaze rather than conform to it. This illustrates how



the depiction of gazes in Amrita Sher-Gil's self-portraits advocate for the feminine authority over the self, which serves as a form of protest as well.

The male gaze primarily revolves around the sexualizing of the female body (Eaton, 2008, pp. 873 – 893). Sher-Gil vehemently challenges such perceptions through her nude paintings. All the female subjects in her nude pieces including the self-portraits, somewhat reject the notion of being objectified by the male gaze. The nude pieces titled *Nude Study (1931)*, *Professional Model (1933)*, and *Two Girls (1939)* feature such female naked bodies that deviate from the 'ideal' female body of male expectations. These female figures refuse to commit to male desire. By refusing to conform to male desires, these female figures embody a form of protest in and of themselves. Sher-Gil's portrayal of the nude female body in her paintings serves as a powerful statement against the objectification perpetuated by the male gaze, asserting the autonomy and agency of women over their bodies and identities.

As previously discussed, the sexualization of women's naked bodies by men serves as a mechanism that suppresses the embodiment of authentic female experience. In the context of the selected paintings, Sher-Gil, by presenting the naked female bodies in a non-sexual manner, is making a statement against the male gaze.

The *Nude Study (1931)* features a naked female figure looking away with an indifferent expression. Similar to the *Self Portrait as a Tahitian*, this act of averting the gaze functions as a means of challenging the male gaze. Furthermore, akin to the aforementioned self-portraits, the indifferent expression of the naked female body subverts the societal gender expectations imposed by men, which seeks to constrain female expression. It is also noteworthy that while the figure is nude, there are no overt indicators of sexuality present in the paintings, which is yet another departure from the male gaze.

Similarly, the central figure in *Professional Model (1933)* is depicted in a non-sexual manner despite being completely nude. Contrary to the implications of the title, the naked female figure presented here is depicted as disconnected and possesses physical attributes that diverge from those typically expected by the male gaze from a 'professional model'. Through such a presentation of the female body, Sher-Gil challenges the conventional depiction of female nudity, aiming to represent it within non-sexual contexts. By removing the naked female body from the context of sexuality, Sher-Gil endeavors to utilize the experience of the female self against the oppressive dynamics of patriarchy.

Sher-Gil's *Two Girls (1939)* further serves as a potent counterpoint to the typical male gaze. In this piece, Sher-Gil portrays two young females in a state of undress and their

bodies are in close proximity. By illustrating female intimacy, Sher-Gil challenges societal conventions and explores themes of liberation and sensuality among Indian women. Similar to the subjects in the previous paintings, the subjects' gaze is indifferent, devoid of shame or guilt that patriarchal norms traditionally expect from such female forms. Both nudity and same-sex intimacy are typically met with disapproval in Indian culture. However, by portraying both these elements through indifferent expressions and in a non-sexual manner, Sher-Gil not only defies the constraints imposed by patriarchy but also refuses to cater to the male gaze. In essence, this painting alone encapsulates the complete emancipation of the feminine experience from male domination. This sense is manifested here through the expression of indifference and intimacy of nude female figures.

Sher-Gil, through her painting, illustrates how forcefully preventing women from expressing the self, whether through clothing or motherhood, can perpetuate their oppression. She also demonstrates how embracing the expression of the feminine experience can serve as a means of resisting masculine oppression. The female body can serve as a source of agency rather than a justification for subjugation if the individual owning the female body chooses to articulate their experience of the self. This suggests that while the male gaze exerts influence as long as the female body, whether willingly or unwillingly, acquiesces to the gaze, it loses its potency when the female body rejects to yield to it. Though such defiance contains the potential to provoke violence, it renders the authority of the male gaze impotent. The motif of the gaze operates within Sher-Gil's paintings to advocate for this agency of expression of the experience of the feminine self.

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