



The Image of Woman and the Concept of Male Gaze in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

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ABSTRACT

Laura Mulvey (1941-), a British feminist theorist, is the first to introduce the concept of "male gaze" in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" critiquing that image of the objectified female in films. This theory came out of the context of the feminist movement shedding light on the problematic female portrayals claiming that women's existence can only be shown in patriarchal terms and in relation to men. Hollywood cinema produced several recurrent images of women in patriarchal societies rendering them passive and men active. In the present paper, I argue that Mulvey's theory bearing a determining impression on the interpretation of the image of women as objects-to-be-gazed-at not only applies to films but also to drama. This research investigates the presentation of female characters in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894) from this unique perspective employing Sigmund Freud's scopophilic elements. It is found that Mulvey's concept is reinforced in the play by pre-existing patterns of fascination resulted from the social formations which already moulded that patriarchal society in the Victorian era. In the play, Raina, Catherine and Louka are presented as passive, pretty faces to be gazed at, in contrast to the leading male characters- Sergius, Bluntschli and Petkoff- who are seen as active, war-like creatures reflecting a lack that determines women unequal to men in every aspect and thus endorsing dehumanization of women. In Shaw's dramatic performance under investigation, women lack men's distinguished traits and this lack, consequently, plays a significant role towards the construction of the symbolic male gaze. Gender power is found to be a controlling force not only in films but in theatre too and that is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses.

Keywords: passivity, scopophilia, lack, inequality, male gaze.



Cinema vs. Theatre

Laura Mulvey (1941-), heralding the era of feminist-perspectival film theory and criticism, introduced the concept of “male gaze” in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). The word "gaze" reflects how we look at visual representations in media. As Mulvey declares, the celluloid films offer several possible pleasures to the viewer; the chief one being the pleasure from scopophilia (p. 833). Purposefully, the camera is used to bring in specific focus and highlight certain aspects of the female body to force viewers’ attention to it, especially males, and thus achieving that visual pleasure. But male gaze is not confined to viewers’ phantasies since representation of women, as pleasurable objects, inviting the gaze is in itself an act symptomatic of the gendered societal structure signifying power hierarchy as noted by Mulvey (1975):

Pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual [...] impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (p. 837)

Drama, like all other visual media such as its present-day incarnation, the celluloid film, advertisements, soap operas, ... etc., similarly presents women as a spectacle for the viewer's enjoyment, primarily the male. Being the popular visual entertainment medium, drama invites male gaze towards women in a thematic set up, though the given thematic set up is also predetermined by male gaze. In the introductory chapter of his book, George Rodosthenous summarizes the views of some of the established theatre scholars on the nature of the postmodernist theatre:

Patrice Pavis acknowledges the voyeuristic qualities of theatre in his definition of theatre as a ‘visual art par excellence and an institutionalised space for voyeurism’ (1998: 388). Robert Leach agrees, by stating that ‘the situation licenses voyeurism: in the special circumstances of the theatre, in the privacy of the darkened auditorium, the individual may indulge in the “gaze”, which is impossible in most social situations’ (2008: 176). Furthermore, Alan Read observes that ‘theatre poaches on everyday life for its content, relationships, humour, surprise, shock, intimacy and voyeurism’ (2004: 47). Kiki Gounaridou makes a fine analogy between theatre and entertainment... As entertainment, theatre itself is inherently group voyeurism on an artistic scale. Most people go to the theatre hoping to get a glimpse into a life that is not their own’ (2011: 61-2). (pp. 8-9)

Apart from the aesthetic and therapeutic pleasure derived from the other aspects of the story enacted on stage, such as its thematic appeal and emotional sensations variously termed as catharsis by Aristotle (Poetics [384-322 BC/2017], p. 18) and rasa



experience by the Indian dramatist Bharat Muni (Nāṭyaśāstra, Chap. VI [Sanskrit version], 32, p. 3), the audiences also enjoy the pleasure derived from sheer looking at the human body. Drama, therefore, involves the same concept of scopophilia found in films as male audiences derive visual pleasure from their fascination with merely looking at women. Obliquely, some critics refer to the cultural sphere as the determining factor for this fact (see e.g., Rodosthenous 2015, Gounaridou 2011, Leach 2008, Pavis 1998, Read 1993). Likewise, Ewa Glapka (2018), for instance, establishes a close relationship between male gaze and patriarchal cultural discourses stating that:

In gender and feminist studies, the male gaze is invoked with reference to the patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies... Women's positioning to the male gaze by means of culturally available discourses is found to reveal ambiguous sites of agency and submission within its scope” (p. 87)

Kelly Oliver (2017) notes that Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay sets out that women are forced to be identified as passive objects to be looked at, while men’s to-be-looked-at-ness is compensated for by their activity in the film’s narrative (p. 451). This is equally true of drama spectators as well though the conditions of its production are different from that of films. Owing to the thematic perspective of the story, the predominant mainstream ideology and the socially established image of women, female spectators of drama are, likewise, forced to identify with passive pretty central female characters in contrast to men gazing at the pretty figure identifying themselves with the active protagonist in action.

Mulvey (1975) brought up the issue of male gaze in an attempt to critique the patterns of patriarchal social formations underlying the production of the predominantly passive image of women in films, and in the process criticizing Freudian notions of sexuality as well (p. 833). Freud (1905) calls the male's obsessive tendency to derive pleasure from looking at the female body as ‘scopophilia’ (p. 157). To Freud, this is considered as a normal human tendency, but the tendency assumes abnormal proportions as personality disorder/perversion under certain conditions, which Freud termed as ‘scopophilia’. Feminist critics, such as Laura Mulvey, find Freudian interpretations of male gaze and its underlying psychological foundations as endorsement of pre-existing patriarchal social values (e.g. Glapka 2018, Ponterotto 2016, Gallardo 2001, Sassatelli 2011, Mulvey 1975).

Scopophilia, in Freudian theory, is a by-product of ego/ego-libido development beginning in infancy which involves gradual psycho-somatic stages that, in Freudian terminology, are understood as realization of the self distinct from the other, the desire to look at others’ bodily functions, male child’s visualization of the female body as a lack of what he has, castration anxiety, repression of desires, displacement, condensation, use of defence mechanism, interference of the subconscious, formation of socially acceptable ego, and finally, the repressed desires subconsciously expressed



as scopophilia and voyeurism (summary based on Freud 1905, pp. 123-246). The basic issues the feminist critics -such as Glapka 2018, Oliver 2017, Sassatelli 2011, Amy-Chinn 2006, Lazar 2005, Baxter 200, Mulvey 1975- find with this theoretical arrangement are two: castration anxiety and the incompleteness of the other which is inadvertently female. They argue that Freud, using the alibi of anatomy, called women incomplete/unfinished body parts to be viewed against the standard of the complete/finished male body parts (see Mulvey 1975, p. 834). Thus, it is the man who is institutionalised as the possessor of the “complete body” who always gazes in curiosity at the “incomplete body” of the powerless woman and derives visual pleasure out of this gaze.

Drama, as an enactment of social behaviour, endorses the pre-existing patterns of men deriving pleasure from voyeuristic, also symbolic, gaze at women and heuristically determining social patterns for them even if it displays women challenging the established patriarchal gender hierarchy (Leach 2008, Pavis 1998, Read 1993). The controlling power of the gaze, as notes Robert Leach (2008), “has in Western societies traditionally belonged to men” (p. 177). It is so pervasive that, says Leach, “You can sell cars to men by draping languorous, scantily-clad women over their bonnets!” (p. 177). In other words, drama plays upon that socially established interpretations of differences between men and women and invites male gaze that controls the presentation of women on stage as desirable figures fulfilling male fantasies by association with the leading male figures in the darkness of theatre. It is worth mentioning here that the gaze of drama audience aligns with the leading male figure in the play whose object of admiration is the leading female in the story.

Mulvey's essay has been applied to several Hollywood movies and Disney's characters by many researchers but very little work has been done on the concept of male gaze in drama. My intention here is to highlight the aspects behind this concept in *Arms and the Man* which go behind the mere fact of female beauty that causes the gaze. My choice of this play is based on its thematic nature: a play about wars, military forces, soldiers accompanied with their female counterparts. My conviction is that scopophilic elements are influenced by other elements, besides the anatomical lack, prompting men to assert authority over women as the unequal half, not an independent entity. My purpose is not to read Shaw as an anti-feminist writer though Philip Graham (2014) notes that the post 1970s feminist and gender historians neglect Shaw to a large extent, probably because they find a strong patriarchal streak in his writings. The play will be used as reference points with examples derived from it to investigate how drama as visual presentation of literature functions as a site for male gaze that is basically controlling in nature. To Freud, women exist only in relation to what they are anatomically dispossessed of, whereas men are seen as an independent existence. The result is that male gaze becomes an expression of the social/patriarchal power culturally assumed by men over women, to which Freud accorded the sanctity of a scientific theory based on anatomical dissimilarities already perceived as decisive by patriarchal social structuration (see, for example, Ponterotto 2016, Gledhill 1988).



It is worthy to note at this juncture that the term "male gaze" is used in this paper in its both figurative as well as literal senses. In a figurative sense, readers of the play deriving pleasure by association with the dominant male protagonists controlling and determining the passive females in the story are taken to be engaged in the gaze, whereas in its literal sense, the gaze is obvious by the involvement of the male audiences looking at the actresses on stage. Many men as well as women in the audience of *Arms and the Man* would naturally self-identify with the heroes not the weaker party.

Again, scopophilia and voyeurism in theatrical performances may be more symbolic than literal in nature compared to films where the camera brings a woman's body in close focus forcing the spectators to be voyeuristic in the cinema hall since the conditions of viewing a film create a private and detached individual away from the being-watched-and-caught-watching world. Of course, in theatre too such conditions do exist, yet the possibilities of the cinematic close-up views focussed particularly on the leading women are very remote in a drama performance. Thus, to a large extent, the voyeuristic male gaze in plays is taken to be the entry of the male gazer into the private world of the female characters. For example, in *Arms and the Man*, the gazing audiences identify themselves with the male protagonists peeping into their private secrets, and thus, deriving pleasure out of this experience which is equal in force to the pleasure derived by the voyeuristic male audiences in the cinema looking at the close-up pictures of the female body.

Arms and the Man: Men vs. Women

George Bernard Shaw wrote *Arms and the Man* (1894) in the Victorian era. A keen socialist like him, who is aware of class differences that existed in Europe and the struggles that took place as a new wave of socialist ideology, must reflect such issues in his plays. *Arms and the Man* was written based on the Serbo-Bulgarian War that erupted in 1885. Several political and social themes are intermingled in this comedy accompanied with Shaw's antifeminist attitude seen through his characterization. My investigation of the male gaze is focussed on the deterministic impact of the scopophilic elements woven in the texture of the drama that allow representation of the leading male characters as active and dominant against the passive and submissive leading females. The central males like Major Petkoff, Sergius, Bluntschli, and Nicola are the powerful independent and dignified characters who work outside their houses whereas the female characters like Catherine Petkoff, Raina and Louka live dependently on their male counterparts. The contrast in their description from the very beginning is worth noting in the stage directions:

The chest of drawers is also covered by a variegated native cloth; and on it there is a pile of paper backed novels, a box of chocolate creams, and a miniature easel with a large photograph of *an extremely handsome officer, whose lofty bearing and magnetic glance can be felt even from the portrait* (Act 1, p. 4). (emphasis added)



Her reverie is interrupted by her mother, Catherine Petkoff, a woman over forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions. (Act 1, p. 4).

Obviously, gender roles are assigned from the first moments; men are associated with the world of bravery, war, and realism in comparison to women's passivity, idealism, and romance. Sergius for example, is the Bulgarian soldier responsible for leading the cavalry in the war. He, as the stage direction reads, "looks like a genuine soldierly hero" and as such he is presented as a savior figure. Being too confident in his war knowledge, Sergius believes that the world is unworthy of his talents. Similarly, Bluntschli, the Serbian soldier who hides in Raina's room, shares with Sergius his warcraft, practicality and reason. He is seen constantly throughout the play showing off his expertise in drawing up the troop movements. Likewise, Major Paul Petkoff, the family's patriarch, is a professional soldier with distinguished tactical military skills and whose main interest in the play is how to look like a hero.

In addition to the previously mentioned masculine traits, men talk about topics that are totally different from their female counterparts. Fighting courageously in the war is a recurrent topic in the play. Horses, troops, war plans are what the three men talk about. In contrast, all what matters to Raina's mother, Catherine, is her daughter's suitor. If he proves to be the hero in the battle, then he is the one that deserves Raina's hand. Catherine's silly talk becomes apparent when her husband Petkoff praises his war victory while she describes to him how she has installed an electric bell for the servants during his absence.

Raina is a copycat of her mother. Through idolizing Sergius, she believes he is her source of happiness and Catherine helps her in reinforcing this belief. Her naive character makes her switch her admiration easily from Sergius to Bluntschli with no justified reason despite being physically harmed by the latter in the first act. Though these female characters put their men first, their counterparts chide them. Petkoff, for instance, criticizes rudely his wife's improvements in the house, and Nicola, the male servant, scolds Louka by telling her that she, unlike him, does not have secrets that characterise the soul of a real servant.

Hence, I argue that it is not beauty alone, but the way Shaw presents his female characters that stimulates the male gaze as women declare openly being always unequal to men physically and intellectually. As Raina describes herself to her mother Catherine comparing her worth with that of her future husband Sergius saying: "Oh, what faithless little creatures girls are! When I buckled on Sergius' sword he looked so noble" (3:127). In more than one instance, she admits being the weaker sex and the subordinate being. That undermining of women's domestic labour is indeed an



extension of Victorian ideal and, consequently, the audience is urged to gaze at what makes women unworthy.

Obvious scopophilic gaze is noticed when it comes to that youthful and beautiful appearance of Raina, while it is Sergius' 'bearing and glance' that are put forth in contrast. Sergius flirts, subdues, and deceives both Raina and Louka treating them as objects to fulfill his physical needs. Indeed, Raina's look catches the audience from the start:

On the balcony, a young lady, intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her own youth and beauty is a part of it, is on the balcony, gazing at the snowy Balkans. She is covered by a long mantle of furs, worth, on a moderate estimate, about three times the furniture of the room" (Act I, 15).

Hence, the outer appearance of women and the way men flirt with them serve in the dramatic performance as an additional stimulus to gaze at these women in a more concentrated way than usual. On another occasion, Raina is in her nightgown and the run off soldier enters into her room, and when he reminds her of her "present undress", she is "suddenly conscious of her nightgown, instinctively shrinks, and gathers it more closely about her" (Act 1, p. 9,10). The action is enough to draw every man's gaze to her beautiful body. In the same token, Laura Mulvey (1975) comments on that kind of display in films saying that, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as an object for the characters within the screen story, and as an object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (p. 837). Raina and Louka in *Arms and the Man* perform the same role, as if they are on display, as objects for both Sergius and Bluntschli as well as the audiences.

Raina's suitor, Sergius, is a man of action, "winning the battle, charging, flashing, thundering, sweeping through the enemy line guns" (Act 1, p. 5). On the other hand, Raina is weak, trivial, only desiring that her suitor could value her more: "What will he care for my poor little worship after the acclamations of a whole army of heroes. But no matter: I am so happy – so proud" (Act 1, p. 5). The Servian soldier, Bluntschli, who forces himself into Raina's room is also described as a man of action, despite being in a pathetic state, while Raina has no courage even to hear a gunshot as she declares, "Don't be anxious about me. The moment I hear a shot, I shall blow out the candle and roll myself up in bed with my ears well covered" (Act 1, p. 7).

As a passive female, Raina, in accordance with the dominant cultural practice in England and Shaw endorsing them, worships Sergius, the heroic male figure; a representation of the male ego who the male audiences identify themselves with:

How I envied you, Sergius! You have been out in the world, on the field of battle, able to prove yourself there worthy of any woman in the world; whilst I have had to sit at home *inactive – dreaming – useless* – doing nothing that could give me the right to call myself worthy of any man. (Act II, p. 34) (emphasis added)



In a Freudian sense of the male acting in response to his alter-ego, Sergius, while responding to Raina's affections and having a full control over his object of desire, claims that she inspired him to be heroic on the battlefield: "Dearest: all my deeds have been yours. You inspired me. I have gone through the war like a knight in a tournament with his lady looking down at him!" (Act II, p. 34)

It is well obvious then that all the male characters in *Arms and the Man* are men of action, heroic, chivalrous, and courteous to women. They are the ideal representations of gentlemen of the Victorian era who women were expected to love as epitomes of perfection. In comparison, all the three female characters -Raina, Louka, and Catherine - are charming, ready to fall at the feet of their men, to be appropriated, gazed at as well as disdained. It is important to remind ourselves at this juncture that the attributes seen as 'feminine' and therefore 'desirable' among women that determine the male gaze and the power of the male over them are: prettiness against muscularity, toughness or man's warlike appearance; passivity, also associated with their stay-at-home nature against activity or male's outside venture; and beautiful as well as romanticized bodies as opposed to rough-tough-looking unromantic men. The symbolic significance of the beauty of female form is the passive, silent other who can be displayed on stage to enact man's childhood fantasies, repressed desires, and obsessions. The associated point is that women's bodies, in Freudian terms bearing the wound, are, in Mulvey's (1975) words, "the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning" (p. 834). Thus, the central female characters in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, respectively, are pretty, passive, and docile- meanings that the male gaze has made for them; to bear for the pleasurable gaze of men.

However, it is not the literal sense of the image of active males that solely draws our attention here. Rather, it is the image of the dominant male figure around whom revolves the central theme, whose presence is essential to the story action, and who acts for the woman in the play. In contrast, the image of the passive woman is the one whose presence is required only with reference to the man. "In herself the woman has not the slightest importance" (Budd Boetticher, as quoted in Mulvey, 1975, p. 837). She is there to provoke the man for action and to inspire his love or fear and makes him act the way he does.

Since the passive woman in the story lacks importance, she is desired but not taken seriously by the active man as she does not pose any threat to his personal integrity as the desiring. The distinction between the desiring male and the desired female is significant at this point since the desiring always sees himself in the subject position, while the desired is always the object. The voyeuristic male gaze is centered on seeing the man desiring the comely figure of the desired woman, as for example, Bluntschli desiring Raina in her "noble attitude and the thrilling voice" (Act II, p. 54). Raina has been exacting favours for herself since her early childhood striking that pose with everybody close to her - her nurse, her parents and now her suitor, Sergius. 'The noble



attitude with the thrilling voice' makes her endearing to people. This is what her society exactly teaches her to be and Bluntschli admires her traits as part of her youth, her charm:

(*warmly, rising*). No, my dear young lady, no, no, no a thousand times. It's part of your youth—part of your charm. I'm like all the rest of them—the nurse—your parents—Sergius: I'm your infatuated admirer. (Act III, p. 54)

It is interesting to note that the inequality between the desiring and the desired explains why in some cultural contexts women cannot be the 'desiring,' i.e., actively seeking for their desire-fulfilment; women are always to be desired. Thus, activity, culturally associated with men, cannot be associated with women. Therefore, in dramas, such as *Arms and the Man*, there can only be male gaze and no female gaze. The related point here is that there cannot be audience identification with female's passivity as notes Kelly Oliver (2017), that "In this world all identity, activity, desiring, and agents are male, and all non-identity, passivity, submission, and all (objects to be) desired are female" (p. 451).

With no question, the male audience in the play will readily identify themselves with the handsome and lofty Sergius, or the rugged soldier Bluntschli, the agents of action dreaming to be like them. The female audience, on the other hand, may find themselves in a fix since Raina and Louka both signify loss of agency for being passive entities desired only for their beauty. Female spectators of such a performance stand to lose both ways: whether they self-identify with Raina/Louka or with Sergius/Bluntschli. Kelly Oliver's (2017) observations on women's double-bind in self-identification either with the active males or passive females in films and television drama draw good comparisons in theatrical drama too. Oliver terms such kind of a situation as "dramatic hegemony" that signifies loss of agency for women (p. 451). If women identify with the passive female characters, they themselves become the objects-being-gazed-at and suffer the loss of agency, while identifying with the active male characters turns them into subjects and thus participatory actors in the act of objectification of women under male gaze.

Conclusion

Though Mulvey's essay was written forty-six years ago, its implications are still found in some modern visual representations of all sorts. It can be said that drawing on psychoanalysis, Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is structured along a twofold gaze: both by the characters and the audience who look at women from the same leading males' point of view regarding them as mere objects.

Fascination with the female form for men bears a psychological relationship with the desire to control since scopophilia takes other people as objects of gaze as well as determination. Male gaze in drama, as this study shows, goes beyond merely men deriving pleasure from looking at pretty women on stage. The act of looking in itself



takes the being-looked-at as the objects of the gaze and, consequently, that male gaze becomes the privileged position of the male spectators with respect to women: how the male gaze is active, desiring, while the women gazed at are passive, desired bodies. The gaze is found to be symptomatic of the patriarchal power deciding for women the codes of behaviour with their bodies, presenting them for the viewing of men, and hegemonizing women so that they feel happy being gazed at, even becoming participatory actors bereft of any power over their lives. In *Arms and the Man*, the male gaze makes women as objects for consumption for both the characters within the play and for the spectators too.

Laura Mulvey's concept proves that male gaze represents the mainstream ideology of the given cultural context in the play. The target audience was the male viewers and therefore their needs were a priority. The male's perception of female body is highlighted as a site of scopophilic enjoyment, a curiosity to be gazed at, a being exists with a lack or bearing a "bleeding wound," as Laura Mulvey (1975) calls it (p. 834). The leading woman's conception of herself in *Arms and the Man*, in psychoanalytical terms, signifies the anatomical differences between genders used in patriarchal norms to disqualify women from being equal to men. This perceived lack constitutes the meaning of the woman in question in the play interpreted from a specific perspective that made her an object to be gazed at. Even though Mulvey's essay might seem outdated and peculiar to the period in which it was written at, and despite the fact that today there are more realistic portrayals of women than ever before, this concept is still prevalent not only in cinema but in drama as well and it needs further investigation.

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