



Subverting the Male Gaze in Popular Culture: A study of Phoebe-Waller Bridge's Fleabag

¹Author Murchana Das

Assistant Professor, Deptt. of English, Lakhimpur Girls' College

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of time has been spent on over-the-top media platforms particularly Netflix and Amazon Prime, and these online media portals have been used tremendously by the consumers. This is proportionate to the emergence of popular culture in the twenty-first century, which again goes hand in hand with the realization of female power and solidarity. Several movies and series have tried to portray a positive role for women in the visual media. The issue of depicting real-life problems of women, rather than sexualized and fetishized commodities, has been a long-standing problem in the movie and TV industries, usually male-dominated, all across the globe. In order to explain how women in films and cinemas are portrayed as figures of desire, particularly for heterosexual males, British film theorist Laura Mulvey used the term "Male Gaze". Male Gaze, according to Mulvey, pertained to almost all cinemas across the world. Women in movies are generally represented as voiceless and exist only for the heterosexual men inside and outside the screen. However the trope of the sexualized woman in cinema is being changed in the present by various movie and series creators. Phoebe-Waller Bridge's Fleabag, a British two-season series available on Amazon Prime, tries to subvert the male gaze and bring forward to the viewers the various shared experiences of women.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Voyeuristic Instincts, Scopophilia, Laura Mulvey, Spectacle.

¹ Corresponding Author : Assistant Professor, Deptt. of English, Lakhimpur Girls' College,
Email - murchanadas070296@gmail.com , Contact No. 7827484570



In the essay titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', British feminist film critic Laura Mulvey had stated that "that the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in film", however this presence of the woman "...tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (62). Women, on screen, are heavily objectified and are portrayed mostly in terms of the pleasures men may find while looking at them. Taking the gaze theory of Lacan a step further, Mulvey argues that this act of looking means demeaning the woman who is subjected to the male gaze. She merely remains as a spectacle on screen, captured by cameras, while the men in and out of the screen are the spectators, thereby imposing their authority through their gaze on the sexualized body of the woman. Throughout several traditional on-screen presentation across the globe, the body of the woman remains "stylized and fragmented by close-ups" and she remains as "the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey 65).

The traditional cinema and other cinematic productions are patriarchal, in a sense that the ideologies of men and what they like is represented by the passive victim of their gazes, that is, the silent woman on-screen. Thereby, the cinematic form and films themselves build the woman as the spectacle who is just a passive recipient of the male gaze. Therefore, there are several depictions of women in traditional cinemas which portray this patriarchal regime; several ways in which her body is sexualized through her gestures and clothing, which appeases the voyeuristic tendencies of the men in the audience and the men on-screen. Mulvey terms this tendency of men as "scopophilic instinct", borrowing its roots from Freud. Thus, there exists heavy eroticization of the



flesh to please men and their scopophilic instincts. Mulvey's breakthrough essay recognized "...the power present in cinematic art and in the politics of gender everywhere culture is present" (Manlove 103).

In the present context, it can be said without any doubt that cinema and cinematic productions are huge parts in order to understand the ideological workings in culture, thereby gaining a place in the genre of popular culture. Movies are similar to the ways ideological state apparatuses work; they reflect the ideals of the hegemonic class of society. The masculine hegemony imparted by the patriarchal society is rampant across several fields and disciplines, which are also reflected through the ways movies project the desires and fantasies of the males in society. Mulvey's essay "hypothesizes that the visual pleasure found in movies reflects patterns of visual fascination in the culture at large, a culture that is patriarchal" (Carroll 350). Traditional movies and cinematic productions are evidently patriarchal, which is being subverted by emerging artists and creators who try to project the experiences of women on the big-screen, depicted them for who and how they are.

Fleabag, created by Phoebe-Waller Bridge, is probably what Mulvey had termed as "radical" in the genre of cinematic productions. It is a British two-season series, interspersed with humor, sarcasm and personal angst of the characters. The series revolves around the titular protagonist named Fleabag (played by Phoebe-Waller Bridge), encapsulating her journey of growth as an individual. No name is given to the protagonist; an internet search will let us know that even though she is not referred with any names in the series, Bridge's character is known as Fleabag. The literal meaning of Fleabag is an animal infested with fleas. Therefore, naming the protagonist and the series itself with an informal term is quite noteworthy. As seen in the two-



season series, *Fleabag* is a manifestation of the inner workings of the protagonist and what she feels towards the other characters.

The series delves deep into the very aspects of what constitutes a woman. Going forward through a very radical approach towards female representation and womanhood in cinematic production, *Bridge* subverts from the heteronormative male gaze by portraying womanhood for what it is. In season 1, we see a very realistic portrayal of sisterhood between *Fleabag* and her elder sister, *Claire*. They banter humorously with no real animosity between them, which can be witnessed by the audience in episode 1 of the first season. They fight and yet they make amends, because they are sisters by blood and no real wedge can come between them. There is no sexualisation of any sort between the bonds that they share; their relationship is reflected as it is. It must be noted that the plot of the series mostly revolves around *Fleabag* and the women in her lives; however, in no way does *Bridge* sexualize the various relationships that the protagonist shares with the women involved in the series.

In very bold terms, *Bridge*'s rendition of the protagonist owns and accepts the fact that she is a woman who enjoys the act of sexual intercourse. Rather than putting her emotions into the relationships that she keeps having with various men, *Fleabag* remains casual about it. In a way, she uses the act of sex to forget about the pain and guilt she feels regarding the death of her best friend *Boo*. Rather than delving into what traditional cinematic productions would have done to such a nuanced female character, *Bridge* subverts the traditional binary of *Madonna/Whore*, a famous psychoanalytical theory which states that a man sees a woman either as saintly as *Madonna* or as a promiscuous woman; there is no negotiation of any sort. This traditional misogynistic idea of women being defined in the terms of what men think is



completely eradicated by Bridge's portrayal of Fleabag.

However, the way *Fleabag* completely shatters the traditional norms of cinema, thereby removing the idea of male gaze, is the protagonist's continuous conversations with the audience. Fleabag knows that she is being looked at. Traditional cinema carves the way into which the woman "is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (68). The audience is able to look into these women to curb down their voyeuristic instincts, since the camera allows them to maintain a distance from the woman who is looked upon (Mulvey 68). The woman remains a site of pleasure to the heterosexual male. Bridge is able to fall under the umbrella of "radical film makers" (Mulvey 68) because of her capability to make the protagonist break the fourth wall efficiently. Mulvey states it as such:

"The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, personal detachment." (68)

By breaking the convention of distance maintained by the camera, as seen in traditional misogynistic films, Bridge is able to break the barrier between the viewers and the protagonist. Fleabag keeps maintaining eye contact with the audience via the camera. The audience, in a way, is driven to the point of shame if they sexualize Fleabag since she knows that there are people who are looking at her.

Phoebe-Waller Bridge has shown perfectly that it falls upon women to free other women from this heteronormative male gaze. Bridge unabashedly proves that censoring the body of women means that their speech and words are being censored. Fleabag, the protagonist, proves that women are not just commodities, but with their



own personal struggles and emotions.

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