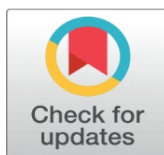
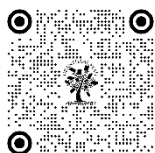


DELINEATION OF MALE GAZE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING

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ABSTRACT

Literature serves as a powerful means of human expression and has long been used to challenge societal norms. Literary theory provides readers and critics with the tools to gain deeper insights into literature through close readings and an understanding of context. Theories concerning the gaze explore how looking, seeing, and being seen are represented and the implications of these acts within texts. Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze,” which refers to how visual arts and literature portray the world and women from a masculine-heterosexual perspective. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* intricately explores the concept of the male gaze. This concept is woven into the narrative and thematic structure, as Atwood examines the dynamics of the male gaze through the protagonist's journey. The protagonist's struggle to understand her own identity amid the male gaze underscores the novel's critique of how women are objectified and defined by male perspectives. Atwood uses the male gaze to explore themes of identity, autonomy and resistance. This study aims to investigate the portrayal of the male gaze in *Surfacing*; to examine the power dynamics between male and female characters in the novel as influenced by the male gaze; to contextualize the Male Gaze within feminist theory, particularly in relation to the objectification and surveillance of female bodies; to assess how the narrative perspective in *Surfacing* either reinforces or critiques the male gaze and to explore the psychological effects of the male gaze on the protagonist and other female characters in the novel.

Keywords: Autonomy, Gender, Identity, Male gaze, Patriarchy, Resistance.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novelist, poet, literary critic and environmental activist. Her works have received critical acclaim all over the world for her feminist perspective. She has received numerous literary awards and her novels have been adapted into popular movies and television series. Atwood's second novel *Surfacing* (1972) narrates the story of an unnamed woman who goes with her boyfriend Joe and another couple David and Anna who venture into an island near Quebec to investigate the mysterious disappearance of the narrator's father. Instead of uncovering the missing man, the narrator uncovers parts of herself that have long since been repressed. In the novel Atwood has realistically illustrated the role assigned to women by patriarchal society.

Theories of gaze in literature examine how acts of looking, seeing, and being seen are portrayed, as well as how texts navigate the consequences of these acts. The notion of gaze plays a significant role in areas such as psychoanalysis, feminist theory, film studies, and art criticism. It encompasses a complex network of relationships defined by who is observing, who is being observed, and the socio-cultural context surrounding these interactions. John Berger's *Ways of*

Seeing published in 1972 prepared the ground for the development of theories of the gaze. According to him, "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (34). The book suggests that historical evidence of class power and gender inequality can be observed in paintings and illustrations, as well as in the way they are perceived. Berger's work not only offered a fresh perspective on viewing art but also shed light on the nature of the world we inhabit. It quickly gained popularity among feminists and contributed to the development of the concept of the male gaze.

"The Male gaze" is a concept developed by British Feminist and film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It is a critical framework for understanding how visual texts especially films, perpetuate gender power dynamics by depicting women as objects of male pleasure. Mulvey takes ideas from psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to further the political aims of feminism. She argues that pleasure in a world is ordered by sexual imbalance between the active male and the passive female. The male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure and women are both displayed and coded to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. In literature this theory examines how narratives and character interactions reinforce gender power dynamics through the act of looking.

In narrative perspectives when stories are told from the point of view of first-person male narrators, female characters are described in ways that emphasize their physical appearance and sexual appeal. Increasing in the representation of female authors and protagonists who have agency and complexity helps counter the male gaze. Texts that prioritize women's experiences and viewpoints provide a richer and more diverse literary landscape. For instances Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* centres on the experiences and perspectives of the female protagonists, challenging dominant narratives by providing a nuanced portrayal of their struggles and resilience. In Atwood's *Surfacing*, the concept of the male gaze is intricately woven into the narrative and thematic structure. The novel critiques how women are objectified and viewed through a male lens, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender. In Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, the male gaze is delineated through various narrative techniques and character interactions.

Objectification is one of the narrative techniques in the character description of the novels which embedded the concept of the male gaze. Female characters are frequently described with a focus on their physical attributes, attire and sensuality, reducing them to objects of male desire rather than fully realized individuals. Atwood has realistically illustrated the conventional as well as social and sexual roles assigned to women by patriarchal society. The unnamed protagonist's experiences in this novel reveal how women are often seen as objects to be scrutinized. The male characters in the novel, including her boyfriend and other men she encounters, often view and evaluate her through their own desires and expectations. She shows the position of male domination through the protagonist's friend Anna. She is subjugated physically and emotionally by her husband David. She narrates her state and reveals her conflict. "I forgot my makeup, and he'll kill me ... he wants me to look like a young chick all the time. If I don't he gets mad" (131) David symbolizes a mirror of male domination. Anna is not allowed to be in her natural self. She is supposed to groom as per the wish of her husband.

Women's narratives are often defined by their relationships with men, particularly romantic and sexual conquests, which are used to develop the male character's journey. Women are frequently sexualized with their bodies and sexuality being subject to male scrutiny and control. In the most shocking scene in the novel, one of the two male characters, David, who claims to be making a film entitled *Random Samples*, forces his wife Anna to strip naked so that he can film her, in front of the female narrator and her male friend. This sexualization is a manifestation of the male gaze, where women are seen not for their individuality but as extensions of male fantasies or judgments.

Women are pigeonholed into stereotypical roles rather than having their own agency and complexity. The protagonist's mother and the female characters in the novel are confined to traditional feminine roles such as domesticity and nurturing. The protagonist internalizes societal beauty standards, critiquing her own body and appearance. As a child the protagonist is obsessed with beauty. Her room is filled with the pictures of beauty pageants. She says: "Ladies in exotic costumes, sausage rolls of hair across their foreheads, with puffed red mouths and eyelashes like toothbrush bristles: when I was ten, I believed in glamour". (50)

The protagonist internalizes the male gaze, critiquing her own body and behaviour through a patriarchal lens. The protagonist's internal struggle highlights the impact of the male gaze. Her self-perception is influenced by how she believes others, particularly men, view her. The abortion she went through is what starts her process. She is traumatized by the procedure and feels disempowered. She describes the procedure with the following words:

After the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body. (101)

She remembers her ex-husband from the point of view of failure: "It was good at first but he changed after I married him, he married me, we committed that paper act" (46). Her former marriage haunts her in a powerful way. The wedding ring is depicted as a symbol of oppression. She says: "I wore his ring, too big for any of my fingers, around my neck on a chain, like a crucifix or a military decoration" (62). This internalization affects her identity and sense of self-worth reflecting how pervasive and damaging the male gaze can be.

Expanding the literary canon to include a wider array of voices and perspectives is essential for challenging the limitations imposed by the male gaze. In *Surfacing* Atwood tries to challenge the existing power politics, the conventional notions of patriarchy and misogyny. She portrays women resisting and subverting the male gaze, reclaiming their agency and challenging patriarchal norms. She tries to cite the fact that there is a possibility for women to refuse victimization and stand out from the male dominated society and can hope to breathe freely in a world defined by them. To achieve this hazy dream, one must rapture from the past. According to her, "Everything from history must be eliminated" (205) because history always consider the female less than male. At the end of the novel, the protagonist comes to realize that she has to resist being a victim. She states: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless" (185). The protagonist reclaims her body and sexuality, challenging the male gaze by asserting her own desires and agency.

Through these techniques, Atwood critiques the male gaze and its impact on women's lives, exploring themes of objectification, power dynamics and resistance. *Surfacing* performs a major role in building cognizance in women. It raises the consciousness that even though the male world rules them they can still accomplish their worth and strive to become who they are. They can withstand and discover the world through their own powers. Atwood confirms the notion that women are not just materials to be possessed. They are as much as human like the men. The novel makes it clear that the death of the women is the death of mankind.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is a powerful critique of the male gaze. Through *Surfacing* Atwood masterfully deconstructs the male gaze by offering a feminist counter-narrative that empowers women to reclaim their agency, bodies and stories. Through her narrative, Atwood critiques traditional gender roles and expectations. The male gaze is not only a literal way of looking but also a metaphor for the societal norms that dictate how women should behave and be perceived. The Protagonist's journey towards self-realization and reclaiming her own identity, challenges these norms. The protagonist's eventual rebellion against these constraints signifies a deeper commentary on reclaiming one's identity from the shadows of imposed male perceptions. Overall, Atwood uses the male gaze to explore themes of identity, autonomy and resistance offering a powerful critique of how women are viewed and treated in a patriarchal society.

The research thus reveals that the male gaze is a pervasive force in *Surfacing*, influencing not only the interactions between male and female characters but also shaping the protagonist's internalized perceptions of herself. The study finds that the male gaze contributes significantly to the fragmentation and suppression of the female characters' identities, particularly the protagonist, who struggles to reconcile her sense of self with the objectifying lens through which she is viewed. *Surfacing* also serves as a critique of patriarchal norms by exposing the ways in which the male gaze dehumanizes and controls women, highlighting Atwood's feminist stance against such societal structures. The novel employs specific narrative techniques, such as shifting perspectives and ambiguous imagery, to resist the dominance of

the male gaze, empowering the protagonist to reclaim her agency. The research identifies significant psychological consequences of the male gaze, including feelings of alienation, self-doubt, and a profound sense of disconnection from the body, which are central to the protagonist's journey.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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