

## RE-CASTING THE GAZE: LOCATING THE SHATTERED MIRROR IN PLATH'S 'LADY LAZARUS'

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### Abstract

*The element of gaze has become important in the modern day feminist theories as it represents both the outlook of the society towards its women folk as well as the objectification of women in the sense where the women become objects for the social constructs to be imposed upon. Thus shorn of their individuality, women become the invalid screen for the projection of socially approved roles. Thus the society allows woman to stick to conformist principles where the image on the surface of the mirror come to dominate their lives rather than the individual who endows the mirror with its utilitarian aspect. This being said, Sylvia Plath's famous poem 'Lady Lazarus' is offered an alternate reading in this paper from the perspective of the social gaze that imprisons the women folk in order to restrict their roles in society in terms of being individuals. Plath's poem thus becomes a mouthpiece of the objectified women, the one to feature in mob lynchings caused by their deviation from the socially approved arena. The prisoner in her work desires release to ultimately succumb to the necessity of a rebuttal, which when realized results in the evolution of a Medusa, comfortable in the villainy she was forced into.*

**Keywords:** Medusa, feminism, gaze, oppression, mirror, society.

Adherence to the mask of social conformity that has been talked about by feminist theorists such as Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and their likes have had numerous renditions at the hand of newer explicators of the same phenomenon, such as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar in their, *Madwoman in the Attic*. The aspect of the gaze as has been introduced by Jeremy Bentham in his idea of the panopticon has come to occupy a greater position in the genre of philosophy with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, where the presence of the all-

seeing intimidating gaze comes to occupy a significant position. The mechanics of the principle can be aptly located in what Foucault comments:

Hence the major effect of the panopticon to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be caught up in a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

However, with the recent introduction of the gaze theory in the genre of visual media, the sexual politics inherent in the act of seeing has come to the fore bringing to a position of strength the psychoanalytic domain in the understanding of the same. How the essential act of seeing an individual and noting the differences in physical form had found explication in Lacanian “mirror stage” Irene Visser further comments on this act of realization of individuality and how it effects the politics of the gendered gaze in explicating Lacan thus:

Thus, in Lacanian theory, the scopic field and ontological status are equated: "... we are beings who are looked at; the gaze circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at" (Lacan, 1977b, p. 72). The gaze, in Lacan's theory, is multiple, "issuing from all sides": it is powerful and omnipresent. Also, Lacan speaks of "the pre-existence of the gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides". Thus, the gaze is external: Lacan emphatically states that it is not "the consciousness turning back upon itself (1977b, p. 74). The external gaze, then, is elusive, "unapprehensible", a controlling influence that subjects and subjectivates: "the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object ...". Thus, the gaze is most powerful, we may again conclude, when it is internalised: Lacan sites the (internalised) gaze at the "underside of consciousness" (1977b, p. 83)." (279)

Even though the Mulvian representation of the gaze is more on the grounds of female sexuality, it should be pointed out that the metaphor of the mirror may be safely used to be an instrument of the society that is rigged in its impression of the women, whose response to the social gaze “internalized” in herself, becomes a response to her perception of herself. From this, it, therefore, follows that the all seeing predominant gaze acts as a social consciousness when it comes to the perception of women in society, where their understanding of

themselves is largely tinted by the stereotypical perceptions about women which casts them into pre-existent moulds of relativity denying them individuality.

With the contemporary social scene coming to the fore and the arrival of revisionist doctrines in various genres of literature, the understanding of the social imposition of the all accepting woman has come repeatedly to the fore comprising perfect images of womanhood to be adhered to, whereas the altering deviant becomes the monster in the prowl. Gilbert and Gubar's statement is explicit in claiming, "It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where they are warned if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters." (53). This remains the case in almost all cultures where the exemplary has to be blindly followed, and any deviance from the fanaticism results in the ostracism of the rebels. Plath conducts a foray into the location of the socially conducted mirror in the psyche of the modern woman to finally shatter the stereotype, as is mentioned correctly in *Mad Woman in the Attic*, where the author claims:

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the image on the surface of the glass, with, that is those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her inconstancy and by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they themselves have invented- to possess her more thoroughly. (Gilbert and Gubar 17)

Plath, almost in a vein of sarcastic jocularly brandishes the monster tag to be attached to the deviation that she attempts, entitling her venture 'Lady Lazarus.' She flaunts herself being the deviant from the very beginning. The image oppsite to the demure, docile femininity is cast as she becomes the madwoman in the attic in her expressions of grotesqueness, only to reach what appears to be a monstrous indignation of the patriarchal codes that cast the life of a woman in a set frame. It is interesting to note that in the corpus of the poem is intricately woven the own self of the poet who repeatedly alludes to her experience in three decades of her existence. The similarity she draws with the nine lives of a cat is significant as it might almost be considered the malleability of the feminine body on various levels. However, she alludes primary importance to the unifying experience of the woman. In her poem is found the simultaneous existence of the socially sanctioned mirror image and the ravages that the same performs on the female. Thus when she says: "A sort of walking miracle, my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade,/My right foot/A paperweight,/My face a featureless, fine/Jew linen." (Hughes 244), the reference to the "walking miracle" the bright skin as well as face similar to "fine Jew linen" might be taken into account. The delicacy of the features, the conventional fairness and the aura of being a miracle in her beauty are emphasized along with a slight sarcastic vein of the paperweight foot, which while indicating

the languorous walk helplessly indicate the restrained gait. The next few lines form an exact opposite of the image thus presented by the poet as she further asks to “peel off the napkin” suddenly introducing incongruity in otherwise free flowing prose, as the reader is seemingly baffled with the indication of peeling off the fine skin that she had compared to Jew linen, and thus the reference to napkin, followed by “Do I terrify?//The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth ?/The sour breath/Will vanish in a day.”(Hughes 244) The swift transition occurs when she recreates the image of beauty in mentioning “Soon, soon the flesh/The grave cave ate will be/At home on me//And I a smiling woman./I am only thirty.”(Hughes 244) It becomes at once clear that the age of the poet mentioned is thus not an age for her to die. This understanding evokes significant curiosity in the reader who wonders that with the absence of near death, what might make the poet wonder about the same in such gruesome detail. The obscurity in her intention gets at once clear as she testifies to the death that a woman has to undergo once every decade till she is finally ninety, the approximate age of her demise. This death that occurs multiple times in the course of her actual lifetime is symptomatic of the denial of individuality as against adherence to the accepted contraption called femininity. It is so because the characteristics that go in the construction of what comprises the feminine is attested by patriarchal motives and do not take into consideration individuality of the people involved. The gender of a woman particularly posits her in the line of sight of a socially concocted mirror that acts as a representative of the patriarchal notions of what comprises acceptability and rejection. This happens in a dual platform. First, in the collective psyche where notions of conformity, beauty and ugliness are constructed for the female by male and thus their impressions of desirability is attributed importance. Secondly, the need for acceptance leads the female to adopt the collective conscience in herself and evaluates herself with respect to the normative notions of beauty and ugliness. The collective thus has a huge role to play in the hegemony perpetrated through the medium of the gaze at the mirror.

The image of mob lynching is presented in the form of abrupt sentences making the impact of the same quite vivid while she mentions “The peanut-crunching crowd/Shoves in to see// Them unwrap me hand and foot/The big strip tease.”(Hughes 245) She here, refers to the ‘gaze’ in community level, where the female is the object of vision. The ‘spectacle’ of the woman and of femininity in general is created by the crowd. However, it is important to mention that since the crowd does not have a singular discernible face it forges a collective force, both social and cultural against an individual making her feel helpless, an object of mockery, and a source of amusement at the cost of her own integrity. The full cognition of this scene eludes our understanding till the time that she mentions the charges pressed against the multiple deaths she suffers. It is interesting to note here, that she might as well have been alluding to her three failed suicide attempts that had elicited jubilant responses from her relatives and friends as she voices them aptly “It's the theatrical//Comeback in broad day/To the same place, the same face, the same brute/Amused shout:/'A miracle!'" (Hughes 245-

246) She suitably mentions that this attempt of self obliteration is a crime where charges are brought forward for the offender of the self. She aptly mentions “For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge/ For the hearing of my heart/It really goes.//And there is a charge, a very large charge/For a word or a touch/Or a bit of blood” (Hughes 246)

On the other hand irrespective of the reference to the autobiographical elements that might be present in the text, it might be considered an act of alternate simulation where the intention of alteration of the self, through the obliteration of the socially constructed individual might be the motive of the rebel. Thus she mentions the hypocrisy of the society which pretends as if “I am your opus,/I am your valuable,/The pure gold baby//That melts to a shriek./I turn and burn./Do not think I underestimate your great concern.”(Hughes 246). However, in actuality, she is to the society the role that the society inflicts upon her she is only “A cake of soap, /A wedding ring,/A gold filling.” (Hughes 246) Thus while she understands the show of concern in the law codes of the society that allows for the helpless suicide victim to be deemed the offender, she while burning in the auguries of the same society understands the fakeness involved in their perception of the woman. For to them, the woman is the object of sight, entertainment for peanut munching multitudes.

However, what the society forgets in the image of hers that is cast rampantly with the hope of the women believing it to be her essence is the fact that at the end of the day, she is but flesh and bone and blood, the elements that constitute a human and not an image on the mirror. She almost ridicules their fallacy in understanding the nature of woman and in silent desperation seeks to escape from the assigned roles so that the result in “ash” representative of nothingness might finally embody that which she is considered in actuality. However, in the corpus of her narrative is found the representation of a forced life where the metaphorical death of the individual self is roused from nihilation multiple times and forcefully so “They had to call and call/And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.” (Huges 245), to be rendered into a life of self denial which she had intended to escape in the first place. Thus the joy of the relatives becomes the ghastly mirth of the incarcerator who had captivated a fleeing prisoner, a phenomenon enunciated well by Gupta and Sharma, in saying:

Generally in many of her poems, she feels that her role as a woman is inflicted on her by society as general she does indeed seem to see it as a conspiracy, and the only means to escape from it is unconsciousness or death. The doctors and the enemy both referred to as Herr, which is German word for ‘Mister’. In *Lady Lazarus*, the woman is made to feel like an object, and kept passive: “So, so. Herr Doktor/ So, Herr Enemy” (65-66).” (Gupta, Sharma146)



The escape has been foiled three times for the poet. However, she maintains that in her is the representation of all the women captives of the socially conditioned mirror: "These are my hands/My knees. /I may be skin and bone, //Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman." (Hughes 245) Thus, gender identity becomes so prominent that other categories such as those of clan are obliterated in the aspect of the gaze. A woman is pitched against the multitudes of 'gaze' directed at her in terms of social expectations and amusements at its failure. The vulnerability that Plath thus feels is of being trapped into the body of a highly restricted gender becomes the centre of conflict in her as a writer, the crisis which Lant expresses thus:

Clearly, Plath's view of herself as a writer was complicated by the fact that she condemned the weaknesses she and her culture associated with femaleness. Her desire to forge an identity as an artist was shaped-and in some ways distorted-by this conflict. What seemed most difficult for her to overcome was her very real awareness of the female body as vulnerable" (633)

The obliteration that Plath talks about only exists in the mind of the deranged oppressed, who seeks escape, the fact well noted by Axelrod in claiming: "By unpeeling an outer self of "dead hands, dead stringencies," she sought to unveil and give voice to an inner "queen" or "White Godiva," a spirit of "rebellious expressiveness". (286) Plath successfully portrays how the gaze works at levels both collective as well individual, carefully charting the manner in which the collective infringes into the individual biological domain to carry on the hegemonic objectification of women. Her attitude is thus not one of patient redressal but a violent dismantling. She identifies the manner of propagation of hegemony in the field of vision whereby women becoming the objects of the male gaze, so naturalize the phenomenon that they themselves become a part of the collective. But in the identification that Plath makes, she is aware of her becoming the non-conformist in her attitude and as if suspecting the vampirization that society plans on branding her, she inflicts it upon herself in declaring that she is the monster who eats men. Thus, the nine lives mentioned at the beginning of the poem takes up an altogether different dimension, when at the end it appears to represent the repeated drudgery of unemancipated existence. Plath alters this significance, converts the lives to chances of a lethal reincarnation as a mutant, resistant to all the malevolent forces of the society which keeps the woman captive in the stereotypical images projected on the mirror called societal conscience. Thus the last line of the poem becomes vocal of this very phenomenon, with the rise of an indestructible Medusa, the mirror of the carefully crafted glass is shattered so that from it can emerge the one who escaped immolation, to wear fire as an adornment, thus Plath ends with a dystopic harbinger: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air." (Hughes 247)

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