



FRAGMENTED BODIES VS EMBODIED SUBJECTS: RECONFIGURING THE GAZE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SCREEN NARRATIVES

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of gaze politics in contemporary Indian screen narratives through a comparative analysis of *Ayali* (Tamil web series), *Mahanati* (Telugu), *Kumbalangi Nights* (Malayalam), and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Hindi). Drawing upon feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, and extending it through intersectional and postcolonial frameworks, the study interrogates how female bodies are represented, visualized, and experienced across different cinematic cultures. While Hindi cinema often negotiates between objectification and agency, regional cinemas increasingly foreground embodied subjectivity and ethical spectatorship. Through detailed scene-level analysis, this paper argues that Indian visual culture is shifting from fragmented representations of women toward experiential and empathetic modes of seeing, thereby redefining the politics of spectatorship.

Keywords: Male gaze, Feminist Film Theory, Spectatorship, Gender Performativity, Visual Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The concept of the gaze has been foundational to film theory, particularly in analyzing how visual media constructs gendered power relations. Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" argues that classical cinema is structured around a masculine viewing apparatus that objectifies women, reducing them to spectacles for male pleasure (Mulvey 11). This framework, rooted in psychoanalytic theory, highlights how cinematic techniques such as close-ups, fragmentation, and narrative positioning reinforce patriarchal ideology.

However, subsequent scholars have challenged and expanded Mulvey's framework. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity complicates the notion of fixed gender identity by suggesting that gender is constituted through repeated social performances (Butler 25). Similarly, Bell Hooks introduces the concept of the Oppositional gaze, arguing that marginalized spectators actively resist dominant visual regimes (Hooks 116). Laura Marks further extends gaze theory through the idea of haptic visuality, emphasizing embodied and sensory engagement rather than detached visual consumption (Marks 162).

In the Indian context, cinema has historically oscillated between spectacle and realism, often reproducing patriarchal structures while occasionally subverting them. Bollywood, as a dominant industry, has frequently been critiqued for its reliance on the male gaze, particularly in song sequences and romantic narratives. In contrast, regional cinemas especially Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam have increasingly explored alternative visual languages that foreground female subjectivity and lived experience. This paper investigates whether contemporary Indian screen narratives signal a shift from objectification to embodiment. By analyzing *Ayali*, *Mahanati*, *Kumbalangi Nights*, and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, the study explores how different industries negotiate the politics of the gaze and reconfigure spectatorship.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze remains central to this study, particularly her argument that women are positioned as "to-be-looked-at-ness" within cinematic structures (Mulvey 19). This notion of visual pleasure is tied to scopophilia, where the act of looking becomes a source of control and dominance.

However, this paper moves beyond Mulvey by incorporating Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that gender is not an inherent identity but a repeated cultural performance (Butler 33). This allows for an analysis of how female characters negotiate and resist imposed identities.

Bell Hooks' Oppositional gaze is particularly relevant in examining how marginalized characters and by extension, audiences challenge dominant visual narratives (Hooks 122). This framework is crucial in analyzing regional cinema, where alternative modes of representation emerge.

Finally, Marks' concept of haptic visuality shifts the focus from visual mastery to sensory engagement, enabling a more nuanced understanding of films that emphasize texture, intimacy, and embodiment (Marks 170). Together, these framework allow for a multi-layered analysis of gaze as not merely a visual mechanism but a site of ideological contestation.

III. METHODOLOGY:

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, focusing on:

- Cinematography (framing, camera movement, shot composition)
- Narrative structure and character agency
- Representation of the female body
- Spectator positioning
- Spatial dynamics (domestic vs public spaces)

Close reading of key scenes enables a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed visually and narratively.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

4.1 Ayali: Surveillance, Ritual Control, and Embodied Resistance:

The Tamil web series *Ayali* offers one of the most powerful critiques of the gaze as social surveillance rather than mere visual pleasure. Unlike classical cinematic structures described by Laura Mulvey, the gaze here is embedded in community enforcement, myth, and ritual restriction.

Scene 1: Menstrual Taboo and Spatial Exclusion:

A recurring motif in *Ayali* is the prohibition placed on girls once they reach puberty. In a key scene, a young girl is prevented from entering school after attaining puberty. The camera does not fragment her body into eroticized parts, instead, it captures her in a long, static frame, emphasizing her social immobility.

The gaze here functions as disciplinary power, aligning with Michel Foucault's idea of surveillance. The female body is not objectified but controlled through invisibility and restriction.

Scene 2: The Run Toward Education:

In a crucial resistance moment, the protagonist runs toward school defying patriarchal rules. The camera follows her in a continuous tracking shot, avoiding cuts or fragmentation. This uninterrupted visual flow constructs the body as whole and agentic, countering Mulvey's fragmented gaze (Mulvey 11). The spectator is positioned alongside her, producing what Bell Hooks calls an Oppositional gaze (Hooks130).

Scene 3: Collective Female Solidarity:

In later episodes, women begin to question rituals collectively. The *mise-en-scène* places them within shared domestic spaces, framed equally rather than hierarchically. The gaze shifts from individual surveillance to collective resistance, transforming spectatorship into a critical engagement with patriarchy.

4.2 Mahanati: Stardom, Fragmentation, and Emotional Collapse:

Mahanati presents a dual gaze structure oscillating between spectacle and interiority. The film initially aligns with Mulvey's notion of visual pleasure but gradually subverts it.

Scene 1: Savitri's First Screen Appearance:

In her early film career sequences, Savitri is introduced through soft lighting, elaborate costumes, and stylized close-ups. These shots emphasize her beauty and screen presence, aligning with the "to-be-looked-at-ness" described by Mulvey (Mulvey19). The camera constructs her as a cinematic object within the film industry itself.

Scene 2: Performance vs Reality:

A meta-cinematic moment shows Savitri performing joy on-screen while experiencing distress off-screen. The contrast is created through cross-cutting between performance and private life. This juxtaposition exposes the constructed nature of spectacle, resonating with Judith Butler's idea of performativity (Butler 33). Gender and stardom are shown as roles rather than identities.

Scene 3: Alcoholism and Isolation:

One of the most striking scenes depicts Savitri alone, intoxicated, in a dimly lit room. The camera remains still, focusing on her face without glamorization. This is a shift towards haptic visuality, where the spectator feels her emotional state rather than consuming her image (Marks 175). The gaze becomes empathetic rather than voyeuristic.

Scene 4: Final Decline:

In the hospital sequences, Savitri's body is shown in its most vulnerable state weak, silent, and de-glamorized. The absence of spectacle dismantles the earlier cinematic gaze, revealing the human cost of visual commodification.

4.3 Kumbalangi Nights: Domestic Space and Ethical Seeing:

Kumbalangi Nights redefines gaze politics through minimalism and realism, rejecting both spectacle and voyeurism.

Scene 1: Kitchen Conversations:

A quiet scene between female characters in the kitchen uses long takes and natural lighting. There are no dramatic close-ups or cuts. The camera does not dominate the scene; instead, it coexists with the characters, aligning with Laura Marks's haptic visuality (Marks 181). The spectator experiences intimacy without intrusion.

Scene 2: Romantic Interaction:

Unlike Bollywood romance, the love story unfolds through casual interactions rather than choreographed spectacle. The absence of song-based objectification removes the fragmented gaze structure. The female character is not displayed but engaged with as a subject.

Scene 3: Domestic Violence Subtext:

The antagonist's oppressive masculinity contrasts sharply with the film's otherwise gentle gaze. His gaze is controlling, invasive, and authoritarian. This contrast highlights how gaze itself can signify violence vs care. The film critiques patriarchal masculinity through visual tone rather than explicit exposition.

Scene 4: Final Family Unity:

In the concluding sequences, characters share space in a communal setting. The framing is balanced and inclusive, emphasizing relational harmony. The gaze here becomes ethical and restorative, moving beyond domination.

4.4 Lipstick Under My Burkha: Desire, Secrecy, and Fragmented Visibility:

This film is crucial because it both challenges and reproduces the male gaze simultaneously.

Scene 1: Secret Fantasies:

The elderly protagonist private fantasies are depicted through voice over narration and stylized imagery. While the narrative gives access to female desire, the visuals often remain fragmented, aligning partially with Mulvey's scopophilia (Mulvey 17). Desire is visible but still mediated through secrecy.

Scene 2: Surveillance and Control:

Several scenes depict women being watched by family members, society, or lovers. The gaze function's as social policing, like Foucauldian surveillance. Women internalize this gaze, regulating their own behavior.

Scene 3: Intimate Relationships:

Moments of intimacy are framed through partial visibility hands, faces, gestures rather than full bodily presence. This creates a tension between expression and concealment, reinforcing the hybrid gaze structures.

Scene 4: Final Assertion

In the closing moments, the women assert their desires despite societal constraints. However, the visual language remains cautious and mediated. The film does not fully escape the male gaze but negotiates within it, producing a liminal space of resistance.

V. Expanded Comparative Insight:

Across these texts, three major transformations emerge:

1. From Surveillance to Self-Representation:

- Ayali → gaze as control → resistance
- Lipstick → gaze as negotiation

2. From Spectacle to Emotional Interior:

- Mahanati → spectacle collapses into vulnerability

3. From Observation to Ethical Engagement:

- Kumbalangi Nights → gaze becomes empathetic

VI. Key Theoretical Contribution:

This analysis suggests that Indian screen narratives are not merely rejecting the male gaze but reconfiguring it into multiple forms:

- Oppositional Gaze → resistance (Ayali)
- Transitional Gaze → negotiation (Mahanati)
- Ethical Gaze → empathy (Kumbalangi Nights)
- Hybrid Gaze → contradiction (Lipstick Under My Burkha)

VII. Final Analytical Statement:

Contemporary Indian cinema marks a shift: From the fragmentation of the female body as spectacle to the articulation of the female body as lived, political, and experiential subject.

Comparative Analysis:

Table 7.1 Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Ayali	Mahanati	Kumbalangi Nights	Lipstick Under My Burkha
Body Representation	Controlled Resistant	Spectacle Subjective	Embodied	Fragmented Expressive
Camera	Experiential	Stylized Introspective	Observational	Voyeuristic Subjective
Agency	Strong	Gradual	Balanced	Central constrained

Spectatorship	Critical	Emotional	Empathetic	Negotiated
Gaze	Oppositional	Transitional	Ethical	Hybrid

Table 7.1 shows the analysis between the selected movies and how they explored gaze in different aspects.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

This study demonstrates that contemporary Indian screen narratives are actively reconfiguring the politics of the gaze. While elements of the male gaze persist, particularly in mainstream Hindi cinema, regional narratives are increasingly foregrounding embodied subjectivity and ethical spectatorship. The shift from fragmented bodies to embodied subjects signifies a broader transformation in visual culture from consumption to experience. By integrating feminist, intersectional, and sensory frameworks, this paper contributes to the expansion of gaze theory within a post-colonial context. Ultimately, Indian cinema is not merely replicating Western theoretical models but generating new paradigms of visuality that challenge, negotiate, and redefine the act of looking.

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