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The Politics of Gaze: Interpreting Objectification in Animal Studies

There exists perpetually a huge gap in perceiving the Other which becomes problematic when the power equation between the subject and the Other is weighing towards the subject while the subject occupies the dominant or privileged position. There is an irrational fear on the part of the dominant group even while they exert power that results from the limited knowledge of the dominated Other. Such is the relationship between humans and non-humans where humans exercise their power over the non-human animals and humans are the gazer while animals become the gazed. Everything about animals is authoritatively laid down by humans in the anthropocentric world. The way the dominant group looks at the other is completely prejudiced by their limited understanding of the Other.

The concept of Gaze is elaborated by Sartre in phenomenological terms. Gaze is mutually directed towards each other: the gazer as well as the gazed, where the roles are simultaneously reversed. Gaze is perceived by the subject as the look which the Other exercises upon the subject during which the subject alienates the other while the subject gets othered along with the rest of the universe and feels ashamed. Sartre states: "The Other is the one who excludes me by being himself, the one whom I exclude by being myself" (236). The subject is assured of himself in the presence of an inanimate object but is disturbed when he feels the gaze of another person or being, or, in other words, the subject becomes conscious of himself when he encounters the gaze of the Other. But, at that moment of self-consciousness, he is being othered. Sartre observes: "I recognise that I am as the other sees me." (222) Sartre's Other is "a thinking substance of the same essence as I am, a substance which will not disappear into primary and secondary qualities, and whose essential structure I find in myself." (223) Humans and non-human animals share an intimate relationship in which non-human animals are the other.

Lacan elaborated upon the concept of gaze and gaze becomes the look in which one encounters a state of self-awareness of being observed by the unknown. When a person is being gazed at, he tends to regulate himself and conduct so as to meet the approval of the

observer. The gaze may be seen or unseen which induces a sense of anxiety in the gazer during which his gaze becomes “self-directed.... It creates a self awareness which ‘disturbs him and reduces him to a feeling of shame’” (Krips 93).

The concept of gaze has been further elaborated in critical theory where gaze is surveillance on the part of the gazer towards the gazed. In this concept theorized by Foucault, the activities of the gazed are defined, monitored and controlled by the gazer in their own terms. There is power in the gaze which controls the other. Goodale observes: “Foucault’s concept of the gaze is particularly important because it was through the gaze that the new categories of disorder—the lunatic, the pervert, the sick, the abnormal and the criminal—came into being.” (29)

In film theory, it can be seen that how the gaze of the dominant group has manifested in films where male gaze interprets women as an object of pleasure. Laura Mulvey who interprets male gaze explains: “According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like....The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power.” (20)

The idea of animal gaze was brought in by Derrida in his work, “The Animal That therefore I Am” which narrates how a cat gazes at the human and the human becomes aware of his nakedness and feels ashamed. This paper seeks to highlight the problematic aspect of gaze exercised by humans on the non-human animal and initiate a discussion on the subjectivity of the animal which is rarely represented. The non-human animals are perceived to exist for the sake of humans and are considered senseless and emotionless with no purpose of their own in anthropocentric world.

The object is gazed upon and understood to be different from the subject while intrinsic and extrinsic features of the object are ignored in such a way as to justify their treatment at the hands of the subject. The gaze authorizes the human to become the subject and non-human animals become the object. The acceptance of the Other becomes difficult which leads to hostility and power is exercised over the object. A binary of human/nonhuman is formed in Western discourse similar to many others like white/black and male/female. These binaries are hierarchical in nature where one is viewed to be superior to the other on account of differences rather than similarities.

There are many instances where ego-centric narratives formed a discourse in which the dissimilarities of the dominated from the dominant group are hailed as an excuse to oppress and the absence of certain feature or aspect is looked upon as marks of inferiority. The lack of reason in animals is pointed out as a reason among many others for not treating them with rights. Such 'lack' has always been a part of the narratives of dominant groups in which 'the lack' becomes one of the reasons for the subjugation of the oppressed.

Lack of a penis in a patriarchal narrative was a real 'lack' and the lacking female is inferior in all respects in such a discourse. Laura Mulvey observes: "...in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure ...connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis..." (21) Women were observed and interpreted from a patriarchal perspective in fiction and non-fiction. Such literature was later re-interpreted from feminist perspective. For example, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* is a critical work which sought to re-interpret the patriarchal construction in *Jane Eyre*.

The African natives who have been oppressed and exploited for being different from the white colonizers form another group among humans who had to face severe ill treatment at the hands of the group who exercised power. Various binaries like civilized/uncivilized, cultured/barbaric, intelligent/less intelligent are created as the dominant group gazed at the group of people who were different from themselves in many respects like colour, body features, culture, language, and behavior and perceived them inferior instead of merely being dissimilar while ignoring the similarities. *The Telegraph* reports that a documentary series was aired on Channel 4 which features scientists who claim that race and intelligence are interlinked and scientific basis is brought to argue that African natives are less intelligent than Europeans. This kind of perception even in the 21st century and the eagerness to provide a scientific explanation to the blatant racism suggest the intolerance towards the Other and the tendency to negate its voluntary existence. In the context of race, bell hooks states: "There is power in looking....The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze". (115)

Such solipsism resulted in further instances of exploitation and heinous cruelty meted out to the gazed. Nazism employed scientific racism to prove their master race theory and their superiority claim led to a horrific ethnic cleansing. The holocaust was a result of the

irrational fear of a religious group and glorifying one's own race. Similarly, Dalits have been enduring an existence below the dignity of being human. Another instance is imperialism in which colonizers perceived the colonized as people who needed to be civilized. All these notions emerge from the assumption that one is perceived inferior if one does not possess the qualities of the subject.

Humans are one among many species in the animal kingdom. The other species are different from humans and between each other but similar in several physiological and anatomical aspects. Berger writes: "Animals are born, are sentient, and are mortal. In these things, they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy – less in their deep anatomy – in their habits, in their time, in their physical capacities, they differ from man. They are both like and unlike." (4)

Gaze perceives the unknown being in terms of one's own experience and understanding which is limited. The unknown is the Other which the subject tries to bind in a framework of its knowledge. In the process of knowing or perceiving the Other, the inherent qualities of the Other get negated and the resultant perception is devoid of what it really is. This happens in every subject-object relationship where the dominant subject essentialises the submissive/oppressed other and the case of non-human animals is not different. This in Malamud's opinion "confounds an ecologically ethical ideology, in which all members of an ecosystem are interdependent and no single species is inherently privileged above any other." (7)

John Berger explains how the gaze is to be understood in the case of human/nonhuman relationship:

The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal – even if domesticated can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension... Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secret of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man. (5)

In this case, humans exercise the power and the perception serves as a means to control the non-human animals. The subject always fears the unknown Other and tries to dominate it

through the exertion of power. The oppressed group here is non human animals who can never have their voices heard against the injustices meted out to them. They lack means of communicating to humans while they communicate among themselves in their own manner.

Animals are viewed as machines intended to supply products and services, and not as beings with a subjective existence. Descartes' Cartesianism rejected even the possibility of a subjective existence to animals. Sartre poses this question: "If animals are machines, why shouldn't the man whom I see pass in the street be one? What I apprehend on this face is nothing but the effect of certain muscular contractions, and they in turn are only the effect of a nervous impulse of which I know the course. Why not reduce the ensemble of these reactions to simple or conditioned reflexes?" (224)

Non-human animals are sentient beings with the capacity to feel pain, emotion, and suffering. They are similar in many respects with each other though different in some other aspects. Berger writes: "With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species." (6)

Animals are capable of having conscious experience, exercising logic and feeling emotions just like humans who are animals too with common physiological and anatomical aspects. But, it is problematic to define species-specific aspects by comparing with that of humans. For example, the faculty of language is not present in other animals, but each species have their own means of communication. Sartre observes: "...the appearance of the Other in my experience is manifested by the presence of organized forms such as gestures and expression, acts and conducts. These organized forms refer to an organizing unity which on principle is located outside of our experience". (226) Such foreign experiences would be difficult to understand and Andrews argues that while it is difficult to interpret human behaviours across cultures, it would be even more difficult to interpret what it would be like to have a mind-like system in non-human animals. (17)

Experiments have been carried out on the existence of minds or mind-like system in non-human animals. The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness by an international group of neuroscientists gathered at Cambridge University to assess conscious experience in human and non-human animals declare: "...the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman

animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.”

There is no means of knowing the meaning of the behavior of non-human animals and what they perceive of humans except by interpreting it in anthropocentric narratives. Sartre argues that the real problem lies in “the connection of transcendental subjects who are beyond experience” (234). The authoritarian gaze which humans exercise on non-human animals betray their fear of the unknown and the desire to suppress the Other. Dominant interpretations are given authenticity and are treated as truths which lead to their blatant abuse.

Anthropomorphic readings often prove problematic when every trait of animals is identified with that of humans. The gaze towards animals through which they are observed interpret their behaviours with an authoritarian attitude. There are similarities in the natural behaviour of human and non-human animals but it does not extend to behaviours which are culturally acquired. For instance, there are some make-shift stories connected to elephants who are forever in bondage in temples. It is said that when the elephants are raising their trunks, they are supposed to be bowing towards the deity. Such anthropomorphic narratives make the elephants a willing participator while the reality is far from it. The elephants, in addition to being wild animals, are snatched off from their natural habitat, lose the means to exhibit their natural characteristics, and also, on top of it, are severely ill-treated. They are made to stand still for hours, in hot conditions while they lack sweat glands that can relieve them from heat. They are always tightly wound by chains which cause wounds that never heal. Moreover, they are forced to work in various places to haul heavy items.

The animals performing in the zoo or in other entertainment zones are likewise perceived to be enjoying their role in the acts. Malamud writes about these acts and how the gaze of the human works in them:

...there are dancing bears, piano-playing chickens, rabbits being pulled out of hats, chimps in human clothing on parade, ‘stupid pet tricks,’ elephants with paintbrushes taped to their trunks in ecotourist camps, and so forth. That is: animals doing silly things for the audience’s amusement—things they don’t usually do, and have no reason to do. Perhaps viewers are so engrossed in these vaudevillean farces because they are ashamed to look animals in the eye, ashamed to confront what we have done to them. We don’t like to think much

about wild, natural animals, because we have just about extinguished wildness and nature. We prefer our animals framed, domesticated, dressed up for our spectacles.”(4)

Malamud further observes that some animals are perceived as cute just like cuteness is feminised and one would feel bored if the animals at the zoo do not move or when they are sleeping thus failing to entertain humans. He states: “This kind of objectification is dangerous, not only because it is outmoded from a scientific and social perspective, but more fundamentally because it is reductionist. It circumscribes animals’ existence in relation to the human gaze, appraising them only in terms of their usefulness or threat (to us).” (7)

Representation of non-human animals in wild life documentaries and Hollywood films are also results of limited perceptions of humans. Malamud calls the gaze directed at the animals in visual culture as the human gaze. (6) In those films, animals are objectified as spectacles which would make them an object of interest to humans. In addition to this, their activities are often anthropomorphised. The Guardian reports the filming of a Disney movie in which the narrator comments on scenes where chimps are named and their activities are followed by a camera in their natural setting: “‘Isha couldn't be happier with her new baby boy,’ Allen tells us. ‘Like most kids, Oscar hates bedtime.’” In other instances, their predatory nature is glorified and their fiery encounters are captured in the camera.

Animals are subjects who can exercise their gaze upon the Other though they have been objectified so thoroughly in the symbolic level that it is no longer relevant. Non-human animals are being comprehended in a limited manner excluding their real selves even though complete understanding is impossible. Berger argues: “...animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them.” (16)

The question of consciousness in animals can never be encompassed fully as understanding them is impossible with the current faculty of humans and the inability of non-human animals to communicate with humans. The hierarchy between the species is also a perception of humans with their look intended to absolve the threat from other animals as a sentient being in which humans can no longer justify the acts of violence they commit. Thus, their gaze becomes a tool of oppression.

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