

## Her Story, Their Gaze: The Intersection of *the Male Gaze* and Female Subjectivity in Autobiographical Narratives

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**Dr Neha Sharma**

Associate Professor

Department of English, SMM college, Palwal

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### Abstract

This paper explores how female autobiographers and memoirists navigate *the male gaze* in their self-representation, balancing societal expectations with personal truth. It examines how women writers assert their agency while facing external scrutiny from a patriarchal society. Using feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism, this study highlights the tension between internalized gender norms and the desire for authentic self-expression. By analyzing autobiographical works by authors such as Virginia Woolf, Maya Angelou, and Sylvia Plath, the research reveals how women resist, negotiate, or internalize *the male gaze* in their narratives. The study also explores how self-surveillance, influenced by Foucault's concept of panopticism, affects female subjectivity in autobiographical writing. Additionally, it discusses how contemporary women writers reclaim their narrative authority through alternative storytelling techniques, rewriting history, and challenging dominant literary traditions.

**Keywords:** Male gaze, female subjectivity, autobiography, self-representation, feminist theory, self-surveillance, panopticism, literary criticism, narrative agency, patriarchal norms.

### Introduction

Writing about one's life is a really impactful way for people to build and share who they are. However, for women, this way of representing themselves is often shaped by outside influences, especially *the male gaze*, which determines how female perspectives are viewed and told. According to Kaplan (2012), the combination of the male and imperial gaze forms a framework that makes women's stories not only personal but also influenced by social and cultural factors. This situation brings up important questions about personal choice, how we express ourselves, and how we deal with what society expects from us in our life stories. Feminist theorists have examined the intricate aspects of female identity in autobiographical writing for a long time. Benstock (1991) points out that autobiography exists at the intersection of

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sharing oneself and how others see us, highlighting the conflicts between who we are and the roles society expects us to play. In a similar way, Hesford (2000) points out that autobiographical narratives are influenced by voyeuristic tendencies, suggesting that self-writing turns into a performance shaped by the observation of others. This concept connects with Mulvey's (1975) key idea of *the male gaze*, which goes beyond just visual media and influences how women create and share their personal narratives in literature.

Additionally, autobiographical narratives frequently show how women look at themselves as they monitor their actions to fit in with what society expects. According to Young (2005), how we are seen by others really affects our awareness of our own bodies and the stories we tell about ourselves. The way female autobiographers express themselves shows how they either push back against or go along with the frameworks that have been set for them in their writing. Rodovalho (2018) looks into how certain women challenge *the male gaze* by taking back their stories through different storytelling techniques, like personal archives and reinterpreted memories. This paper will look at different autobiographical works to see how female writers deal with *the male gaze* and express their perspectives. This research looks into how self-representation, narrative agency, and societal influence come together to reveal the ways women manage to align their personal truths with what is expected of them from the outside.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This analysis is based on feminist literary criticism and psychoanalytic theories, which help us understand how female autobiographers navigate self-representation in a patriarchal society. Butler's (1990) idea of performativity shows that gender identity isn't something we're born with; instead, it's a performance created by the cultural expectations around us. This viewpoint connects with de Beauvoir's (1949) idea of "becoming a woman," showing how women's identities are shaped by societal conditioning and observation. Also, hooks (1992) talks about the idea of the oppositional gaze, showing how women, especially women of color, push back against dominant images and take back their stories. Psychoanalytic and feminist film theories help us understand how *the male gaze* affects autobiographical narratives. Eagleton (2010) points out that postmodernism and psychoanalysis come together to shape subjectivity, affecting the way women create their self-narratives in oppressive contexts. In a similar way, Walters (1995) looks at how *the male gaze* goes beyond just visual media and into literature, reinforcing norms in storytelling that are based on gender. Kaplan (2012) dives deeper into this topic by looking at the imperial and male gaze in film and literature, illustrating how these influences affect how women represent themselves in different cultural settings. Mohajer-Taleghani (2023) critiques *the male gaze* using a psychoanalytic perspective, highlighting how feminist scholars question mainstream views of female subjectivity in media and literature. Theoretical perspectives like these help us look closely at female autobiographical writing, showing how women manage to represent themselves while

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pushing back against the limits set by patriarchal ideas. This framework combines performativity, psychoanalysis, and feminist critiques of the gaze to provide a thorough understanding of how gender, identity, and narrative agency intersect in women's autobiographies.

### **Negotiating the Male Gaze in Autobiography**

Women writers encounter the difficulty of expressing themselves in a society where their stories are frequently shaped by male-dominated standards. Some autobiographers actively push back against the male perspective by emphasizing their viewpoints, while others hold back their true selves to fit in with what society expects. According to Morales-Díaz (2002), Esmeralda Santiago's autobiographical writing takes control of and challenges the traditional male perspective, reshaping how she represents herself in a way that is true to her identity. In a similar way, Wilson (2020) points out that autobiographical narratives frequently represent a negotiation between truth and the external gaze, where female writers either push back against or redefine the dominant views of their identities.

In this context, Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* shows how fragmented and introspective storytelling challenges traditional, male-centered narratives. Woolf's nonlinear structure really shakes up the usual rules of autobiography, giving us a personal story that doesn't fit neatly into any categories (Conti, 2019). Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also reclaims the female body and voice by addressing trauma and the way femininity is viewed through a racial lens. According to Gilmore (1994), Angelou's work shows how confession and gender come together, enabling women to take back control over their stories. In a similar way, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* reveals how societal expectations can be really stifling for women, impacting their mental health and how they see themselves. According to Stanton (1987), Plath's semi-autobiographical work shows the struggle between personal identity and cultural limitations, highlighting how women's stories are influenced by psychological and social pressures. These examples show the wider challenge that female autobiographers face in dealing with and responding to *the male gaze*. Women writers are changing the way we think about autobiography by questioning traditional narrative structures, expressing themselves in new ways, and exploring how trauma and identity connect. Reeds and Rocca (2013) point out that modern autobiographical narratives frequently show a careful balance between resistance and conformity, emphasizing how women are finding new ways to express their agency within the limits of gendered storytelling.

### **Internalized Gaze and Self-Surveillance**

Michel Foucault's idea of panopticism helps us see how women take in *the male gaze*, which results in them monitoring and controlling themselves in their personal stories. Foucault (1975) presents the Panopticon as a metaphor for how society enforces discipline, suggesting that people change their behavior because they are always aware they might be observed. When we talk about how gender affects how people see themselves, it's clear that women often take in

societal expectations. This leads them to form their identities based on how others view them instead of how they truly see themselves. Þóroddsdóttir (2021) suggests that this internalized disciplinary gaze pushes women to constantly monitor themselves, which strengthens the systems of patriarchal control. In a similar way, Ferrell (1996) points out that female writers frequently face challenges from the “internal creative Panopticon,” where literary traditions influenced by male-dominated canons affect their self-expression and restrict their narrative freedom. In autobiographical narratives, it's clear that self-surveillance plays a big role, especially for women who shape their identities by navigating societal expectations and their pushback against them. In 2023, Mohajer-Taleghani examines the application of Foucault's Panopticon in feminist film theories, showing how women in autobiographical cinema manage their image to fit into traditional gender roles. Ciccognani (2023) talks about how self-surveillance in media creates a situation where women both create and monitor their self-representations, influencing their autobiographical narratives through a constant, internalized gaze. The effects of internalized surveillance go beyond just literature and film; they also shape how female identity is constructed in society. According to Russell-Mayhew et al. (2024), women tend to internalize self-monitoring behaviors regarding body image. They point out that patriarchal structures lead women to view themselves in a more critical and disciplinary way. This perspective connects with Karmakar's (2021) analysis of the “phallic gaze,” illustrating how women serve as both objects of desire and agents of self-surveillance, which further strengthens gendered power dynamics. Chaudhry (2024) uses this framework to examine South Asian women in Eurocentric societies, showing how the internalization of patriarchal scrutiny influences identity formation across different cultures.

These studies highlight how personal stories serve as places where self-expression and internalized discipline interact and negotiate with each other. Women writers document their experiences and navigate a complex system of external expectations, shaping their narratives within the confines of a gaze that has been deeply embedded in their consciousness. According to Hall (2015), the way self-surveillance is portrayed in visual and written media shows a broader cultural system in which women act as both the subjects and the enforcers of patriarchal norms. This dynamic shows how panoptic surveillance significantly affects female subjectivity, illustrating how the internalized gaze influences the way women represent themselves in their autobiographies.

### **Reclaiming Narrative Authority**

Even with the limitations imposed by the male perspective, women writers have found different ways to take back their stories and express their identities. Lanser (1992) points out that even when women writers push back against patriarchal authority, they still have to deal with long-standing narrative conventions that have traditionally favored male viewpoints. Women writers use different storytelling techniques, like fragmented structures, nonlinear timelines, and self-

reflexive narration, to challenge traditional literary expectations and make their voices heard. Boehmer (2009) points out that postcolonial women writers take back narrative authority and push back against nationalistic and colonialist discourses that have historically sidelined female voices. The writers use their stories to push back against the norm, rewriting history through a gender lens to question the existing power dynamics.

Writing and presentation by women have been limited by patriarchal norms in many literary traditions. Ferris (2019) looks into how historical fiction has shown these limitations, illustrating how gendered constraints influenced the growth of the novel as a genre. Gergen (2000) highlights that modern feminist writers are reworking narratives by blending performance, psychology, and personal experiences to question the core principles of autobiographical storytelling. This change lets women share their stories without having to fit into strict narrative molds. Warhol (1989) looks at how women novelists from the Victorian era challenged traditional storytelling by including gendered elements in their narratives, using voice and perspective to take back control.

The representation of the female body poses a significant challenge to narrative authority. Katrak (2006) talks about how women writers in postcolonial contexts take back control over their bodies by exploring themes of gender, sexuality, and the politics surrounding the female body. This supports Nash's (1996) point that feminist narratives challenge *the male gaze* by creating female-centered perspectives on desire, embodiment, and subjectivity. Mitchell (2002) argues that modern Black women's fiction provides liberating stories that push back against the racial and gender limitations placed on women's storytelling. These stories highlight historical texts, reinterpreting experiences of oppression and transforming them into acts of empowerment. By using different methods, women writers have opened up new literary spaces to take charge of their stories. Spencer (2014) points out that new female authors in post-repressive regimes are really focused on reworking histories and identities that have been influenced by patriarchal limitations. Women writers are changing the way we think about who gets to tell stories. They are pushing boundaries and showing new ways to represent themselves, all while questioning traditional literary rules and societal norms.

### **Conclusion**

The way *the male gaze* interacts with female perspectives in personal stories shows the continuous fight for self-representation in a society dominated by patriarchy. Outside judgment, self-monitoring, and strong cultural norms shape the challenging environment in which women writers work. This study shows how female autobiographers navigate their identities using feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic theories, and critical discourse analysis. They sometimes resist and sometimes conform, but they are always involved in a complex conversation with societal norms.

This research examines the works of Virginia Woolf, Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath, and other female writers, highlighting how women challenge traditional storytelling methods to take back control of their narratives. Fragmented structures, introspective reflections, and nonlinear timelines act as ways to push back, allowing women to question and challenge the male-centered viewpoints in literature. Additionally, Foucault's concept of panopticism shows how women often monitor themselves, influenced by *the male gaze*, which affects how they see themselves and tell their stories in ways that fit societal expectations of femininity.

Even with these challenges, modern women writers are still pushing the limits of autobiographical writing. By taking charge of their stories, they push back against being forgotten in history and reshape how they present themselves. This change in autobiographies written by women highlights how literature can serve as a tool for resistance, transformation, and empowerment. In the end, looking at autobiographical narratives with feminist theory shows how strong women are in taking back their voices. As literary traditions change, it's critical to recognize and support stories by women that push back against set ideas and encourage genuine self-expression. In this way, literature can act as a tool for breaking down oppressive systems and promoting a more inclusive portrayal of human experiences.

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