

# Reconfiguring the Gaze in *Everyone Has a Story* by Savi Sharma

Proshanta Sarkar

Assistant Professor  
Department of English,  
Ghatal R. S. Mahavidyalaya, Medinipur, India  
[psarkar@grsm.ac.in](mailto:psarkar@grsm.ac.in)

**Abstract**— This article presents a critical analysis of the novel *Everyone Has a Story* by Savi Sharma. It takes the conceptual approach of the feminine gaze. The paper suggests that the novel is a deception to the traditions of the classic male gaze which tends to objectify female characters. Rather, the character of the protagonist, Meera, narration perspective also creates a feminine gaze, which is more focused on emotional interiority, narrative curiosity, and mutual recognition. The article addresses the theme in which Meera is attracted to the male lead, Vivaan, not only as a physical object of interest, but as a multi-layered narrative, which Meera has to comprehend. It explores this need to know in a narrative way in how this affects their relationship. The discussion is furthered to other characters such as Kabir whose narrative of personal love and sacrifice is brought out through the gaze which desires feelings of emotion. The article shows that the novel makes romance with the help of not conquering and objectifying but the compassionate acts of telling and hearing stories. It draws the conclusion that the work by Sharma provides a paradigm of romantic narrative in which the final relationship is the in-depth comprehension of the entire story of the other person.

**Keywords**— Feminine Gaze, Male Gaze, Narrative Theory, Emotional Interiority, Scopophilia, Romance Novel, Indian Fiction,

## 1. Introduction : The Framework of the Gaze and the Search for a Story

The romance genre tends to follow an intricate path of desire, attraction, and view in the landscape of the modern popular fiction. The novel *Everyone Has a Story* by Savi Sharma has offered a rare chance of critical analysis. It is a book whose exterior is inspirational romance. Nonetheless, a more critical examination shows an elaborate involvement of perspective and looking. This paper will examine the novel, based on the theoretical approach of feminine gaze. It will claim that the main actor in this gaze is the protagonist Meera who plays the role of being the main agent of this gaze. Her opinion reinvents the traditional relations of attraction. She goes beyond physical objectification. Instead, she is concerned with the quest of narrative, emotionality, and the complicated story concealed in the other.

In order to comprehend the meaning of the feminine gaze, we have to define the theoretical predecessor of the concept, the male gaze. This was widely known by the film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Mulvey believed that the mainstream cinema is framed in a male way. This view leaves the audience in a situation where they can relate with the male protagonist. The woman character in this structure is mostly marketed in the form of a passive object of desire. The male gaze is practiced in three different forms. First, it is the appearance of the camera per se, which frequently continues lingering on the female figure, in a disjointed, objectifying fashion. Second, it is the appearance of the male characters in the story, who are proactive at looking at the dormant female. Third, it is the gaze of the spectator who is prompted to take on this masculine objectifying position. The outcome is power where the male is the active bearer of the look and the female is the passive image to be gazed at. This interaction diminishes the female character to her physical attribute. It disallows her agency and complicated subjectivity.

The feminine gaze is the counter and alternative to this form of representation. It is not just a turnaround whereby the woman objectifies the man. This inversion would just bring about a repetition of the same power structure. The feminine gaze, on the contrary, aims at deconstructing it. It is a perspective of seeing that is appreciative of subjectivity and emotional attachment. It recognizes the entire individual and not the body. The feminine gaze is concerned with the gaze behind the eyes. It wonders about the inner world of the person that is being taken a look. It tries to find acknowledgment in each other, in which looking is a mean to an encapsulation, rather than power. This means that the feminine gaze tends to look at the body, touching on the aspect of physicality, vulnerability and personality. It is an eye that touches the man it looks at. It does not just look at them.

The feminine gaze is realized through the character of Meera in the film *Everyone Has a Story*. She is not seeking a romantic partner as her main motivation in the start of the novel. She is driven to seek a narration. She is an HR manager herself, as it is a profession that already requires listening to the stories of people. Nevertheless, there is something more she is called to. She wants to become an author. This is a wish that shapes her whole worldview. She is an amassing of tales. She is a seeker of meaning. She does not go to the cafe, *Coffee and Us*, as a social gathering. They are pilgrimages to the shrine of narration, in which she hearkens to known writers.

It is not fame or success that she is fascinated with. It is by the very power of creating the stories of other people. She asks herself, “How could they draw the truth from each individual and build a beautifully woven tale?” (9). This is the main question of her character. It determines her gaze as one which sees beyond the surface to discover the ‘truth’ and the ‘tale’ within. It is her opinion that she has narratives lodged in the soul of her. This implies that to her the stories are not outward forms but forms of identity. Hence, as she gazes on other individuals, she is actually gazing on endeavors of the nature of identity of the others.

Such a narrative-seeking gaze can be seen quite clearly in her first meaningful interaction with the male protagonist, Vivaan. Meera is immersed in a talk by Arjun Mehra that is given by an author. The writer talks of life and discovering the secret side of the heart. Arjun Mehra is distracted when she focuses a question on one of the young men behind Meera. The first time she sees Vivaan she views him through the prism of aesthetics. She says that he is a clever, good-looking man and his black casual blazer fitted his brown eyes and his short dark hair. A story which functions with a traditional male gaze will halt at this point. It may put him in the position of a pure aesthetic object. But the look of Meera instantly penetrates further. She wonders how she has never noticed him. This implies that her attention could not be attracted to him by his physical looks in the past.

The answer to the questions of the author that really attracts the attention of Meera is the answers of Vivaan. Vivaan demonstrates that although he has money and status and success, he does not know his purpose and wants to “escape the life I am living and grab my bags and just travel” (12). It is this admission of weakness and unattained desire which brings to effect the feminine gaze of Meera. She even thinks of “leaning toward the man behind me, curious to hear how he would answer” (12). The things that she wonders about are not his wealth and handsomeness. It is concerning the struggle in him. It is concerning the narrative of a man who possesses all yet he is never complete.

This is a crucial moment. Meera does not perceive a possible love interest. She sees a potential story. The reaction of Vivaan is a plot device. It presents a mystery. Why then is a successful man seeking to run? What are the dreams that he wants to pursue? These are the issues that excite Meera. The persistence in her mind to see Vivaan again is not the result of a mere romantics game when she storms out of the cafe. It is the will of a writer who has newly discovered her inspiration. She is like a heartbeat excited that she is thinking, “I had found my story” (13). Her gaze does not focus on a man. Her gaze is directed to a narrative.

The passage below of the novel indicates how Meera perceives her inspiration. It is not concerning the physical traits of Vivaan. It is concerning the idea he embodies to her, the traveler.

“I want to travel, travel the whole world. I want to go on a road trip. Stop at random places and explore their beauty. Run through the woods chasing a butterfly. Talk to new people with different cultures and different lifestyles. Listen to their stories; sit on a park bench in the sun. Enjoy every sunrise and sunset, sometimes from a hilltop and sometimes behind the trees. I want to spend hours beside a rushing river, feeling the wind in my hair and listening to the secrets hidden in the waves. Write a poem about the coldest, cloud-bound mountains and all five oceans. I want to cross my boundaries. I want to admire nature, and wonder at the magic of its creation. I want to make memories. I want to feel alive. I want to feel the Creator. I want to feel myself.” (Sharma 14-15)

This section is also important since this is the text of Meera. It is her effort to conceive the spirit of the tale of Vivaan. The language is emotional and sensual. It dwells upon experiences and emotions (‘feel alive’, ‘feel the Creator’). It is concerned with identification to the world and the self. This is the feminine gazing of Meera. She manages to convert her sight of Vivaan into a grandiose of emotional and life desire. She is not objectifying him. She is sympathizing with the desire she could see in him. She is attempting to compose his soul. This creative imagination is a drastic contrast to the objectification of the male gaze. Meera does not desire to own Vivaan. She wants to understand him. She wants to write him. This underlying need preconditions the development of a relationship on the basis not of superficial attraction, but of the deepest and most human experience a story-sharing. It is the voyage of the novel itself it is the voyage of this gaze as it tries to discover the entire account of the man upon whom it has cast its imaginative spell.

## I. THE RECIPROCITY OF THE GAZE AND THE UNFOLDING OF NARRATIVES

The very first meeting of Meera and Vivaan defines the structure of feminine gaze of Meera, which is a gaze desiring narrative more than anything else. This way of seeing defines the formation of their relationship. It creates a reciprocal relationship. In such a relationship, individuals go beyond the status of an observer and the observed. They are reciprocated into the process of knowing one another. It is not a one-way street of gaze of desire. It is a bridge of inquisition and compassion. This part will delve into the gaze of Vivaan as being a reciprocation of Meera gaze. It will also analyze how their common interest in narrating extends to include the lives of the people around them.

Meera starts writing after getting her narrative inspiration in Vivaan. It is a form of her channeling the emotional world which she sees in him in her writing. Vivaan overhears when she tells her friend Kabir about this writing. This is a turning point of the novel. It shows a turnaround of the classical romantic relationship. In a traditional story, he would have fallen in love with the physical looks of Meera. Rather, Vivaan is enamored about the mind of Meera. He is captivated by her words. He is touched by her capacity to express his inner unspoken desires to the extent he leaves her a note. The note contains a single word: “BEAUTIFUL” (16).

This gesture is highly important. She is not complimented on her body. It is addressed to her creation. It goes to her soul, which she has cast on the page. The talent she possessed is beautiful to Vivaan. He sees beauty in her empathy. He knows that she has indeed seen him, not as a beautiful man in a cafe, but as someone with a complicated inner life. He answers her with admiration at her subjective richness. This is the initial case of a mutual gaze. He does not look back at her objectifying desire, but with appreciative wonder at the intellect of hers. This performance makes her a legitimate creator. It forms a bond between them based on mutual intellectual and emotional respect.

The novel sheds more light on this reciprocity as it allows the readers to get the view of Vivaan. Vivaan contemplates his experience with Meera in the chapter that is called Twin Dimples. His mind shows that he too is as fascinated by her as she by him. He reiterates what she says in his head. He thinks, “The words could have been written for me” (20). A very strong sense of identification is evident in this thought. He feels understood. He feels seen. This sense of being observed in terms of inner self is an essential element of feminine gaze. In this case, the male character lives through it and appreciates it. He is not the unbreachable, acting object of the male gaze. He is a member of a person who longs connection and gets relieved when he recognizes it in the eyes of Meera.

Naturally, Vivaan does observe the physical features of Meera. He thinks about her “deep twin dimples and her dark eyes” (20). He recalls her “flowing blue skirt” (20). His observation, however, is not the dissecting, objectizing gaze that Laura Mulvey talks about. Rather, his bodily observations are extremely mixed with his admiration on the part of the character of hers. He notes that her smile “brought multiple layers to her face” (20). This terminology implies that he considers her physical expression as a window to her complicated personality. Physical does not exist as a kind of surface. It is a moving sign of inner profundity. He wants to “lose myself in her deep twin dimples” (20). This is the language of submerging and identification, but not conquest and ownership. He does not desire to manipulate her. He desires to be engulfed with the happiness and the multiplicity that she embodies. Thus, the gaze of Vivaan reflects the same aspects of feminine gaze of Meera. It is caring, understanding and aims at finding connection on a deeper level.

The negotiation of their gaze is a head-on clash when Meera and Vivaan have their first serious conversation. Meera takes the initiative. She comes to him with a definite mission. She desires to know his story. Their conversation is a serious yet jocular conversation on the role they play as “Miss Writer” and “Mr. Traveller”.

“There is nothing to write about me,” Vivaan declared, and shook his head.

I plunked my hands on the table, lacing my fingers together. ‘Everyone has a story to tell,’ I insisted. ‘Everyone is a writer. Some are written in books, and some are confined to hearts.’ I was proud of my answer.

And there was silence for a few seconds. As we stared without blinking, I thought about the childhood game I used to play with my sister.” (Sharma 23)

This is the mainstay of their relationship. Meera is not shy or passive. She is forceful in her attitude towards the idea that every person has a story to be known. She counters the efforts of Vivaan to stay a secret. The scene of their staring is not only a moment of romantic tension. It is an opposition of two subjectivities both attempting to know each other. Meera is not just staring at Vivaan with his handsome face. She is seeking the tale that is captured within the heart of him. Her look is a sort of digging. She is attempting to excavate the truth of the emotions.

A real revolutionary situation is when Vivaan averted the eyes of Meera. He does not tell his story but instead draws her attention elsewhere.. He tells her,

“Maybe you should try to look somewhere else... In Kabir’s eyes” (Sharma 32-33).

It is an extraordinary performance in the context of a romance story. The object of her attention is male and he is the protagonist in the story, who makes her look at another man. He does not do this out of jealousy. He never attempts to take her attention. On the contrary, he confirms her worldview. Her idea that there are stories everywhere is confirmed by him. He joins her in her narrative seeking venture. He basically explains to her that she has to learn to see the stories in other people in order to understand him.

This performance widens the feminine gaze and moves it out of the main love couple. It is made an empathetic habit amongst them. Meera, under the guidance of Vivaan, directs this inquisitiveness of her story to her friend Kabir. This causes the heart-rending revelation of the past of Kabir, his love to Nisha, and his financial hardships. It is not only Meera and Vivaan in the love story anymore. It concerns a network of interrelated lives, having their own tale of love, pain and hope. Feminine gaze as practised by Meera and fostered by Vivaan is not a possessive or exclusive gaze. It is a broad and all-inclusive energy that tries to comprehend the humanity of all the people that it meets. This common action of searching and hearing the tale of Kabir is what causes the relationship between Meera and Vivaan to develop. Their relationship is not established alone. It is created in the environment of a community where each individual has a story, and love is the desire to listen to it.

## II. THE GAZE AS A PATHWAY TO VULNERABILITY AND AUTHENTIC LOVE

The fact that the gaze of Meera is redirected at Kabir with the help of Vivaan is not only one of the plot devices: it is a lesson which turns out to be the element of the philosophy of love peculiar to the novel. It defines that genuine connection is not a two-people affair that is out of the ordinary but a discipline of broad empathy. Meera and Vivaan engage in a collective witnessing in the form of compassion learning the story of Kabir. This performance establishes an atmosphere of trust and emotional sincerity that eventually enables them to turn their looks back at each other, not as a writer and her subject, but as two individuals ready to experience the ultimate vulnerability the real love demands.

The scene when Kabir eventually tells the story of how he was heart broken by Nisha and is being burdened by the money problems is pivotal. This is not the role of a passive listener of Meera. She is active in coaxing the story out of him, her questions soft, but incessant. Her focus on it forms what can be termed as a holy place, a place where the embarrassment of unspoken suffering can be released and purged. This confession is made in the presence of Vivaan who is not an object of the attentions of Meera but rather a silent companion in this process of her holding space in the miserable condition of a friend. His existence encourages the notion of feminine gaze in its idealized form not being a preserve of women only but a state of existence that men can and ought to be able to engage in. The fact that they are both interested in the story of Kabir strengthens their relationship with each other in a way that a mere dating out never would. They are linked not only through the attraction that they have towards one another, but also their ability to be compassionate towards each other.

This same experience turns out to be the ultimate key that opens the closed heart of Vivaan himself. After he saw how Meera is capable of listening and not being judgmental and after being involved in the healing processes of that listening, he knows that his story will be safe in her hands. This is not a dramatic declaration or a lustful embrace as the emotional climax of the novel, but a moment of narrative surrender, a moment of intimacy. In the chapter titled “The Last Page of the Diary,” Vivaan finally looks at Meera and says,

“You were right, Miss Writer. Everyone has a story. Are you ready to hear mine?” (Sharma 142).

His history shows why he has the persona of Mr. Traveller. He is not just a man with wanderlust a man fleeing a failure in the past in a business venture which failed, and cost him the savings of his family. His journeys are like expiation and escape of shame of having betrayed the people whom he loved. This confession is the final gesture of giving back. Meera started by looking at him and she was trying to envision the story in there. He freely hands over to her now the original draft of his life, with its painful passages and unsolved issues. At this point, there is a perfect balance of the gaze. He no longer is the enigmatic subject of her imaginative inquiries, and she is no longer the spectating writer. They are two exposed subjects, that are retelling each other the crude reality of themselves.

The response by Meera is the last confirmation of the influence of the feminine gaze. She does not sympathize with him or consider him lowered by his failure. Rather, she finds beauty in his struggle, the nobility in his effort to make amend. She replies,

“It’s the most beautiful story you could have given me... because it’s real” (Sharma 145).

Her first presentation of his writing as “BEAUTIFUL” is revived back as she evaluates his life. In her case, beauty lies in the realness of the human experience, rather than perfection or success.

### III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the subverted male gaze, which is so pervasive in the sphere of cinema and literature, has been reinvented in a masterful way in *Everyone Has a Story*, except it is not an outright reversion, but a more intricate and humanistic female gaze. Such gaze represented by Meera is characterized by insatiable interest in narrative, empathy, and concern with the inner world of the object of gaze. The novel states that such perception cannot be a one-way road and should welcome and demand reciprocity. The character development of Vivaan consists of a process of learning to give this gaze back, to learn to appreciate being looked upon in his inner being, and in the end, to engage in this sympathetic way of looking with Meera.

The novel entirely reinvents the concept of romantic love. It has abandoned a paradigm whereby it depends on possession, idealization and objectification. Rather, it suggests that love is a narrative discovery. To love is to crave their narrative, to provide them a place in which they can share their narrative, and to share your own story in exchange. The final intimacy is not a physical one, but narrative. It is knowing and being known, without judgment and all the way through. The novel advocates love with its deep-rooted, tender, and truly human commitment to looking at another human being and seeing not a thing of passion, but a narrative to be listened to through the convoluted relationship between Meera and Vivaan.

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