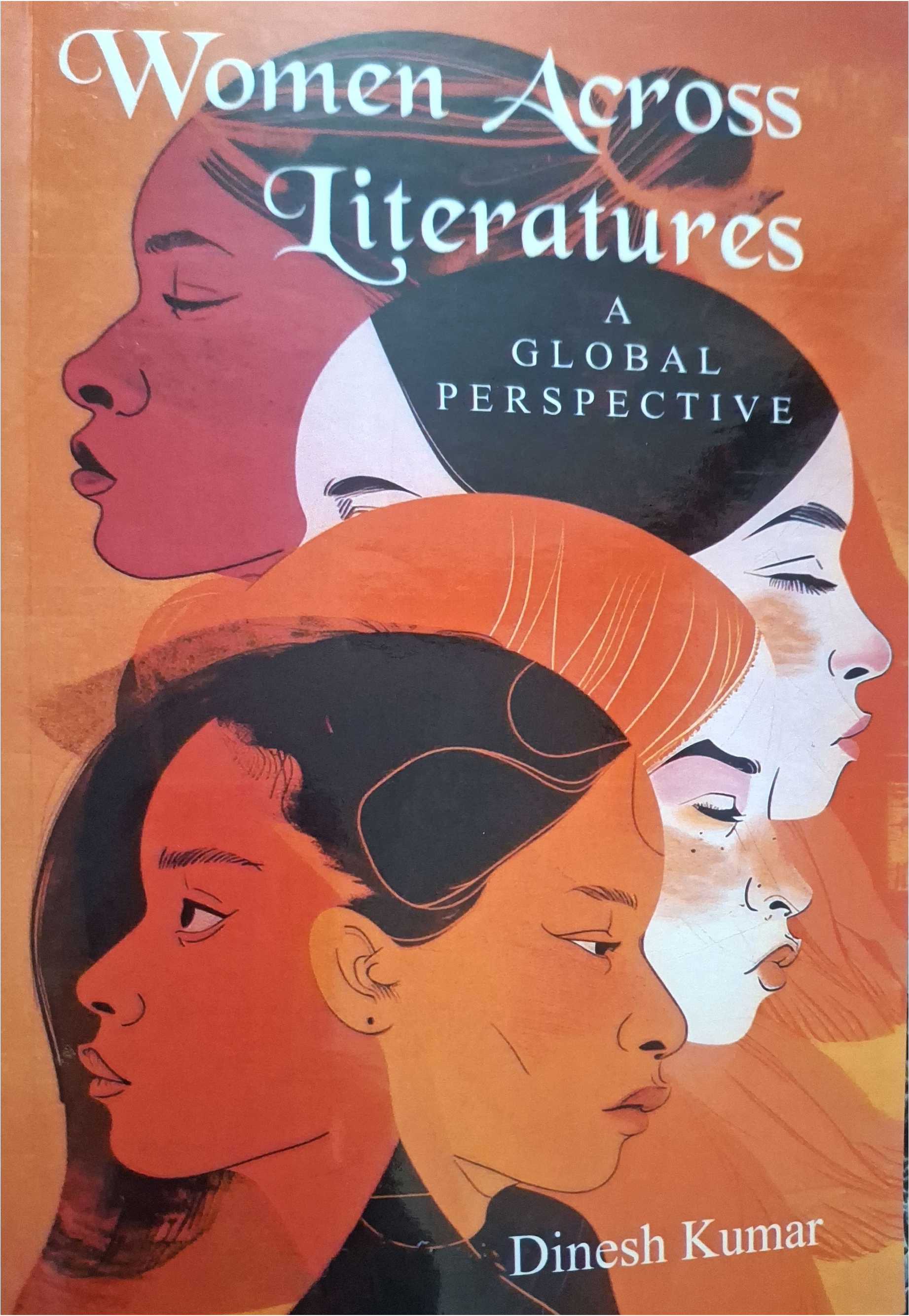


Women Across Literatures



A
GLOBAL
PERSPECTIVE

Dinesh Kumar

**WOMEN ACROSS
LITERATURES: A GLOBAL
PERSPECTIVE**

Dinesh Kumar

Doaba House
Delhi

Women Across Literatures: A Global Perspective

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Post Feminism' in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*

Dr. N. Sumathi

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* focuses on the power dynamics of male gaze, objectification of female identity, aristocratic pride and authoritarian control. It interrogates the gender politics at work, silencing the female sexuality, commodification of women's body and erasure of the Duchess' voice. Duke symbolises the patriarchal possession and how the absence of Duchess' signifies the intergeneration feminism as the voice of women in history, art and cultural memory had always been silenced. "To be silenced is not simply to be deprived of speech but to be deprived of subjectivity." (Gilbert & Gubar 45). By silencing his wife (literally through death, symbolically through narration), the duke deprives her of subjectivity. The contemporary feminist concerns lie in the voice, agency and representation of a woman in this work. The contemporary debates of agency, visual pleasure and ideological containment from Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and Rosalind Gill's concept of postfeminist sensibility are dealt in the research paper.

Postfeminism is the term used by the critic, Toril Moi in his notable work, *Sexual/Textual Politics* in 1985. The term is popularly applied to the works that were published after 1980s as the reaction to the second wave feminism. Post feminism looked at the feminism as a political stance, feminine as a cultural construct and female as biological entity with neo conservative approach. Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, the scholars see the movement not as a rejection of feminism but a double entanglement where feminist gains are acknowledged yet undermined through irony, commodification and individualism. In the essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) by Laura Mulvey who introduced the concept of male gaze

in terms of films where women are positioned as passive objects of visual pleasure, framed by and for male desire. Mulvey concept can be applied to literary works as well. Postfeminist analysis of the poem reveals how the male gaze operated not only through visual control but also through narrative framing and ideological containment. The silence is far from passivity but becomes an interpretive resistance. The postfeminist theory is applied to contemporary debates on gender, representation and power.

Male Gaze and Objectification

The poem's prime focus is on the male gaze which is presented to the readers. Duke's authoritarian control is literal and symbolic. Male gaze is that the Duke is gazing the painting, and tells the envoy as:

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive."

The Duchess exists only as a painting, as a visual object controlled by Duke. She is not held in his heart as a platonic love. He calls the attention of the listener to gaze at his Duchess to make her a commodity to look at for the silent listener as well as the readers. The gaze establishes the male ownership through mediated mode. He curates the representation of this gaze as an act of infidelity of the Duchess. Literally, the duke pulls back the curtain to reveal her portrait, controlling who can look and without her consent. He also controls the interpretation of her character as infidelity seducing others with her smiles and kindness and it is interpreted as signs of disloyalty." Browning's women are often heard only in the silences of the male monologue." (Reynolds 142). The Duchess's silence is precisely what feminist critics identify as symptomatic of patriarchal representation. The monologue is symbolic of the absence of Duchess' voice and any of her allies. The narrative of the duke is filtered through male gaze. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." (Mulvey 11). The Duke embodies the active gaze, while the Duchess is rendered passive, frozen in a portrait.

Commodification lies in holding a lot of portraits by the duke. The Duchess' portrait is a part of his collection just like the bronze sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse. It parallels how women are seen as possessions as art, objects of display that portrays the value of women as objects of display and not to be loved. The commodification has become visual possession by holding the art piece of the duchess. "The dramatic monologue forces us to sympathize with a speaker in spite of ourselves, until the revelation of his inhumanity shocks us into judgment." (Langbaum

85). Readers are drawn into the Duke's gaze before realizing its cruelty – showing how the male gaze manipulates both subject and audience.

The portrait becomes a substitute for the living woman allowing the Duke to restrict access and it also reflects on how he has exercised his control over the woman. The authoritarian control is revealed through his boast that:

“.....none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I.”

This act of veiling and unveiling mirrors the voyeuristic structure of the male gaze, where the woman is rendered visible only through male permission. Transgression of her smiles, her joy in life are framed as threats to the Duke's authority. The Duchess expresses her emotional openness through her smiles and hoy but it is pathologized by him and her subjectivity is erased through Duke's gaze as a series of seductive and aesthetic impressions and shown as a mere visual artifact. “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.” (Beauvoir 6). It is a kind of existential entrapment through suppressing the role of the woman and her authentic self but performs his entitlement with infidelity. The Duchess is not allowed subjectivity; she is “the Other,” defined entirely by the Duke's narrative and possession.

Silencing of the Woman's Voice

The dramatic monologue dramatizes the duke's perspective and absence of Duchess's own voice. She never speaks within the poem that makes the duke to reduce her actions, gestures and personality to the evidence of disobedience and infidelity. The silencing is not just accidental but central to the execution of power of patriarchy in the monologue reflecting the mechanism of power politics based on gender. Browning has made an attempt to exercise the gender politics focussing on polygamy practised by duke mentioning her as last duchess. The vitality and generosity of women commonly exhibited through smiles and graceful gestures of women which are stereotyped as feminine qualities by men. The same men blame her for her feminine qualities and call her to be infidelities.

“That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive” (ll. 1–2)

The Duchess is positioned as an object, frozen in art, deprived of speech and agency. Her smiles, which should signify generosity and vitality, are reinterpreted as flaws by the Duke:

"She smiled, no doubt, whene'er I passed her, but who pined
without
Much the same smile?" (ll. 43-45).

In his narration, her individuality is erased and her warmth becomes grounds for condemnation.

Elaine Showalter observes that "the female voice has often been mediated, suppressed, or silenced in the patriarchal text" (*A Literature of Their Own*, 31). The Duchess is doubly silenced: first through death—when the Duke "gave commands" that ended her life and then through the dramatic narrative technically silenced her and he controls how her memory is presented. Adrienne Rich reminds us that "the silences are as important as what is said; they tell the story of the power that has silenced them" (*When We Dead Awaken*, 19). A woman's silence can be easily dominated by men many times and the Duchess's silence, therefore, is not mere absence but evidence of domination.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar noted that "to be silenced is not simply to be deprived of speech but to be deprived of subjectivity" (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 45). The authoritative voice of the Duke has overwritten the Duchess's subjectivity and leaving her as a portrait, possession and objectification and a male tale to be narrated to everyone to show her infidelity. As Isobel Armstrong argues, "Browning's monologues dramatize not only what is spoken but what is silenced, the margins of utterance" (*Victorian Poetry*, 213). The margins drawn for the women stereotypes is present as a portrait in the poem but absent as an autonomous presence. The Duchess exists only in these "margins," absent from the center of her own story. The Duchess's absence of voice exemplifies patriarchal suppression within male-authored narratives.

New Feminism

Silence becomes the agency of power for women in new feminist lens. The silencing is recognized and celebrated as an act of women's power through the feminist criticism that considers silence as an act of reclamation. The duchess' voice challenge the structures of women stereotyping by gently smiling at people to show her generosity and individuality as strengths rather than fault. "The silences are as important as what is said; they tell the story of the power that has silenced them." (Rich 19). The Duchess's silence itself tells the story of the duke's control and the violence of patriarchal power. Though Silencing is considered as patriarchal strategy to gain control over the legacy of this woman's life and art, she is calm and peaceful exhibiting

her smile pleasantly when she is alive and stands as a valuable art portrait with aesthetic value.

"The female voice has often been mediated, suppressed, or silenced in the patriarchal text." (Showalter 31). The Duchess never speaks for herself in the poem; her life and actions are narrated entirely by the Duke.

The poem opens with his claim:

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive." (ll. 1-2)

The phrase suggests she is not only dead but reduced to an image, deprived of speech and agency. The poem exemplifies how the authority of patriarchy is intergenerational that dictates not only women's loves but also their afterlives in memory and representation.

The subtle resistance and emotional autonomy of the duchess is expressed through her smiles, her joy in life, her appreciation of others. The emotional agency stands as an emotional autonomy gaining control over situations and people in spite of the duke's character assassination. The duke's complaint that she was "too soon made glad" and valued "anyone's gift" reveals his discomfort with her democratic spirit and refusal to be exclusively defined by him.

Under narrative framing in the poem, the unreliable masculinity is expressed in his style of monologue. The monologue is often seen as a performance to impress a marriage emissary. The readers feel that his narration is unreliable and it reflects his character as jealous and possessive. Postfeminist readings interrogate this stereotyped narrative framing rendered in the dramatic monologue but call the readers to understand the historical truth behind the silenced narrative construction directed towards the duchess and her silence to erase the duke's agenda in readers' minds. "Browning's monologues dramatize not only what is spoken but what is silenced, the margins of utterance." (Armstrong 213)

Irony and Postfeminism

The monologue is represented as a dramatic irony as he presents himself as refined and reasonable but his speech reveals his cruelty, jealousy and authoritarianism as he plans to kill the duchess, holds her art and smile through his possessiveness and authority that he holds over the art and her life itself.

"I choose

Never to stoop"

The pride duke expresses an ironic self-indictment and is perceived as a refusal to engage with emotional complexity. His mind is more complex with his possessiveness to be held responsible for her life, death and art as well.

Postfeminist sensibility is portrayed through contradiction and ambivalence. Rosalind Gill stated that "Postfeminist sensibility is a cultural mode that simultaneously celebrates and disciplines female agency. The duchess is admired for her beauty but punished for her autonomy. Her "too soon made glad" nature is entitled as a moral failure yet postfeminists celebrate it as an emotional openness as a resistance to aristocratic control.

Surface civility vs. subtextual violence is evidential through the duke's language that is elegant and his tone is measure through his civility in chilling admission that:

"I gave commands

Then all smiles stopped together"

The aesthetic refinement and implied murder are juxtapositioned and shows the postfeminist irony that the very structure that admire the beauty of women in art, marriage and nobility and women are expected to be pleasant and smiling exhibiting the feminine beauty which is admired in marriages suddenly becomes the reason for jealousy in duke that he gave commands to stop her smiles forever.

The narrative, the portrait, the social transaction, the life and death of the duchess are controlled by the duke's narrative. His speech reveals his performance for the emissary crafted to secure another bride for him. Postfeminist critique questions that "whose story is being told and whose voice is missing?". The duchess' silence becomes the site of interpretive resistance.

The illusion of empowerment and commodification of the duchess as a woman and as an art can be viewed in terms of post feminism through how empowerment is often repackaged as aesthetic appeal. Women are considered to be trophies or a commodity to be own and not subjects as the duke expresses his pride through "nine-hundred-years-old name" and his art collection reflects the worldview of art and women as commodities by aristocrat men.

Conclusion

Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* offers a perceptive and unsettling portrait of patriarchal control, one that reverberates powerfully with

postfeminist critique. Through the Duke's monologue, the poem stages a complex interaction of visual possession, narrative framing, and aestheticized silencing—mechanisms that postfeminist theory identifies as central to the commodification of femininity. The Duchess, though denied a voice, emerges as a figure whose emotional autonomy and refusal to conform subtly challenge the rigid hierarchies imposed upon her.

Postfeminist sensibility, with its emphasis on contradiction, irony, and ambivalence, allows for a reappraisal of the Duchess not as a passive victim, but as a symbol of resistance within a system that aestheticizes and disciplines female agency. The Duke's polished rhetoric and performative civility mask a deeper violence, revealing how patriarchal authority often operates under the guise of refinement and taste. *My Last Duchess* becomes more than a dramatic monologue - it is a cultural artifact that anticipates contemporary debates around gender, power, and representation. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to provoke critical reflection on how women are seen, spoken for, and silenced and how those silences might speak volumes when read through a postfeminist lens.

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