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The Failure in Communication: Gaze and Gaze Back in “The Museum”

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between gaze and subjectivity construction, focusing on Shadia in “The Museum” written by Lelia Aboulela. Through the theoretical lens of gaze, the influence of familial, Western ideological, and imperial gazes on Shadia’s self-perception is explored. The analysis reveals that these gazes initially render her passive and devoid of subjectivity. However, through gazing back, Shadia gradually reconstructs her subjectivity as a woman and as an African. Despite her efforts, the powerful imperial gaze in the museum context limits her ability to bridge the gap with Bryan. This study highlights the transformative potential and limitations of gazing practices and emphasizes the ongoing negotiation between individual agency and dominant gazes in shaping subjectivity.

Keywords: *Shadia, “The Museum”, gaze, subjectivity, alienation*

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Introduction

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008) writes: “Look! A Negro” (p. 68), which is the first line to depict the lived experience of the black man. This sentence indicates that black people are looked at and gazed at by the white, and realize that they differ from others. Then, the blacks are aware that “here I am an object among other objects” (Fanon, 2008, p. 68). For a long time, the blacks have been gazed at and stared at by the white in literature, such as Marlow’s gaze in *Heart of Darkness* and the unnamed black being gazed at by the whites in *Invisible Man*. Marlow and the whites unconsciously regard the black as being in a flock rather than in an individual, and also their gaze contains the power of alienation. However, in “The Museum”, Leila Aboulela presents the readers with a dominating gaze or look from Shadia, a Sudanese woman, who stares at the surroundings around her.

“The Museum”, for which Aboulela won the Caine Prize, follows the eye of Shadia, a Muslim female, who lives and studies abroad in Scotland, and her relationship with a fellow student, a long-haired Scot named Bryan, who accompanies her to an ill-conceived museum about Africa. Throughout the story, Shadia keeps looking at herself while recalling her family and having classes at the university. In the course of the looking, Alonso (2017) suggests that Shadia undergoes “alienation through a parallelism between the sociocultural system” of Scotland and “social rules that are explicitly written down”(p. 60). Thus, Shadia has disoriented herself and lost her own subjectivity. Moreover, when visiting the Scottish museum about Africa, Shadia is defined as “outside of the community of power” (Cooper, 2006, p. 339), and “the museum alienates Shadia because of its homogenous narration of empire through the colonial gaze” (Arora, 2021, p. 123). Therefore, both Arora and Cooper deem Shadia a passive and alienated figure under the gaze of the museum. Nevertheless, Aboulela’s writing unveils “the ineffectual myth of the oppressed Muslim woman by illuminating and personalizing her experience abroad”(Zanchettin, 2013, p. 41). The “personalization” here can be understood as the very own look of the character; thus, Shadia does construct her own subjectivity in the course of looking back at herself, her family, Bryan as well as the museum and personalizing her experience. As for this paper, it is expected to discover how Shadia gradually constructs her subjectivity, transforming from being obedient to opposing being alienated and estranged, and also why the communicative bridge built through interaction between Shadia and Bryan eventually collapses in the museum.

Gaze and Gaze back

According to Hegel, the gaze is a way of seeing with power and desire, and the self-other relation chiefly concerns “the issue of individual recognition over the exchange of gaze” (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 62). The consciousness of self arises with the recognition of clashing with the other. With such concept of consciousness and recognition, Sartre discusses how the gaze of another person disrupts one's sense of freedom and transforms one's state of “being for itself” into “being for the Other” (Sartre, 2003, pp. 291-292). When a person senses the presence of the other and is aware of being observed, he may have the feeling of “shame”, which is the fundamental mood of intersubjectivity (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 68). Sartre writes that “the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other” (Sartre, 2003, pp. 245-246). Such shame leads to a significant sense of alienation in the self. Consequently, Sartre deems look an alienating force that makes one conscious of oneself in a negative sense. It denies the capacity to freely interpret oneself and one's freedom is enslaved by the presence of the Other (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 64).

While Sartre also considers gaze as the indeterminate cause of vulnerability like the sound of footsteps followed by silence, the rustling of branches, or something like an unperceivable stranger (Sartre, 2003, p. 281). Therefore, anything that makes one vulnerable may be defined as a look. Differentiating from Sartre's gaze, Lacan differentiates the look of the eye from the gaze. Lacan's gaze does not derive from the subject, but from the side of an object without any possibility of becoming a subject. Lacan's example of the gaze is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. When one looks at the painting, the looking gives him a sense of control; nevertheless, one then notices a blot at the bottom of the canvas, which is actually a skull staring back at him. Then, one is reminded of his own lack of control, and of the fact that the symbolic order is separated only by a fragile border from the materiality of the Real. It is the look of the subject that returns as a gaze causing anxiety to the subject itself (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 75).

Grounded on the gaze of Sartre and Lacan, gaze theory is substantially employed and developed in postcolonial study and culture study, especially in film study. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon profoundly analyses the psychological experience of the black under the white gaze which contains "an unusual weight descended on" the black (Fanon, 2008, p. 69). While Laura Mulvey (2003) put forward the male gaze to conspicuously unveil the desire underneath the presentation of females in film making (p. 44). Besides, Bell Hooks (2003) maintains that black females are supposed to interrogate and oppose the stereotypes of black women in the film, take on an oppositional gaze to reject identification with the distorted images, and defiantly declare that "not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (p. 94). As for gazing back, Sartre also poses that individuals can resist the objectifying gaze and regain their subjectivity through a process of looking reciprocally. By turning the gaze back upon the one who is looking, individuals assert their own subjectivity and transcend the transcendence of the Other, by which the Other's subjectivity becomes a property of the object of one's look. This reciprocal looking can disrupt the asymmetrical relationship between the observer and the observed, affirming the individual's freedom and autonomy. Then in this way, "I recover myself, for I cannot be an object for an object" (Sartre, 2003, p. 313).

Thus, resorting to the theory of gaze, this paper aims to explore the relationship between gaze and the construction of subjectivity. Through internalizing the gaze of her family and Western ideology, Shadia becomes passive and obedient without any subjectivity and freedom. However, Shadia constructs her own subjectivity as a woman and as an African piecemeal via gazing back at Bryan, her family, and the museum. In addition, she also tries to bridge the gap between her and Bryan, which eventually fails under the mighty imperial gaze in the museum. It's supposed to be noted that the whole story is narrated from the perspective of Shadia, and the gaze for Shadia and gaze-back from her occur simultaneously to form a dynamic conflict inside Shadia. Therefore, the following discussion concerns the dominating position of gaze or gaze-back, impacting Shadia all the way in diverse degrees. Moreover, the breakdown of communication between the two characters also indicates that the dominating gaze of the museum overcomes Shadia, leaving her to cry.

Alienation under Gaze

As a Muslim migrant studying in Scotland, Shadia senses the culture shock for the first time when she looks at Bryan's hair and earrings. The strangeness encountered by Shadia makes her afraid and lost in the class as Shadia thinks she is someone "tossed around by monstrous waves-battered" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 2). When she takes courses, Shadia feels stressed and weary due to the lack of a certain background; meanwhile, although far away from her homeland, Shadia still lives under the shadow of her family, especially her mother and her fiancé, Fareed. Hence,

in the white society, struggling with statistics and burdensome expectations of her family renders Shadia vulnerable to the gaze of herself and the outside. The following will analyse how Shadia is alienated by self-gaze and gaze in the museum.

“As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others” (Fanon, 2008, p. 68). When Shadia, with a collection from the third world, hears about the suicide of a Nigerian and racists, she shrieks and cries to express her anxiety and fear. In a totally strange circumstance full of white gaze, Shadia tends to belittle herself. First of all, Shadia reckons her collection and those white students as two predetermined groups, “the ones who would do well, the ones who would crawl and sweat and barely pass” (Aboulela, 2013, p. 2). Without the certain background the course requires, she flounders and does not know the system. Such division is led by the idea of Orientalism. According to Said, Orientalism is regarded as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1979, p. 3). In other words, Orientalism can be understood as a discourse informed by notions of Western masculinity in which the West is strong, rational, and male, while the Orient is weak, irrational, and female (Said, 1979, pp. 137-138). Shadia unconsciously deems herself as inferior to the white, and strikes herself in the division framed by the West. Then, in the course of their interaction with Bryan, Shadia tends to speculate what Bryan thinks about her. When Bryan looks at her, she presumes that Bryan regards her as an insect and is surprised that she can speak (Aboulela, 2013, p. 4) and she also assumes as if Bryan doesn’t “want to come near her,” and “want to talk to her” when he slides folders towards her (Aboulela, 2013, p. 6). Such assumptions and interrogations of herself expose Shadia’s self-colonizing. When she confronts a white man, she unconsciously activates the awareness of the distinction between “us and them” (Aboulela, 2013, p. 2) and lowers herself as the inferior even though Bryan probably doesn’t realize and is conscious of such discrepancy. Therefore, Shadia assumes Bryan’s look disrupts her, but in fact, it is her self-gaze that alienates her subjectivity as an African, which is manifested in her gazing at her face in the mirror in the corridor as well. She dislikes her corrugated hair, and in the mirror her eyes are large. Then she speculates that her face is “the face of someone with HIV” which could have been printed on the mirror (Aboulela, 2013, p. 4). As Fanon said, “In the white world, the man of colors encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating” (Fanon, 2008, p. 69). So, Shadia alienates herself by longing for the straight long hair the doll has and negating her hair and her face through her own gaze.

Apart from self-colonization, Shadia also belittles herself through internalizing the gaze of her family and always lingers on the guilty. Brought up only by her mother, Shadia and the other five sisters are told to behave with manners, owe their mother considerably and feel sorrowful for the suffering of their mother, including the illicit affair of their father, for which her mother imposes all the expectations and hopes on Shadia and her sisters. Shadia is molded by her mother, saying that she should be educated, otherwise she will end up like her mother who left her education to marry Shadia’s father. Her mother’s bitterness, nagging and expectation pester all along Shadia’s growth so profoundly that despite the long distance, Shadia still carries all the burdens overseas; thus, Shadia takes on the gaze of her mother inside her mind. Such gaze hovers around her surroundings and makes her realize that she is not “being-for-itself” but “being-for-others” (Sartre, 2003, p. 262), rendering Shadia vulnerable, negating the capacity to freely interpret herself, and then slaving her freedom (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 64). In this sense, Shadia always behaves full of manners, a form of gaze which reminds of her visibility through which Sartre suggests that one encounters the other person in his subjectivity as a look (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 63). In this case, Shadia is adept at restraining herself and displaying

her proud manners. When she interacts with Bryan, she maintains her manners even if she thinks the behavior of Bryan is impolite. In the funeral of Fareed's father, Shadia even rubs soap in her eyes so that Fareed will reckon that she weeps for his father's death, which she considers as polite and full of manners. Even worse, such manners degenerate her into the state of obedience. Shadia is obedient not only to her mother but to Fareed. When she gets married to Fareed, her mother underscores that she is a "lucky, lucky girl," which has predetermined the uneven relationship between her and Fareed (Aboulela, 2013, p. 6). In the following interactions with Fareed and his family, Shadia displays her talent for pleasing people. During the call from Fareed, she listens to Fareed talking about his family and the decorations all the time; however, Fareed doesn't have time to talk about her course and has no space for her anxieties. Even, Fareed claims that he is so broad-minded to allow Shadia to study abroad that she should be grateful. All of these stress, expectations, and "charity" of her fiancé squeeze and distort the subjectivity of Shadia as an independent female.

With the gaze thrust into her mind, Shadia always registers and internalizes the sense of guilt, a representation of alienation, when she misbehaves herself in Scotland. Distinctively, the guilty manifests itself through some physiological reaction. For instance, she feels sick when realizing she doesn't learn but is daydreaming. Moreover, guilt is cold like the fog engulfing Shadia when she detects that the sterling she spends is enough to keep a family alive back home and she supposes that she will fail the exam and return home "empty-handed without a degree" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 5). Guilt is also a hindrance to her communication with Bryan. Owing to the guilty of betraying her mother and Fareed, Shadia tries to distaste Bryan and tells herself that what happens to Bryan is none of her business (Aboulela, 2013, p. 9). Consequently, the guilt caused by the gaze inside Shadia alienates her subjectivity as a female with attraction and desire. Perceived under gaze from inside and outside, Shadia tortures herself psychologically and physiologically.

In "The Museum", Shadia encounters the most forced colonial gaze as she walks through the museum about Africa with Bryan. As Shadia looks at the objects and pictures in the museum, she tries to find something representing her homeland and someone like her father, and also seeks the sense of belonging which she is eager for since residing in the strange land. However, on the contrary, Shadia feels as if she is an outsider in this museum for nothing belongs to her and her people. Most intriguingly, the first thing they perceive in the museum about Africa is a "Scottish man from Victorian times" surrounded by possessions from Africa (Aboulela, 2013, p. 15). As MacKenzie (2017) states in the introduction to *Museums and Empire*, "The museum was created by an essentially European vision and was intended to feed the white gaze. It offered a route into a global memory, the perquisite of western cultures" (p. 5). Although this is a museum about Africa, as Shadia asserts, the museum is under "Europe's vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 15). Nothing is belonging to her life. The aim of this kind of museum is to shape and support an "orientalist-racist worldview through a celebration of western culture as progressive and superior, and displaying the non-western other as primitive and exotic" (Arora, 2021, p. 122) and also Barringer and Flynn (2012) assess the historical role the museums play as "potent mechanisms in the construction and visualization of power relationships between colonizer and colonized," which Shadia acutely beholds in the museum (p. 5).

Shadia undergoes alienation as she stares at the distorted version of Africa. What Shadia expects isn't displayed in the museum, only to find that the museum tells lies and wrongly represents Africa and its people. During the look, Shadia tries to identify with the museum and teaches Bryan what is Africa; however, she is rejected by what she looks. That means Shadia's

look fails to determine her subjectivity as an African, and conversely, Shadia senses the look from what she looks at when she reads the tangible reminders and glances at those pictures of jungles and antelopes. This look is Lacan's gaze which refers to the look of the subject returning as a gaze causing anxiety to the subject itself (Sharma & Barua, 2017, p. 74). In the museum, the gaze of the distorted version of Africa negates Shadia's identification of being an Africa and disturbs the subjectivity of Shadia, causing her to think that "She wasn't right, she was too modern, too full of mathematics" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 16) and stirring bodily and emotional responses in her, such as the shiver she feels though she wears layers of clothes. Such shiver indicates that Shadia is intimidated by Scottish arms, "gunfire in service of the empire" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 18), and also the compelling representation of Africa acknowledged and studiously learned by people in Scotland, like Bryan.

The Construction of Subjectivity via Gazing back

Under the gaze from inside and outside, Shadia loses her subjectivity both as an independent female and as an African, and is trapped in the guilty and the state of inferiority. However, while being gazed at, Shadia also takes on an oppositional gaze at the surroundings around her and her family, and more importantly, she does gazes back at the museum via rejecting being coercively identified with the Scottish version of the museum. Meanwhile, in the course of gazing back, Shadia gradually constructs her subjectivity as a woman and as an African.

Being gazed at, Shadia is obedient and always listens to what others say, never hearing her own voice. She is trained to please people around her, so she is full of manners. She also imagines that there are audience in mind (Aboulela, 2013, p. 11), which means she allows and accepts others to gaze at her all the time. While through gazing back, Shadia constructs her subjectivity as an independent woman by her changing position from listening to others to speaking out her thoughts, and by uncovering the attraction and desire inside her.

Urged by her fear and anxiety about failing the course and letting her family be disappointed, Shadia musters all her courage to ask Bryan for the notes for he is the only one sailing through the course. Via the notes, she thinks that she can strengthen the background this course requires. In a sense, the notes are a source of power. After reading his notes, the gap between them is filled and Shadia feels connected with Bryan and begins to communicate with him. During the communication, Shadia gradually perceives the whole body of Bryan and speaks out her inner thought that she distastes his long hair and earrings which is strange to Shadia the first time she sees him. What surprises her is that Bryan does alter his appearance for her. It is the first time for Shadia that someone has heard her thought and then changed for her, which lightens the inner part of Shadia, "under the crust of vanity" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 9). She learns that she can be noticed and heard by someone. In this case, Shadia attempts to challenge the gaze of her family via further interacting with Bryan. As Shadia recalls, "To make herself pleasing to people was a skill Shadia was trained in. It was not difficult to please people. Agree with them, never dominate the conversation, be economical with the truth. Now, here was someone to whom all these rules needn't apply" (Aboulela, 2013, p. 11), she finds out that she speaks out "luxury words" and takes a dominating position to ask questions in the conversation, during which she doesn't need to apply the rules to please people and conceal the truth inside her which is what she does when talking with her mother and Fareed. Such an alteration of position indicates Shadia gazes back at her former position in the interaction with her mother and Fareed, disengages Shadia from the other, and wrenches her away by constructing the subjectivity of Shadia (Sartre, 2003, p. 307). Additionally, the fixed gaze punishing her for not learning in class temporarily disappears when Shadia concentrates on the transformation of Bryan. In the text, the direct quotations of the content of the class interject within the narration,

“Notes to take down. *In discriminant analysis, a linear combination of variables serves as the basis for assigning Cases to groups*”(Aboulela, 2013, p. 9), implying that they are having class. However, the alarming gaze doesn’t manifest its presence as in the former narration. At this moment, Shadia’s guilt for her mother and herself is alleviated, diverting her attention to her own feelings towards Bryan’s transformation. This ephemeral absence of gaze also denotes that Shadia learns to overlook such gaze though not completely.

Meanwhile, such a change in Bryan’s appearance transforms what Shadia thinks about him. Without the pigtail and earring, Bryan looks nice and decent in the eye of Shadia and glows the inner part of her, arousing her desire to be focused and liked. Yet haunted and tormented by betrayal of Fareed, Shadia still accepts the invitation to visit the museum with Bryan, as a sign of opposition against Fareed. Transcending the transcendence of gaze from Fareed, Shadia finally shouts out “I can’t, I can’t” when Fareed calls her for the purchase of fixtures (Aboulela, 2013, p. 14). It is the first time that Shadia has argued with others in the novel. Though this “can’t” contains the feeling of being guilty of hanging out with Bryan, it underlines Shadia’s opposition by articulating her aversion to gold toilet seats Fareed and his family favor. Even, she denies him in the name of Allah, saying, “Allah is going to punish us for this, it’s not right...” (Aboulela, 2013, p. 14). Therefore, at this moment, Shadia controls her own subjectness and negates the transcendence of Fareed by making him an object in his world, and then gains the freedom to express herself. Then in this way, as Sartre(2003) claims, “I recover myself, for I cannot be an object for an object” (313), Shadia, deracinated from her family and husband, recovers herself the desire to communicate with Bryan and receive the invitation to the museum.

The construction of the subjectivity of Shadia as an African has two parts, one is gazing back at Bryan and the other is looking in the museum. When Shadia watches Bryan to judge if he is approachable, on the one hand, Shadia perceives the gaze from Bryan’s blankest look which is what Shadia assumes and actually her own gaze from inside as mentioned above; on the other hand, Shadia begins to assess Bryan by the standard of what she learns back in the homeland. In her judgment, Shadia thinks that Bryan is immature, “devoid of manners,” and speaks with no respect to the lecturers (Aboulela, 2013, p. 3). In Shadia’s eye, a poor English accent adds to Bryan’s pitifulness which diminishes Shadia’s sense of inferiority imbued by dominating Western society. Intriguingly, Shadia employs the metrics of Westerners to evaluate Bryan, the white student, to gain a sense of superiority. Moreover, the higher social status than that of Bryan also accumulates her sense of pride. Standing in the higher status, Shadia actively gazes back at the white student, saying, “The Nile is superior to the Dee. I saw your Dee, it is nothing, it is like a stream” (Aboulela, 2013, p. 11), which displaying Shadia’s pride of having the Nile in Africa, longer and wider than the Dee which is nothing. Via the comparison, the inversion of relations set by the Orientalism is appreciable. In this contrast, Bryan is reduced to the inferior and the weak while Shadia realizes the oriental discourse is broken, gaining her sense of pride. Such pride in African culture is the sign of subjectivity of Shadia, which is also presented in her religion.

In “The Museum”, religion is the protection of Muslim identity for Shadia living in a foreign land. Before living in Khartoum, Shadia isn’t so religious as she is in Scotland. Back in the homeland, she never gets up to pray. However, when she resides in a foreign country, prayer is her clothes. Without praying, she feels like going “out into the street without any clothes” (Aboulela, 2013, p. 5). So, for Shadia, religion is a comfort and also a source of identification as a muslim African. When she learns Bryan believes in no religion, she again reckons him as pathetic. Compared with Bryan, Shadia increases her pride in her culture and constructs her

own subjectivity as an African, breaking the stereotypes of ignorance and savages as being an African. Withal, the gap of communication between Shadia and Bryan also is filling.

While walking through the museum, Shadia is disgusted and irritated by the Africa in Europe's vision, cold and old. Pictures of jungles, tangible reminders, and gunfire in service of the empire force Shadia to acknowledge and identify with Africa inhabited only by game; hence, the museum alienates Shadia due to its "homogenous narration of empire through the colonial gaze" (Arora, 2021, p. 122). Nevertheless, being gazed by the distorted version of Africa, Shadia still gazes back at this distortion and cries out to tell Bryan that lies are filled in this museum, as an oppositional pose to challenge the authoritative narration in the museum, just like Hook suggests, "Critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (Hooks, 2003, p. 103). Though Hooks discusses about film spectators, in the museum, the visitor is also a spectator looking at the museum. Thus, via gazing back, Shadia becomes a site of resistance against the colonial gaze. Beholding Bryan studiously and carefully learning the distorted version of Africa, Shadia, at first, doesn't express her worry and irritation obviously. Then when she detects that the imperialists who had humiliated her history are heroes in his eyes, Shadia cannot tolerate the humiliation and distortion, so she cries out (Aboulela, 2013, p. 18). Being furious and helpless, Shadia rejects the representation of the museum and being the objects under the colonial gaze, and also refuses to identify with the game and jungles, crying that they have "things like computers and cars" just like people in Scotland (Aboulela, 2013, p. 18), an individual attempt to invert the representation of the museum. Therefore, through the negation of who she is told by the museum, Shadia constructs her own subjectivity as an African. Bell (2003) also defiantly declares that "not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (p. 94). Obviously, a singularly oppositional gaze doesn't suffice to rebel against the mighty gaze of the institute and change the reality distorted by the museum. In the end, Shadia's inability to sustain a conversation with Bryan signals a failure to challenge the dominant orientalist discourses represented in the museum displays, and the gap is shattered.

Conclusion

To conclude, in "The Museum", Aboulela provides a perspective of Muslim female migrant, Shadia, to present how Shadia undergoes alienation and construction of herself living in Scotland. The relationship between gaze and the construction of subjectivity is presented throughout the story. Looking at herself and being looked at by others, Shadia loses her subjectivity of being a woman and an African when living in the new environment and constantly lives in the guilt caused by the anticipation of her mother and the sense of inferiority.

However, Shadia also actively takes her gaze to look at the surroundings and the museum. Interaction with Bryan profoundly assists Shadia knows herself and fix the gap led by alienation. Although Shadia finally fails to build a bridge between her and Bryan because of the mighty gaze in the museum, rendering Shadia discovers that individual is small and has no strength to change the museum, her "can't" to Fareed and her negation of representation underscores the gaze-back of Shadia and the subject-ness within her.

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