

## Gaze and Oppositional Gaze in *Mr. Tang's Girls*

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The gaze is a means of power that can flow through family relationships. It has intense regulatory overtones. In her short story *Mr. Tang's Girls*, Malaysian-Chinese Anglophone diasporic writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim shows the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures and the resistance of women under the oppression of patriarchy through the portrayal of the father, Ah Kong, and the eldest daughter, Kim Li. Based on Foucault's discipline gaze and Hooks' oppositional gaze, this article analyzes the power operation in the story from the following three aspects: the male gaze, discipline and self-discipline, and the oppositional gaze. Kim Li's subjective image of breaking free from male ownership control has been presented. It suggests the difficulties encountered by female groups in their rebellion against the male gaze and their pursuit of freedom and emancipation. It also reflects the tragedy of awakening women's destinies under the dual oppression of patriarchy and the East-Western cultural conflict.

*Keywords:* *Mr. Tang's Girls*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, gaze, oppositional gaze

### Introduction

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, a Malaysian-Chinese Anglophone diasporic writer, is a renowned American poet, novelist, and critic and a recipient of MELUS and Feminist Press Lifetime Achievement Awards. She is the author of more than 40 novels, poems, and critiques, among which the poetry collection *Crossing the Peninsula*, published in 1980, made her the first female writer to win the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Her works *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* and *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* were awarded the American Book Awards in 1990 and 1997, respectively.

*Mr. Tang's Girls* is included in the short story collection *Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (hereafter referred to as *Two Dreams*). The story is set in Malaysia, where a Chinese father, Ah Kong, has four daughters with his second wife. Kim Li, the eldest daughter, is physically developed and has a rebellious personality after entering puberty. Her father dislikes her for making him feel that his paternal authority is being challenged. In order to discipline her, he arranges a marriage for her to marry a Chinese henchman in his thirties as his second wife. To rebel against the arrangement, Kim Li pretends to agree to it, and ultimately tempts and kills her father before the wedding.

In the introduction of *Two Dreams*, famous literature researcher Zhou Xiaojing (1997) pointed out that *Mr. Tang's Girls* indicates that the family structure is ultimately a power structure, and the relationship between men and women is a power relationship that constrains the emotional and sexual lives of characters (p. xi). In the story, as the male parent under the patriarchal system, Ah Kong represents the core of Eastern traditional culture and ideology. He stands in the dominant position in the power field, gazing at his wife, daughters, and the Western culture they represent. While females, represented by the eldest daughter Kim Li, have suffered from the dual oppression of gender and culture and have undergone male gaze after being disciplined by power.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim later expanded this work into the novel *Sister Swing* (2006), which sparked widespread reaction. Existing studies mainly focused on this novel and discussed the construction of female cultural identity (Farahmandian, 2015; Marino, 2014; Zhang & Zhu, 2017). So far, domestic and foreign researchers have not treated *Mr. Tang's Girls* in detail. This article will focus on the power operation in the short story from the perspective of gaze in the following three aspects: the male gaze under patriarchal oppression, discipline and self-discipline, and Kim Li's oppositional gaze.

### **The Male Gaze under Patriarchal Oppression**

Gaze is a viewing method that carries power or desires entangled in it (Chen, 2006, p. 349). Since the narcissistic gaze of Narcissus in ancient Greece, the gaze has always been a manifestation of the will to seek truth centered on vision (Zhang, 2004, p. 115). In the 19th century, Foucault criticized this visual centrism and was the first to propose gaze as a means of power operation. He was inspired by the panopticon depicted by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham and proposed the theory of panopticism, which holds that gaze itself is a discipline of power. The subject of gaze possesses power, and in patriarchal rule, gendered gaze arises, which in turn endows the subject of observation with a dominant and governing position in power relations. Zhu (2011) once pointed out that desire is linked to women, and desire itself represents the male unconsciousness. She held that "it is the fact as well as the result of the construction of social gender culture that women enter the male perspective as objects of their desires" (p. 48). Therefore, the male gaze is the process in which men, as the subject of the gaze, objectify the female body and satisfy male desires. During this course, women become the object of male desires.

Power operates and is implemented through a network of organizations. Not only do individuals move back and forth in the path of power, but they are also always in a state of exercising power (Foucault, 1979). Therefore, gaze, as a means of power, can also circulate within the family network (Wang & Xu, 2023). In the story, the subject of gaze is Ah Kong, the representative of patriarchal parents, while the objects of gaze are his second wife and daughters. Shirley Geok-lin Lim entirely constructed this patriarchal gaze in it. Ah Kong came to his second home every weekend to spend time with his wife and daughter. He brought them various Western-style foods, staring at his wife and daughters who had received Western education. They all surrounded and depended on him, playing the role of his wife and daughters in his heart. Every late night, Ah Kong would stare and peek into each of his daughters' rooms after checking the door locks. Shirley Geok-lin Lim provided a detailed description of each daughter's bedroom and sleeping posture from the father's perspective. This scene constitutes a panopticon, where the father monitors each daughter, and their every move during break time is under the father's "eye of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 146). By monitoring his daughters'

sleeping appearance, Ah Kong felt his daughters' attachment to him and his ownership of them, thus acquiring pleasant sensations in the silence of the night. In addition to conducting physical visual surveillance, Ah Kong also conducted covert monitoring of his daughters' behavior, both mentally and physically. He rarely slept at night and consistently monitored every move of his daughters and the maid:

...he walked through the house, looking into each room while his mind and body ran in electrical fusion, each female form in bed renewing his pleasure with his life, leaving each room with a fresh vibrancy to his body. (Lim, 1997, p. 34)

Physical and invisible monitoring of women at home can invigorate his spirit and restore his vitality and energy as a man. Therefore, the father's gaze on female images in the family is a projection of male desires, and the subjectivity of these female images is suppressed and overshadowed. Thus, women become objects of male desires. The entire process implies the discourse of power construction. The subject of gaze possesses power, and this gendered gaze relationship is not only a product of patriarchy but also a tool to strengthen patriarchal government (Hawthorn, 2006, p. 513).

Ah Kong had his own definition and paradigm for the image of women in the family. In his perspective, his wife should be a gentle, obedient, and dependent woman with a "vague smile and soft shape" (Lim, 1997, p. 31). Her most significant role was to provide him with emotional value during the daytime and physical comfort at night. The name of the mother never appears in the story, and there is no detailed description of her image. She seems to be just an accessory, a concrete manifestation of the fictional wife image from the patriarchal perspective.

Moreover, his daughters should be innocent and pure; "their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements, and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home" (Lim, 1997, p. 28). He enjoyed the role-playing of his wife and daughters and the fulfillment that came from their attachment to him. Gazing at his wife and daughters removed the fatigue of a week of work and provided strength and solace.

However, in Ah Kong's view, daughters can only be holy, pure and naive. Once they reached adolescence and made the transition from childhood to womanhood, that is, when their bodies began to develop, their sexual awareness awoke, their personalities became rebellious, they would break away from the patriarchal definition of the image of a daughter and become symbols of wickedness and lasciviousness. When Kim Li, the eldest daughter, said in a provocative tone that his daughter was becoming a woman, he cursed her for dressing like a "half-naked slut" (Lim, 1997, p. 30). During his nightly surveillance of the house, the scent of talcum powder and hairspray in his second daughter's room reminded him of a prostitute's room. He also analogized the position of her holding a pillow to sleep with the position of a woman embracing her lover. When he found Kim Li's long hair cut short, he felt that she was horrid. The male became observers and judges of female appearance, and all the phenomena that symbolized his daughter's maturity were abhorrent and disgusting. This feeling comes from the unease of being out of control brought about by a daughter's growth and from the fear of patriarchal oppression decline. As daughters grow up, they become more independent. For example, Kim Li became rebellious and no longer wanted to rely on pleasing her father for living expenses. At the same time, Ah Kong began to grow old: his hair began to turn gray, and his forehead, which was growing more extensive due to baldness, was covered with spots. Initially, Ah Kong "seldom had to think about what to say in this house, and his self-consciousness was extreme" (Lim, 1997, p. 33). Afterward he "turned away, not staying to see if

she would obey him” (Lim, 1997, p. 33) even when he thought Kim Li’s short haircut was ugly. The change in the mindset of Ah Kong declares his aging and signifies the gradual decline of patriarchal domination. Meanwhile, Kim Li’s series of rebellious behaviors are seen as provocative and defiant against the patriarchy, with consequences for the power of the gazing subject. With this sense of threat and anxiety, Ah Kong took his daughter’s fate a step further with oppression and discipline under the gaze of power.

### **Discipline and Self-discipline**

Foucault’s power gaze is strongly disciplinary, with the subject of the gaze exerting power over the object of the gaze in order to create a “tamed body” (Foucault, 1979, p. 138). According to Xia (2022), in the context of feminism, women are always in a state of the male gaze and self-gaze internalized by discipline. As mentioned earlier, Ah Kong had his own definitions and standards for female characters in the family, and these female family members were constantly undergoing self-regulation under his gaze. Whenever Ah Kong returned home, his daughters would stay home from all school activities, friend invitations, gatherings, and shopping, playing the role of daughters beside him. The father liked to see his daughters eat like European ladies, so they spent their Saturday tea time savoring all kinds of Western food with Western behaviors. Ah Kong needed to satisfy his desires through the attachment of female family members. The daughters, therefore, seized the opportunity of afternoon tea to attract his attention through banter, actively requesting his gaze and thus soliciting gifts from him to meet their own needs. The mother, on the other hand, timely raised the financial need for life-sustaining by portraying a gentle, docile, and household-oriented woman in chats.

Although Ah Kong raised and educated his daughters in Western ways, hoping that the women in the family would have a Western outward appearance and behavior, he still tried to maintain their traditional and docile female mindset and core. It is also the source of women’s contentment when they attached to him monetarily. The subject of gaze is endowed with the privilege of seeing by power. At the same time, the object of gaze experiences the power pressure brought by the viewer’s gaze while being reduced to the object of seeing. They internalize the viewer’s value judgments and reach self-objectification (Chen, 2006). The mother was once a Protestant Christian, but her marriage to Ah Kong as a second wife violated the doctrine and made her a “stray lamb” (Lim, 1997, p. 34) in the eyes of the pastor. This marriage relationship is not only a competition between Western religious beliefs and Eastern traditional culture but also a tug-of-war between male and female relationships. Under the patriarchal power, women ultimately succumbed. They violated their religious will and catered to the value judgments under the male gaze, playing the role of wives and mothers in the traditional oriental patriarchal cultural environment. Since marrying Ah Kong and becoming his second wife, the mother has never been to church again. The pastor of the church expressed his understanding of Ah Kong’s belief in polygamy as a pagan and his forgiveness of the mother’s apostasy behavior from the teachings of the times. However, it can be seen from the following texts that in his mind, he still condemned the mother’s behaviors and blamed her for all the sins.

And, although I suppose it doesn’t matter who the sin is committed with, Mr. Tang is a well-known, respectable man...Pagans have their own faith, I have no doubt, and Christ will consider this when the Day comes, but for the mother... (Lim, 1997, p. 35)

Therefore, in essence, she was abandoned by her own religious beliefs. Men share privileges by forming same-sex social networks with groups of people similar to themselves, elevating male social status and maintaining their dominant privileges (Kanter, 1977; Matin, 1996). The pastor's judgment of the mother is actually a manifestation of the male gaze and power discipline supervision from a social perspective. As the object of gaze, the mother is oppressed by male power. At the same time, the father's positive image of masculinity is established, and the operation of such social gaze and disciplinary oversight consolidates patriarchal domination. The discourse of the male gaze objectifies women as things to be displayed and possessed (Mulvey, 1975). Under the patriarchal gaze, the mother loses her self-subjectivity and plays the role of the Other, whose name and image are both nothing. The full manifestation of her individual value is to satisfy the physical and spiritual desires of her husband, becoming a representative of the female image in the patriarchal perspective.

However, Kim Li, the eldest daughter, who had awakened her self-awareness and sexual consciousness, had broken the patriarchal definition of a daughter and struck at the kernel of traditional oriental thought pursued by her father, Ah Kong. He found his eldest daughter's behavior provocative. From her current image and behavior, he had foreseen the future in which she would be transformed from a good girl to a promiscuous slut. Kim Li's rebellious defiance forced Ah Kong to maintain patriarchal rule through more forceful discipline and reprimand. Therefore, Ah Kong eagerly arranged a marriage for her. For this marriage, he never considered the will and interest of his own daughter but regarded her as a means of safeguarding paternal authority, praising employees, and helping his own career. Despite knowing that his wife and daughter would not be willing, he decided to marry his young Kim Li to a 33-year-old male employee with a Chinese background. This middle-aged man not only had a language barrier with Kim Li, but also already had a wife just like Ah Kong. Through such discipline and punishment, the male attempted to maintain the passive position of women through absolute discursive power and reinforce their dominion over the female (Mulvey, 1975).

The power oppression of this discipline is not only imposed on the eldest daughter Kim Li, but also indirectly affects other female members in the family. Under the continuous patriarchal gaze and oppression in the past, the engagement of Kim Li did not affect family members' daily lives on the surface. His wife and daughters still fulfilled their respective roles to cater to his gaze and satisfy his desires. Psychologically, however, the behavior served as a warning to other daughters. The mother described to Ah Kong the reactions of other daughters when they learned that their eldest sister had been engaged:

The girls were quite upset. Kim Mee is so sensitive. She was crying because she was afraid you will arrange a marriage for her also, and I couldn't say a thing to her. (Lim, 1997, p. 37)

The act of disciplining created a psychological sense of fear among girls. The oppression of power prompted them to avoid rebellious behavior similar to Kim Li and regulate their behavior as women under patriarchal rule to cater to male cognition and value judgments. In the case of the mother, she internalized the values of the patriarchal gaze while using them as principles to guide her own behavior and imposing them on her daughters. After Ah Kong told the family about the engagement he made for his eldest daughter, the mother stated that his decision was very correct and instilled her internalized views on marriage and female values under patriarchal oppression into his eldest daughter. Throughout the entire process of arranged marriage, the mother's power

and discourse as a female parent were absent, and her freedom as the subject was deprived, demonstrating the absolute dominance of male parents in the patriarchal system. And the mother's attitude and behaviors ensured the intergenerational inheritance of patriarchal values, the completion of patriarchal discipline, and, to some extent, the maintenance of patriarchal government.

### **Kim Li's Oppositional Gaze**

Foucault (1980) emphasized that there is an effective resistance to gaze in the panopticon, where the role of gaze can be transformed, and there is also room for disadvantaged groups in power distribution to retaliate (Wang & Xu, 2023). Bell Hooks (1992), in her study of black female viewers, also stated that viewing is a form of power. She argued that the role of the gaze is transformative and further proposed the concept of the oppositional gaze. Therefore, when the patriarchal gaze constantly disciplines and oppresses women, the desire to fight back against the gaze and the discipline will gradually become more vital. In the story, the eldest daughter, Kim Li, is a typical representative of the awakening of female subjectivity and resistance against the patriarchal gaze.

The story unfolds with Kim Li sneaking cigarettes and being caught by her younger sister Kim Mee. Smoking is not in line with Ah Kong's definition of a daughter, let alone stealing his cigarette. Therefore, Kim Mee screamed, "Ah Kong will slap you" (Lim, 1997, p. 27) when she saw her sister smoking. Kim Li's act of stealing her father's cigarettes is a rebellion against female norms under patriarchal oppression. She is like the "large ciku tree" (Lim, 1997, p. 26) planted in the yard, which grows within the fence but constantly stretching its branches and leaves towards outside, yearning for a world of freedom without patriarchal oppression. When she finished her cigarette and extinguished the butt under the sand, the smoke still rose from the unextinguished stub buried under the mound. The fate of this cigarette butt is the same as Kim Li's arranged marriage in the following story. Although she restrained her rebellion and accepted her father's arrangement on the surface, her desire and spirit to fight against domination and discipline were not extinguished, which eventually prompted her to commit the act of assassinating her father. In addition, Kim Li also painted red nail polish, wore adult clothes, and cut short hair. These rebellious behaviors in appearance are a decisive counterattack to the image of a daughter under the patriarchal gaze. She did not internalize male values but rejected the rules and regulations of feudal patriarchal society on female behavior.

Hooks (1992) pointed out that the object being stared at can challenge the power of the gazing subject, dissolve the power of gaze through adversarial gaze, and thus take over the position of the subject. In addition to a range of rebellious behaviors, Kim Li also rebelled against the dictates of the patriarchal gaze through the oppositional gaze. When Ah Kong patrolled each daughter's room at night, all the daughters except Kim Li were asleep, indicating that she was the only one who had awakened the female subject consciousness. When Ah Kong came to the door of her room, "she turned a baleful look" (Lim, 1997, p. 32) and questioned him. She retaliated with Ah Kong's gaze, causing a considerable impact. The father quit criticizing her short hair and tossed and turned in bed: "Old, he thought, old and wasted his daughters had made him" (Lim, 1997, p. 34). Kim Li's oppositional gaze challenged the authority centered on the male gaze. After sensing that his patriarchal rule was threatened, Ah Kong urgently wanted to impose patriarchal oppression on Kim Li through more brutal disciplinary means. Therefore, he set her up in an arranged marriage.

Foucault believed that the root of the gaze on disciplinary power lies in the mastery of discourse power in the knowledge system (Liu, 2023). Therefore, in order to regain subject freedom and reconstruct subjectivity, it is necessary to start with mastering discourse power. Kim Li used a provocative tone to inform Ah Kong that his daughters were becoming women and repeatedly expressed her desire to meet the man in the arranged marriage. Sartre argued that:

In order to regain freedom, we need to gaze at others in order to liberate ourselves from their domination and control them in turn. Nevertheless, others are not easily submissive, so I and others “gaze” at each other, surpass each other, engaging in power struggles (Chen, 2006, p. 352).

Kim Li's desire to meet the man in person before marriage indicates that she wanted to construct the subjectivity of her own gaze by forming an antagonistic gaze relationship with the dominant gazer. And her repeated arguments with her father, who adhered to the traditional view on marriage, over the request to meet with the man also showed her dissatisfaction with the feudal patriarchal oppression and her attempts to engage in a power tug-of-war through the struggle for discourse power. After the communication failure, Kim Li did not willingly accept the arrangement but retaliated against it by scowling.

Since the father's discipline of his daughter was rooted in the daughter's mental and physical resistance to the norms of femininity under the male gaze, the “body” also became the field in Kim Li's resistance to the patriarchal gaze. She vented her dissatisfaction and demonstrated the emergence of her sexual consciousness through her crazy makeup behavior.

She pencilled her eyebrows crudely, rubbed two large red patches on her cheeks and drew in wide lips with the brightest crimson lipstick in Kim Mee's collection...Blue shadow circled her eyes, and her clumsy application of the mascara stick left blotches below her lids like black tear stains. She teased her short hair into a bush of knots and sprayed cologne till it dripped down her neck. (Lim, 1997, pp. 38-39)

These performances that did not conform to the image of a daughter under a patriarchal gaze were all Kim Li's challenges to patriarchal discipline. “Ah Kong stood at the door afraid” (Lim, 1997, p. 39), gazing at all this. Although he was still the subject of gaze, he could no longer demonstrate his authority and discipline through the means of gaze. Kim Li acquired control of her body through paranoid and crazy behavior, and the norms that suppress female gender roles met with resistance.

At the end of the story, Kim Li jumped into the arms of her father in a sexually suggestive gesture of dedication and ended his life with a knife in the course of the dispute. The posture of Kim Li is like “a gesture of love or hope” (Lim, 1997, p. 40), which reflects Kim Li's awakening of female sexual consciousness, her thirst for love and desire, as well as her longing for hope and freedom. In the eyes of Ah Kong, daughters should be innocent and pure, and women's desires were manifestations of evil and challenges to patriarchy. While Kim Li broke free from the constraints of patriarchal oppression and, under Ah Kong's gaze, expressed her desire as an individual with a dying posture and the makeup that he despised the most. When Ah Kong opened his eyes during his nap, he “saw Kim Li's black and blue eyes tightly shut, her white and red face screwed up in a smile” (Lim, 1997, p. 40). The makeup had become a weapon of resistance, making Ah Kong feel the threat of death: “his heart was hammering urgently; he could feel his jaws tighten as if at the taste of something sour” (Lim, 1997, p. 40). During the dispute, “Kim Li's eyes blazed open,” and she transformed

from the object of gaze to the subject. This behavior of oppositional gaze demonstrates strong subjective will through silent resistance.

In Ah Kong's final moments of consciousness, "he saw the gleaming fish-eyes of the fishwoman rise from the klong to greet him" (Lim, 1979, p. 40). This indicates that his life was shrouded in the shadow of a female gaze: he became an object of power relations. From this perspective, Kim Li's oppositional gaze achieved victory. Kim Li sought a path to determine her own destiny through her resolute and tragic act of killing her father. This tragic ending may be the only way for Kim Li to seek resistance under the constraints of the social environment and individual cognition at that time. As a descendant of the immigrant community, she found it difficult to achieve balance and complete the construction of self-identity and subjectivity in the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures. Therefore, she can only resort to the cost of life to break through the predicament. Although she had completed her pursuit of freedom, Kim Li would spend her whole life healing the pain caused by the tragedy of her own patricide. Hence, to some extent, her construction of her own subjectivity failed. This ending reflects the difficulties women face in their oppositional gaze and their pursuit of liberation under the dual oppression of Eastern and Western cultures confrontation, cognitive contradictions, and patriarchy.

### Conclusion

The article uses the power of the gaze to interpret Shirley Geok-lin Lim's short story *Mr. Tang's Girls*. In the story, Lim portrays the conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures and the resistance of women under patriarchal oppression through the portrayal of the father, Ah Kong, and the eldest daughter, Kim Li. Under the constraints and oppression of patriarchy, women are invisible objects lacking discourse power and subjectivity. They are Others who are spoken by men and live under their gaze and discipline. In this structurally unequal system, women constantly receive discipline and self-discipline, internalizing male values and replacing their true self-feelings with the standards of a patriarchal society. However, Kim Li is not a completely passive and submissive female object in the male gaze but a subject who strives to break free from male ownership control and freely chooses to create herself. When confronting the discipline of patriarchy, she challenged the authority and norms centered on the male gaze through rebellious behavior and oppositional gaze. Through the inversion of subject and object, she transformed from a passive and vulnerable object under the male gaze to the subject of observation, completing the construction of female subjectivity. Malaysian-Chinese Anglophone diasporic writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim has a complex cultural background and unique creative identity. As a feminist warrior and leader, her exploration of patriarchal culture and feminism reflects the reality of women's survival in cross-cultural contexts, providing inspiration and reference for issues such as women's identity and subjectivity construction in the current era.

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