



## Cross-Cultural Audience Perceptions of the Female Gaze: A Comparative Analysis of Fleabag and Charulata

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### Abstract

This study comparatively analyzed the female gaze in the British series *Fleabag* and Indian film *Charulata*, examining how storytelling techniques empowered female protagonists with raw, relatable journeys that challenged patriarchal norms and influence audiences. Guided by five objectives—to investigate, explore, compare female gaze representations; assess audience awareness; and evaluate life impacts—the research addressed four questions on gaze theorization, narrative strategies, perceptual effects, and gender discourse implications. Data comprised in-depth interviews with 15 diverse participants (aged 20–60) from India, Myanmar, the UK, Thailand, and South Korea. Grounded in Narrative Paradigm and Feminist Standpoint theories, the analysis highlighted *Fleabag*'s fourth-wall breaks and *Charulata*'s visual framing as tools dismantling the male gaze's objectification. These techniques humanized female characters, granting them authentic voices, emotional depth, flaws, and agency—contrasting historical stereotypes. Findings revealed participants' deepened awareness, profound relatability, and personal transformations: viewers aligned emotionally with protagonists' journeys, reshaping gender role perceptions and fostering authentic connections.

This contributes to media studies by underscoring the female gaze's cultural power in Television and film, advocating nuanced female representations that promote progressive gender discourse and audience empowerment.

**Keywords:** Storytelling Techniques, Female Gaze, British series *Fleabag*, Indian Film *Charulata*

### Introduction

The media has often presented women as weak, emotional, and incapable of making sound decisions, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. This not only limited the opportunities available to women but also reinforced gender inequality and



discrimination. The male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) a concept has been extensively explored in feminist theory, particularly in the realms of literature, cinema, and cultural studies. The concept mainly referred to the way in which visual arts, literature, and media are structured around a masculine-heterosexual perspective, objectifying women for the pleasure of the male viewer in general media. The concept of the female gaze challenges traditional narratives by emphasizing the perspectives, experiences, and desires of women, offering a counterpoint to the male gaze that has dominated cinematic storytelling. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of female identity and emotional complexity. Comparing *Fleabag* (UK) and *Charulata* (India) illuminated the female gaze's cross-cultural adaptability in cinema, bridging Western contemporary TV satire with postcolonial Indian art-house traditions. This study juxtaposed the work of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's raw, fourth-wall-breaking introspection against Satyajit Ray's subtle visual lyricism, revealing shared techniques that humanized female protagonists—empowering them as subjective agents who dismantled patriarchal objectification and forged relatable audience bonds.

The importance remained in the demonstration of the female gaze's universality: both works transcended cultural contexts to prioritize women's emotional complexity and agency, challenging Eurocentric feminist narratives while highlighting cinema's potential to reshape gender discourse globally. A cross-cultural lens exposed convergence of internal monologues fostering empathy and divergences in the form of *Fleabag*'s direct address vs. *Charulata*'s restrained longing, underscoring media's role in nuanced female representation amid diverse socio-historical norms. Such comparisons mattered because they countered rather the homogenous gaze theory applications, enriching media studies by validating non-Western contributions like Ray's proto-feminist gaze, fostering inclusive feminist scholarship that influences global audience perceptions and gender equity dialogues.

Literature gaps included limited empirical audience studies on gaze reception across cultures, scarce Narrative Paradigm or Feminist Standpoint integrations for non-Hollywood texts, and underexplored viewer impacts specifically life-altering relatability in UK-India comparative frameworks gaps this qualitative interview analysis addresses. Comparing *Fleabag* (2016–2019) and *Charulata* (1964) spanning over 50 years was a deliberate choice to demonstrate the continuity of female interior struggles highlighting about isolation, silenced agency alongside the evolution of the female gaze from Ray's proto-feminist visual restraint to Waller-Bridge's direct fourth-wall catharsis, both peaking at Freytag's Climax through relational rupture. This temporal bridging addressed the core research problem lack of empirical evidence linking cross-era, cross-cultural female gaze portrayals to universal audience transformation while filling three gaps:

- (1) temporal continuity tracing gaze development



- (2) cross-national reception testing UK/India techniques on diverse viewers (India, Thailand, Myanmar, UK)
- (3) empirical validation quantifying interview data. Interviewees confirmed relevance proving media's mainly storytelling in Films and television Series the persuasive power to foster global empathy for authentic female subjectivity across socio-historical contexts.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the representation of female gaze portrayed in Fleabag through storytelling techniques.
2. To explore the representation of female gaze portrayed in Charulata through storytelling techniques.
3. To compare and analyze the portrayal of female gaze through storytelling techniques of Fleabag and Charulata.
4. To explore audience awareness on female gaze among the audience.
5. To investigate the impact of the concept of female gaze on participants.

### Literature Review

#### Types of Storytelling and Models used in Cinema and Television

Storytelling vividly captures events, objects, or experiences to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually, serving as a powerful communication tool that reaches the heart unlike pure analysis. It transforms abstract ideas into relatable narratives, fosters connections, sparks creativity, encourages action, and simplifies complex messages driving clarity, collaboration, and change by reflecting real-life contexts and diverse viewpoints.

The text lists key storytelling models that provide narrative structure for film and TV:

#### Storytelling Technique in Fleabag

##### Hero's Journey (Monomyth)

Joseph Campbell's universal narrative template tracks a protagonist's call to adventure, trials, mentorship, transformation, and return, emphasizing growth and triumph over adversity in myths and epics.

##### Three-Act Structure

Divides stories into Setup (introduction), Confrontation (escalating conflicts), and Resolution (climax and payoff), prized for clear pacing and sustained audience tension in screenwriting.

##### Seven Basic Plots

Christopher Booker's archetypes—Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, Quest, Voyage/Return, Comedy, Tragedy, Rebirth—map universal emotional journeys across cultures and genres.



### Story Spine

Kenn Adams/Pixar template: "Once upon a time... Every day... But one day... Until finally..." guides cause-effect progression for brainstorming with clear stakes and resolution.

### Freytag's Pyramid

Five-part dramatic arc (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Dénouement) builds tension to a peak then resolves, ideal for suspenseful literature and theater pacing.

### Story Pyramid (8-Step)

Freytag expands into eight steps: Introduction through New Situation, aiding business/education in organizing persuasive narratives with comprehensive conflict-to-resolution flow.

### Kishōtenketsu

East Asian four-act (Ki: intro, Shō: develop, ten: twist, Ketsu: reconcile) emphasizes reflection over conflict, recontextualizing slice-of-life stories via surprise.

### The Use of Freytag's Pyramid in both *Fleabag* and *Charulata*

Both *Fleabag* (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2016–2019) and *Charulata* (Satyajit Ray, 1964) masterfully applied Freytag's Pyramid Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Dénouement to chart introspective female protagonists' emotional journeys under the female gaze. In *Fleabag*, exposition unveiled chaotic grief via fourth-wall asides, rising action intensifies family strife and priest romance, climax erupted in raw confession/rejection, falling action processes loss (e.g., statue return), and dénouement signals ambiguous growth with a final gaze-break. Similarly, *Charulata*'s exposition exposed an isolated housewife's boredom in colonial Calcutta, rising action that further sparked intellectual intimacy with her cousin amid secret writing, climax shatters via betrayal and departure, falling action wrestles guilt, and dénouement freezes hands apart, evoking enduring solitude. Freytag's tension-building pyramid proves ideal for both, mirroring internal psychological arcs over action-driven plots amplifying relational ruptures, emotional complexity, and unresolved ambiguity to humanize flawed women as relatable agents, fostering profound cross-cultural audience influence distinct from heroic monomyths. *Fleabag*, written and performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, has earned critical acclaim for its portrayal of non-normative femininity and its raw, subversive treatment of trauma, guilt, and grief. The protagonist's rejection of social conventions sparks discourse on vulnerability versus conformity in modern society, highlighting tensions between self-determination and societal pressures. These conflicts manifest stylistically through metafictional techniques fourth-wall breaks and direct audience address that restored her narrative agency while exposing ironic gaps between her inner world and outward behavior (Vetri, 2025).



Charulata was adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's "The Broken Nest," has garnered critical acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of female subjectivity and emotional repression within colonial Bengal's patriarchal constraints. The protagonist's intellectual isolation and unspoken desire challenge gentlemen norms, inviting feminist discourse on autonomy versus domestic duty. Ray stylistically conveys this tension through visual lyricism; her gaze through opera glasses, swing shots, and frozen gestures—granting Charu narrative agency while revealing poignant disjunctions between her inner longing and societal performance (Osman, 2021).

### **The Definition of the Female Gaze and Their use by Directors**

Women have made films since cinema's dawn in the late 1800s–early 1900s, yet remain underrepresented on-screen and behind the camera, overshadowed by male dominance. The "female gaze" counters this by portraying women's experiences authentically—without objectification or sexualization—emphasizing their desires, viewpoints, and complexity. Contemporary directors like Greta Gerwig and Ava DuVernay exemplify this, crafting nuanced stories of identity, empowerment, and relational dynamics that prioritize female agency, diversify narratives, and foster empathetic audience engagement.

#### **Female Gaze in Fleabag**

Fleabag embodied the female gaze through its authentic portrayal of a complex, flawed protagonist with agency, flaws, and unsexualized sexuality challenging objectifying male gaze norms.

Key techniques include fourth-wall breaks for intimate viewer empathy into her emotional struggles, and peripheral male characters that center her desires, contradictions, and vulnerabilities. This disrupts stereotypes, prioritizing emotional authenticity, feminist introspection on identity, sexuality, and relationships.

Fleabag's feminist portrayal of grief and family dysfunction resonated rather therapeutically with audiences, that fostered emotional catharsis and self-recognition mirroring study's interview findings where participants across cultures reported profound relatability to Fleabag's flawed interiority, reshaping their gender role perceptions through shared vulnerability (Zhao, 2025).

#### **Female Gaze in Charulata**

Satyajit Ray's Charulata embodies the female gaze through intimate visuals aligning viewers with Charulata's inner loneliness, desires, and intellectual awakening via opera glasses, framed shots, and subtle gestures without objectification.

It emphasizes her subjectivity, blending erotic longing for Amal with self-exploration, challenging patriarchal norms while compassionately noting male complexities.

Symbolic liminal spaces highlight societal constraints vs. personal freedom, offering a



nuanced, empathetic view of her emotional world. Ray masterfully employs wordless visual storytelling, as when Charulata stands silently at her bedroom doorway while Bhupati passes without acknowledgment, prompting her to swiftly raise opera glasses in a symbolic attempt to draw him nearer. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey ( Mulvey, 1975) defines the gaze as the act of perception specifically how individuals view others, groups, or themselves (Mondal & Bhattacharjee, 2024).

## Related Theories

### Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory posits that knowledge from marginalized women's lived experiences reveals overlooked power dynamics, challenging male-centric narratives by prioritizing female agency, voices, and emotional depth; it complements the Narrative Paradigm, which argues humans interpret the world through stories with narrative coherence (internal logic) and fidelity (resonance with audience values), making authentic female narratives persuasive and empathetic. In *Fleabag*, raw critiques of norms via fourth-wall breaks foster investment in gender complexities, while *Charulata* illuminates a housewife's patriarchal constraints through subtle introspection—together demonstrating how these theories enable female-centered stories to disrupt ideologies, deepen engagement, and highlight women's identities.

### Narrative Paradigm

Narrative Paradigm theory, developed by Walter Fisher, posits that humans fundamentally understand and communicate through stories rather than rational arguments alone, assessing their validity via narrative coherence (internal logic, structure, and lifelike fidelity) and fidelity (resonance with personal values and experiences). While following the concept of female gaze in *Fleabag* and *Charulata*, it structured the storytelling techniques as persuasive narratives that elevated every woman's subjective perspective, emotional depth, and flaws over male gaze objectification—aligning with Feminist Standpoint theory in the study. For *Fleabag*, fourth-wall breaks created an intimate interaction with the audience, coherent asides that built fidelity through *Fleabag*'s raw vulnerabilities, fostering audience empathy and dismantling patriarchal viewing norms. Similarly, *Charulata* employed visual framing and introspective monologues for narrative coherence around the protagonist's desiring gaze, that resonated with suppressed female agency in colonial contexts to humanize her complexity. This theoretical lens thus analyzed how both works' storyline persuaded viewers to reimagine gender roles.

## Conceptual framework

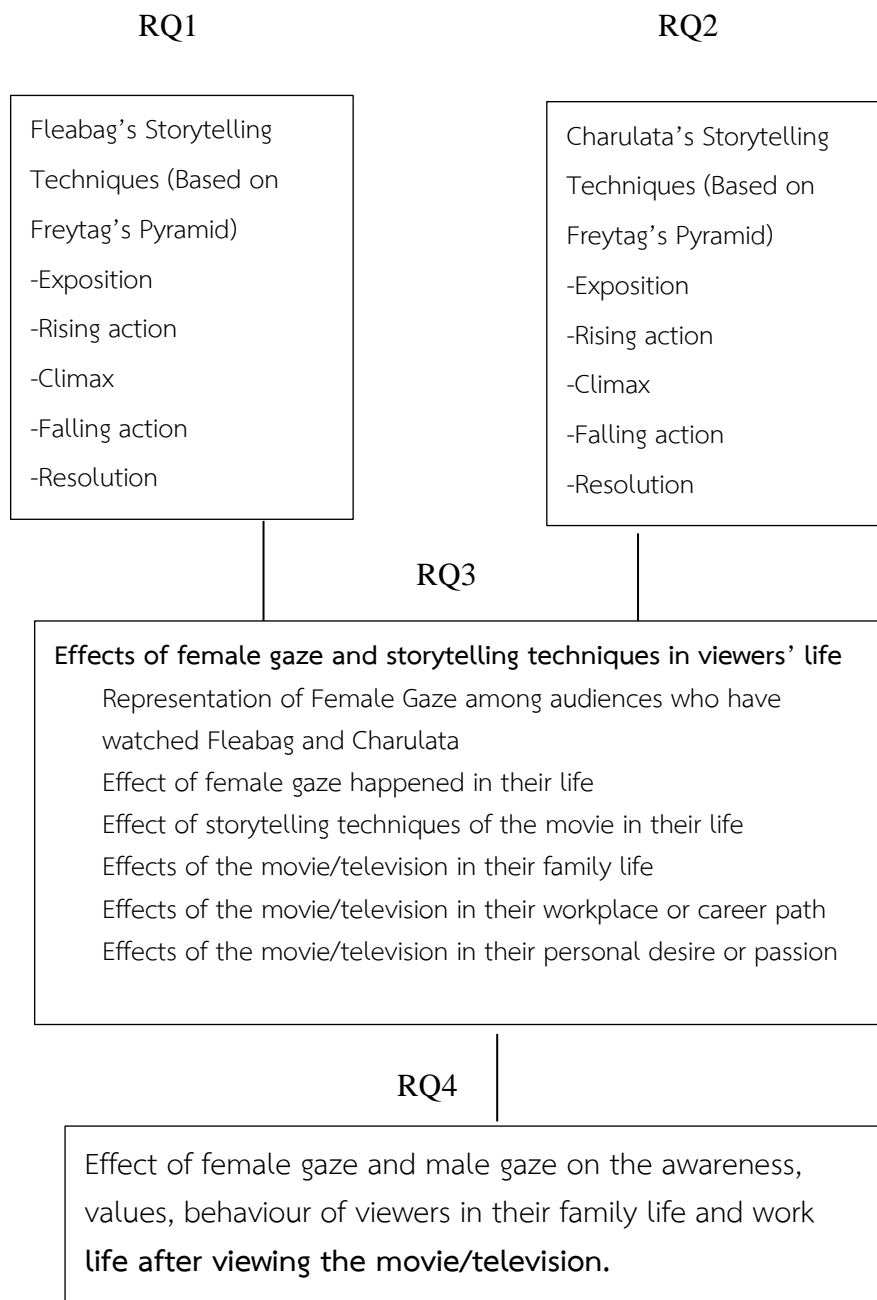


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

In figure 1, this conceptual framework outlines a comparative analysis of storytelling structures and the female gaze in two films: Fleabag and Charulata. It consists of four key components (RO1–RO4). RO1 and RO2 depict Freytag's Pyramid for each film, including Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution, highlighting narrative parallels and divergences. RO3 examines the effects of the female gaze on female representations, specifically in Fleabag and Charulata, along with its impacts on



storytelling mechanisms within their family lives and personal quests. RO4 explores how the female gaze influences viewer behavior in movie consumption and shapes career decision-making paths.

## Materials and Methods

This qualitative study analyzed the female gaze in *Fleabag* and *Charulata* via research design, population, instruments, collection, and analysis.

**Research Design:** Compares narrative techniques in both works—*Fleabag*'s direct fourth-wall challenges vs. *Charulata*'s subtle visuals—using in-depth interviews to gauge audience attitudes toward female characters and gaze concepts across generations.

**Population and Sample:** However, before interviewing the 15 participants (ages 20 - 60, grouped by age) from India, Thailand, Myanmar, and UK, selected for interest in the works and female character arcs; conducted online across cities. A pretest of 3 participants was first conducted. The intention of doing a pretest was to see whether the participants are able to understand the questions and be able to give the appropriate answers. The Pretest showed that certain questions were required to be changed and a set of new questions that aligned with the Research Objectives and the Research Questions. With the help of the 3 participants, the questions revealed that the questions were required more to be centered about the perception of the The Pretest was successful for the researcher to further conduct 15 in depth interviews with the participants The reason behind selecting online interview was to connect from different parts of the world in a specified time zone where most of the participants resided and aligning according to their time with Bangkok time so there was an easier flow of information for the researcher. One of the reason for selecting participants from United Kingdom, Thailand, Myanmar and India was *Fleabag* was shot in English language which is universally spoken including in these countries, *Charulata* however was shot entirely in Bengali which is widely spoken in West Bengal India and Bangladesh, yet the Satyajit Ray classic still holds a cult status in India and also in the United Kindgom because of the Indian diaspora along with the Western Audience who are more aesthetically inclined to the shots and the camera angles in the film by Ray. The reason behind the selection process consisted of interest in the works of the writers: Pheobe Waller Bridge and Satyajit Ray. The show *Fleabag* and the Film *Charulata* hold an interest amongst the participants. The participants were living in cities like Bangkok, Kolkata and London.

A pretest with three pilot participants (ages 25–45 from India/Thailand) via 20-minute Google Meet sessions tested initial question clarity and alignment with research objectives, revealing vague phrasing (e.g., "gaze techniques" refined to "storytelling methods") and sequencing issues for 100% comprehension. This informed streamlining in



depth interview questions into, directly mapping to the five objectives: gaze definitions, Fleabag techniques, Charulata visuals, comparative analysis, and audience impact. Purposive sampling then selected 15 participants (ages 20–60) with prior exposure to either work, ensuring cross-cultural diversity India, Thailand, Myanmar, UK and generational cohorts (18–28; 31–40; 41–60) via online film studies networks, conducted July–August 2025 following the June pretest.

**Research Instrument:** Google Meet interviews on storylines, gaze awareness, and relatability; pretested with 3 participants to refine questions.

**Data Collection:** July–August 2025; showed key clips of protagonists' turning points, followed by 15–30 min interviews.

**Data Analysis:** Examines audience awareness of female gaze, linking to Feminist Standpoint and Narrative Paradigm theories to advocate nuanced, non-stereotyped female characters and feminist insights. The study had employed in-depth interviews with 15 participants, whose data was analyzed across 6 coding categories that directly corresponded to the research objectives and questions ensuring content validity. However, before moving forward with the interview questions, a pretest was first conducted with 3 participants who answered the questions of the first draft of the pretest interviews. The researcher then made some changes in certain questions that only showed in the pretest interviews and was altered or changed. This helped in framing the guided questions for the 15 in-depth interview participants.

## Results

This research explored how the female gaze in storytelling techniques shapes audience perspectives on women-centered narratives in films and TV, analyzing narrative elements that fostered relatability and long-term impact on gender representation. Data from 15 in-depth interviews with participants aged 20-60 years primarily mid-20s to early30s students and professionals, plus one 60-year-old housewife revealing key insights into female characters' authentic portrayals.

### **Key findings, organized by coding framework, address research objectives:**

- (1) Definitions and theorization of female vs. male gaze in film or television.
- (2) Female gaze representation in Fleabag via storytelling techniques.
- (3) Female gaze representation in Charulata through visual or narrative methods.
- (4) Comparative analysis of portrayals in both works.
- (5) Audience awareness and interpretations of the female gaze.
- (6) Its impact on viewers' gender role perceptions and broader cultural implications for discourse on women's representation.



The study revealed that audiences consistently recognized the female gaze in *Fleabag* and *Charulata* as an authentic, empathetic lens prioritizing women's inner emotional depth, subjectivity, and lived complexities over male gaze objectification. In *Fleabag*, storytelling techniques like fourth-wall breaks, confessional humor, raw sexuality, and female solidarity created intimate, relatable connections, evoking immediate emotional impacts such as laughter, tears, and reflections on masking pain—especially among younger viewers—while reinforcing feminist themes without didacticism. *Charulata*, in contrast, employed subtle visuals (opera glasses, body language, pacing, silence, daydreams), conveying quiet loneliness, intellectual desire, and patriarchal constraints through non-verbal nuance, fostering lasting, introspective resonance across ages. Comparative insights highlighted *Fleabag*'s modern, loud messiness versus *Charulata*'s restrained sophistication, yet both humanized flawed women, shifting perceptions toward deeper gender understanding, solidarity, and non-stereotyped portrayals; impacts included heightened empathy, mindful listening in relationships, validation of hidden struggles, and cultural advocacy for nuanced female narratives, with generational variations (e.g., older participants critiquing *Fleabag* as vulgar). Overall, the female gaze proved powerfully persuasive via narrative coherence and fidelity, bridging emotional divides and challenging traditional depictions. This study investigated female gaze representations in *Fleabag* and *Charulata* through storytelling techniques (Research objectives 1–3), while exploring audience awareness and personal impacts (Research objectives 4–5), addressing research questions on gaze definitions (RQ1), narrative manifestations (RQ2), perceptual influences on gender roles (RQ3), and broader cultural implications (RQ4). Overall, these pursuits revealed the female gaze's persuasive power via Narrative Paradigm coherence and fidelity, bridging emotional divides and challenging traditional depictions.

## Conclusions and Discussion

Writing compelling female characters with authentic voices and identities regardless of whether the TV series or film is female or male led are crucial for evoking audience emotions and relatability. Well-crafted female protagonists drive evocative storylines that resonated deeply, fostering empathy and compassion among both female and male viewers long accustomed to women as mere accessories or objectified sex symbols. Theoretical frameworks like Feminist Standpoint Theory, Narrative Paradigm, and Mulvey's male gaze (1975) critiqued such passive portrayals geared toward heterosexual male desire, while the female gaze countered this by prioritizing women's subjectivity, emotions, and agency a shift was validated by social movements like #MeToo and the Bechdel Test. These catalysts have ushered in more writers crafting nuanced female roles



that contribute meaningfully alongside male counterparts, though Bollywood lags, often failing the Bechdel Test due to objectifying song-and-dance routines and item numbers.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis of *Fleabag* and *Charulata* revealed the female gaze's cross-cultural potency, where UK directness and Indian subtlety alike persuaded audiences through raw narrative authenticity. These insights underscored media's power to humanize women universally, bridging generational and national divides to advance gender discourse and narrative persuasion toward equitable representation. Ultimately, such portrayals not only challenge patriarchal norms but empower global viewers to reimagine identity and agency in everyday life.

#### **Implication of the Study:**

The participants from the interview aligned with the female gaze concept that showed the interiority of the female character, empathizing with them despite of the characters flaws that appeared relatable and realistic to them as audience in contrast to the female characters often written in the perspective of the male gaze. This prioritized the thoughts of women with more resonant and humanized narratives. *Fleabag* used raw fourth wall breaks that took the audience to a journey through her eyes, they were often chaotic, laughable but also flawed and made them empathize with her and her losses. This is extremely relatable to the younger people who are in their early 20s. Meanwhile *Charulata* was more subtle with soft visuals, body language and silences that showed the haunting introspect of loneliness in a relationship; often experienced in the present times, especially in a patriarchal society that often normalizes women suffering in silence.

Both the storytelling and the characters fostered empathy in the participants and challenged the stereotypes with *Fleabag* via immediate, messy catharsis while *Charulata*'s silence and quite resonance humanized women in a multidimensional aspect citing critiquing norms, promoting solidarity, and richer representation that validated the complexities of every woman. The study recommended broader applications of female gaze storytelling by encouraging diverse techniques—like humor, poetic subtlety, and visual symbolism—to depict women's emotional complexity and foster empathy across demographics, while promoting education on the concept, inclusive content for varied races/classes/sexualities, audience feedback integration, and platforms for discourse that challenge male gaze norms and inspire social awareness. For future research, it advocated exploring complex, flawed female characters such as Mizu (*Blue Eye Samurai*, written by Amber Noizumi), Jess (*Too Much*, Lena Dunham), Villanelle/Eve Polastri (*Killing Eve*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge), Piku (*Piku*), or Valkyrie (*Thor: Ragnarök*) to analyze humor in thrillers, resilience in dramas/superheroes, cross-cultural receptions across South/Western/East Asian media, genre-specific audience engagement (drama/comedy/action), and female



creators' influence on multidimensional, relatable (even dislikeable) protagonists that blend genres for wider resonance.

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