

## **Photographs as Cultural Text: Decoding Mary Ellen Mark's *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay***

**Ms.GopikaGopan**

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**Abstract:** The American photographer Mary Ellen Mark, used her photographic skill to challenge the discourses concerned with prostitution. Through her female gaze she exposed the unseen world of prostitution in India. Her photos of the prostitutes of Kamathipura, exhibited the condition of women who were used for the sexual satisfaction of men. Mary Ellen Mark gave the world a new style of photography, the style of unapologetically documenting the vulnerable sections of society.

**Keywords:** Photography, Mary Ellen Mark, Subjectivity, Female Gaze

Photography is an art that captures life as it is. Photographs are the universal language that speaks to us directly to our hearts. A camera helps us to seize special moments of our lives. They offer us a chance to evaluate how our lives have changed through time. Social media has laid a huge platform for the improvisation of the photographic skills. The photographic art helps us to express matters that might not have been feasible with words. Pictures can attract human eyes more than words. Pictures can convey ideas much faster and easily than words.

Photographers take great effort to capture the known, unknown or the ignored into images. They call our attention to the things that we miss in our day to day lives. Through the medium of photos they ask us to look at people who are far away from our patch of the universe. Photography is an art that can defeat time. Photos can keep the memory of the loved ones alive. It has the capacity to hold a moment in history for future generations and the ability to be a witness to tragedy or joy. Photographers are devoted and passionate in their attempt to show us the unexplored world that is to be seen and known. Mary Ellen Mark, an amateur American photographer, was one such photographer, who used her photographic skill to showcase the plight of the people who

were kept away from mainstream society. Her works highlighted the condition of the ostracized sections of the society and thus to hold a mirror up to contemporary society.

Mark had mentioned in one her interviews with New York Times that “I feel an affinity for people who haven’t had the best breaks in society. What I want to do more than anything is acknowledge their existence.”(Ghorashi, *Photographer Mary Ellen Mark Has Died at 75*) Born on March 20, 1940 in Philadelphia, she earned a B.A. in art history and painting and an M.A. in photojournalism from the University of Pennsylvania. Mark is best known for her documentary photographs, *Streetwise* (1984) and *Ward 81* (1979). *Streetwise* portrays the lives of nine desperate teenagers who were thrown too young into a seedy, grown up world while *Ward 81* exhibit the lives of women locked in the Oregon State Mental Hospital, who were considered dangerous not only to the outside world but also to themselves. Ellen Mark always placed women at the centre of her photographic projects. While visual representation of the closed worlds can often slip into voyeurism, Ellen Mark ensures that the authentic voice of her subjects can be heard. She brings to all her photographs can unflinching yet compassionate eye. Her photographs are the archetypal saga of a photojournalist who conquers all the obstacles and emotional shocks to bring back accounts of unexplored territories such as the Indian brothels, Indian circus, women in mental hospital etc.

In *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*, Ellen Mark brought her lens to expose a private world filled with sexual desire and complex power dynamics. Her camera cut through the constructed sexual fantasies, and in a wider context, the preconceived ideas about sex and power in society. Ellen Mark had mentioned in her interview with New York Times that the novel *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* is meant as a metaphor for entrapment, for how difficult it is to be a woman in this male oriented world. The novel *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*, is interesting not because it shows nudity in its plain form but because it includes things that makes us think and rethink. The book talks about prostitutes working in the brothels like slaves. It shows how women in India, and many other countries, are used for the gratification of men. Ellen Mark’s photos have a strong street feel. Her photos have emotion and soul. Each photo of Ellen Mark is strong and can stand alone. She has photographed the underbelly of urban life and the outcasts of society. She was one of the first to attempt to give a clear sight of the life of prostitutes of Mumbai’s Falkland Road while the Indian photographers looked at them from a distance fearing the dirtiness of their lives. In most of Ellen Mark’s photographs of Falkland Road the prostitutes would be wandering around, gazing out from behind the iron-grills of their prisons with their sorrows hidden behind their dazzling dresses. Mark is best known for

establishing close relationships with her subjects. They talked and laughed with her and let her photograph intimate moments in their lives. A single picture that particularly stands out portrays the unrestrained smile of one of the prostitutes who is peeping out from below the curtain as the deep veined hands of her fifth customer of the day clutches her. India and Bombay which shut its eyes to them had finally awakened to take a look of Falkland Road through Ellen Mark's photos.

Mary Ellen Mark got to know her subjects very well. She was able to convey who they were and how they lived and to portray a sense of their interior lives. She was among the last of an extended line of western photographers who came to India with a keen interest and was totally captivated by what was hidden there and built up a body of work. Mark, engraved her place in photography by maintaining the documentary nature of her work and by trying to look into the life of people on the margins.

Ellen Mark found young women in cages. Men watched women who beckoned and raised their skirts and then decided which one to prefer as if they were selecting a brand of shampoo or eatables in the supermarket. That was the sight that Mary Ellen Mark confronted in 1968 when she visited Falkland Road, India's notorious red-light district. It took ten years of repeat visits before she managed to gain the trust of the sex workers. The work was accepted globally for bringing light to the biases that were meted out to young women who were marketed by pimps and madams and were frequently crushed and exposed to sexually transmitted diseases. Through Ellen Mark's lens, street prostitution and dim brothels popped in vibrant hues of blue and green and the dingy rooms and drawn curtains gave a sense of place. The expressions on the women inside the brothels were sombre, helpless and weakened. Ellen Mark's photos brought that place to life. Mark's images are striking, absorbing, electric, shocking and remarkable for their emotional power and for the instinctive brilliance of their colour. Together with Mark's descriptions and introducing text, Falkland Road is an astounding work of insight into a raw and scary world that was made reachable by the wholeness of the photographer's participation, by her humanity and by the way she depicts the variety of individual life with the colour, passion and tenderness that exist there.

The cover photo of the novel *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* is an eye-catcher. Ellen Mark had captured the photo of a naked child and explained that "Putla, a thirteen-year-old sex worker, comes from a small village. She was sold to the brothel by her mother. Putla's family is very poor. Her mother brought her here from the village last year.

She was only twelve then. But her family needed money desperately. Her mother still comes to visit every year.”(*Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*, pg.no 67)

Mark’s intimate and shocking photographs of the brothels of Falkland Road, form a captivating portrait of an exotic and enclosed world. Working from extremely close quarters, Mark photographed the sex workers in the rituals and realities of their world: waiting for business, applying makeup, having sex with customers, smoking in the café, napping, bathing, and crying. The resulting painterly tableaux of prostitutes, madams and clients are remarkable for their intimacy and emotional power and for the instinctive brilliance of their jewel like colour. The life of the working girls of Falkland Road is projected in the novel with all its shades of grey. Each of Mark’s photos in the novel brings out the silent suffering of women who sell their body for feeding their family and the same that rejects them by blaming them for living a shameless life. Her photographs touch upon the very core of the conflict, and even keep aggravating it, stirring controversy and provocation. For Ellen Mark photography is a vehicle that helps her explore the disruption of stereotypes and the obliteration of taboos. Her photographs of Indian sex workers present a nuanced, alternative take on sexuality and an antidote to the rigid definition of sex that we see in the mainstream. Unfolding against a background of riotous colour, lives that one might expect to be unremittingly grim and tragic was shown to be full of warmth and ordinary humanity.

As mentioned before, the novel portrays the pictures of wire-fronted cages that opens into the street, where women and transvestites are on display like goods in a shop window or animals in a zoo. Other photos were taken in the tiny cubicles behind the cages and on the floors above them. Here the women, dressed in gaudy clothing, live and practice their trade in brightly painted rooms decorated with patterned bedspreads and curtains. The visual impact of these photographs is extraordinary, for example, a young girl wearing gold jewellery, a lime green ribbon in her hair, and fuchsia lipstick reclines on a pink-and-green bedspread against a bright blue wall.

“When I was young I was beaten up by my madam and the other transvestites. It cost me four thousand rupees to buy my freedom.” (pg.no.16) These are the words of a transvestite named, Champa. Champa’s words give us the vivid picture of the hardships and mental torture that the sex workers face in their life. For them, a red-light district is not a place of desire and pleasure. It is a place of agony. Kamla with a potential customer said that “Last night a customer paid me one hundred rupees to spend the whole night. A man that stupid is not worth marrying.” (pg.no.29). It means that Kamla doesn’t consider herself valuable

for hundred rupees as she had never received such a huge amount in her life. The 32<sup>nd</sup> photograph of a naked girl, a teenager taking her bath in a brothel shows that they are no longer ashamed to reveal their nudity in front of a photographer. The naked photographs captured by Mark emanated a sense of concern rather than sexual stimulation. A significant feature of Mark's work is that the novel is an attempt to document the personal lives of the sex workers, instead of simply snapping their sexual lives. It is evident on seeing the flexible nature of the images where the women are found doing things like putting makeup and wiping the floor. In each photos the novel, we can notice that even though most of them do portray sex, the joy of sex is absent in almost all of them. They portray the sex which is forced upon the prostitutes due to their professional boundaries.

Visual redefinition of the body is considered as the main social effect of the invention of photography. The power of naked images lies in their photographic realism, an alluring illusion of medium transparency, a belief that if something was photographed, it must have existed in front of the lens. A photograph has all the requirements to become a fetish. The illusion of physical proximity is to a large extent what made photography so popular. The 46<sup>th</sup> photograph is again an eye catcher as it portrays a topless woman, Kanta. Kanta says, "I could never visit my parents. I haven't seen them for years. I don't know if they are dead or alive. But I could never visit them. I would bring shame to them." (pg.no.46) Most of the sex workers came into the field of prostitution out of sheer poverty. They send the money that they earned by selling their bodies to their family. The family accepts their money but not them. The 54<sup>th</sup> photograph portrays the picture of a girl in a red top and skirt who is sitting ready with all her make-up while another woman applies lipstick on her lips. The picture shows that the old woman is preparing the young girl to meet her customer. "The girl was brought to the brothel by the people of her village because her husband had left her... they changed their minds and came to take her back. She was an epileptic and they were afraid that the goddess inhabiting her would get angry and avenge herself on the village." (pg.no.54).

The term female gaze was a reply to the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's term, male gaze. The female gaze is used to refer to the perspective of a female viewer that would be different from a male view of the subject. Mary Ellen Mark, picked up a camera in order to reclaim female representation. In an image obsessed culture saturated with social media, Ellen Mark used her photography and her female gaze to reformulate the field of photojournalism by making a profound impact on our visual world. "Seeing or gazing is so powerful that one's identity is carved out by the power of this single activity; the other is the other because he is seen as the other; the woman similarly becomes a woman that is

how she is perceived.” (*The Male Empire under The Female Gaze: The British Raj and the Memsahib*, pg.no.12 ) Female gaze illustrates a diverse range of female perspectives while exploring the themes of sexuality, objectification, body image, mental illness and addiction. It is a frame of female mind that allow all females to program vibrant discussions that enable them to look at the world from a different perspective, engaging with complicated themes of female identity, beauty and sexuality in a way that is sure to resonate. Through female gaze the audience can see a part of this world that is often left out of sight by the male.

If the male gaze is all about what men see, then the female gaze is about making the audience feel that which women see and experience. In one of the photographs of the novel, Ellen Mark’s camera has wiggled towards a post-makeover woman in a skin tight dress, who is ready to seduce a customer. Her photographs embody social consciousness, visual power, deep filial attachment and closeness with her subjects from Falkland Road. Each photograph looks beyond the dust, the clutter and the crowd to discover those hidden treasures. The presence of a strong female gaze is exhibited in every photo of Mary Ellen Mark. This gaze is demonstrative and intimate. It perceives people as people. It is respectful. It is technical and tells the truth, is feminine and unashamed. Ellen Mark’s photographs are full of tenderness. There is no judgement on her part. There is no morality. She is not glamorising her photographs and not trying to move away from the difficult aspects of her subject’s lives.

It is this strangeness between the dependence of women and their instantaneous empowerment that grabs our attention to the female gaze. Female gaze refers not to any woman who watches but to a constructed space of viewing. It highlights how we tend to identify subject-hood with men and object-hood with women. Mary Ellen Mark’s pictures were marked by plain disparities in textual and lightning, unusual angles and vibrant figures emerging from gloomy backgrounds. Throughout her career, Ellen Mark conveyed a deep humanity in her black and white photographs, but her gaze was not one of pity.

*Falkland Road; Prostitutes of Bombay* 1981, captured that seedy world with all its foulness, colour and pathos. For all the heart wrenching desperateness in her images, Ellen Mark does not illustrate her subjects as strangers or specimens. They are described as human beings driven by circumstances to the shabby edges of society. “If the oppression of women is socially scripted, the re-envisioning of social fabrics overturns that position, some photographs achieve this re-envisioning, this re-arranging, the visible, and overturn that which can take place wrenching the framework of patriarchal capitalism. Photographs

that advocate feminism, they carry forward a feminist aesthetic work through perception: the event of vision that takes place in the viewer. The photograph itself is an uncanny purveyor of perception.”( *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics*, pg.no.13)

Ellen Mark removes these partial portrayals of women by using her female gaze to project their exceptional beauty. Her photographs stand as an example for how women can be represented in art as she de-sexualizes female bodies and decentres the male perspective. Ellen Mark often captures women in a fierce, honest and vulnerable light where we can see her subjects pose for her photo sessions without any hesitation or frustration towards the photographer. She photographs women comfortably allowing them to be themselves. The 49<sup>th</sup> photo in the novel is an example, a prostitute washes her menstrual blood while her customer waits for her in bed.

“From inside their street-level cages, prostitutes try to attract potential customers: men who walk up and down the busy street sizing up each woman.” (16).“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 62) As Laura Mulvey had proposed, in an image the photographic perception of male gaze is the positioning of the camera as the spectator’s perspective as that of a heterosexual man whose vision loiters upon the female body. But in female gaze women identifying with women and female bonding are the ways of circumventing patriarchal domination. A photograph conveys a sense of proof, evidence, and testimony. A photograph is a proof of that subject’s existence. A photograph is an evidence that validate the presence of an object or a person that existed when the photograph was taken. Mary Ellen Mark pictured monsters. They were not the monsters in a beastly or demonic sense but instead the way Mary Shelley conceived her monster in *Frankenstein* that signifies the creatures both inside and outside humanity.

Mary Ellen Mark has photographed elderly women, women on the street, women in the circus, autistic women, women who have lost limbs to leprosy, women who have been institutionalized for madness, girls with cancer, homeless girls, and sex workers. Every woman in Ellen Mark’s photographs holds the same caption- “I exist”. Her main interest was in capturing reality, to take photos of things as such. Taking photos of the ostracized was, for Mark, to expose the hidden world as it really is. Mark always wanted to bring her

subjects out of the darkness and to make their existence real for those viewing them. In Ellen Mark's photographs each subject's presence fills the frame. Mark didn't believe in the total objective portrayal of her subjects in which the photographer is supposedly absent. What makes her photograph stand unique is that her subjects were always aware of the person who was taking their pictures. The existence of the photographer in the angle of a photograph, and in the position of the subject can be sensed. The photographer's image is echoed in the gaze of her subject. Ellen Mark lived with her subjects actually and figuratively. The existence of non-sexual and personal photos in Ellen Mark's work shows that she wanted to cover Falkland Road in a healthy manner rather than to portray it in morbid ways.

"The body one is born with shapes one's identity and patriarchy perpetuates a false dichotomy between body and mind, equating "man" with "mind" and "woman" with "body". The patriarchy has riveted women between two horrifying myths: between the medusa and the abyss, that is, they will become monsters if they escape patriarchal prescription but in any case are nothing, "lack", because we are not male. On the other hand, in feminist art, the female grotesque is not the source of horror, but of a wild energy; the horror is the oppression against which she revolt." (*Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts: Women, the Arts and Society*, 23).

The female gaze challenges the continuing dominance of masculine worldviews in film and media. Female gaze is the view that the camera lens, which is trained to be dominant can eventually change in female hands by launching a new fundamental aesthetic. Female gaze is the essential thing that women share.

A visualization that is spherical, filthy, menstrual, close and wise. Through her female gaze Mary Ellen Mark challenges the discourses surrounding prostitution. The male gaze should not be taken for granted in the field of photography. The consciousness of an active female gaze can change the ways in which we understand popular culture, photography, and media. The female gaze thus turns as a mode of impermeable reading that allows alternate methods of analyzing and interpreting the female characters and the gendered issues and themes of a text irrespective of the gender of the makers or readers.

Through the novel, *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*, Mary Ellen Mark was able to tell the entire story of the prostitutes of Falkland Road which includes their life, happiness, misery, joy, patience, grace and all the possible human emotions encapsulated in one frame. Through her photographic representation of stigmatized individuals Mary Ellen Mark throws open doors for searching debates on necessary reforms in social norms and



approaches.

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