

Consuming the Spectacle: Female Spectatorship, Body Politics, and the Cultural Reception of Gender in Indian OTT Series

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Abstract

*The explosion of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms in India – Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, SonyLIV, and regional platforms such as Manorama MAX and Sun NXT – has fundamentally transformed the conditions under which Indian audiences encounter gendered representations on screen. Unlike theatrical cinema, which is consumed in public, communal, and temporally bounded settings, OTT content is consumed privately, individually, and on demand – often on personal smartphones in domestic spaces. This paper argues that this shift in the apparatus of spectatorship produces a distinctive mode of female spectatorship that requires new analytical frameworks beyond Mulvey's (1975) foundational theorisation of the cinematic male gaze. Drawing on feminist reception theory (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984), Mankekar's (1999) ethnographic analysis of Indian television and gendered subjectivity, and the author's doctoral research on body politics and female spectatorship in Indian visual culture, the paper examines how Indian women negotiate gender representations in three critically acclaimed OTT series: *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021, Malayalam), *Made in Heaven* (2019–2023, Hindi), and *Bombay Begums* (2021, Hindi). Through critical textual analysis informed by feminist spectatorship theory, the paper identifies three modes of gendered reception that the OTT apparatus enables: intimate identification (the private screen as a space of recognition), critical distance (the capacity to pause, rewatch, and analyse), and affective community-building (the social media discourse that extends the spectatorial encounter into networked feminist publics). The paper contributes to the intersection of feminist media studies, platform studies, and Indian cultural studies.*

Keywords: *female spectatorship; body politics; OTT platforms; Indian television; feminist media studies; gender representation; The Great Indian Kitchen; Made in Heaven; platform studies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, the Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* was released on the regional OTT platform Neestream after failing to secure theatrical distribution. Within weeks, it had become one of the most discussed cultural texts in contemporary Indian public discourse – not through the traditional mechanisms of theatrical box office or critical

review, but through a viral wave of social media response overwhelmingly led by women. Female viewers shared screenshots, wrote extended analyses, and produced testimony-style posts describing how the film's unflinching depiction of domestic labour – the grinding, chopping, cooking, cleaning, serving, and scrubbing that constitutes the invisible infrastructure of patriarchal domesticity – had made visible what they had experienced but never seen represented with such precision on screen.

This reception event crystallises the phenomenon this paper examines: the emergence of a distinctive mode of female spectatorship enabled by the OTT platform apparatus. When *The Great Indian Kitchen* was watched on a smartphone screen in a bedroom in Kottayam or Kochi, the viewing conditions were radically different from those of theatrical cinema. The woman watching was not in a public space governed by social codes of respectable spectatorship; she was in a private space where her emotional and critical response was unmonitored. She could pause the film to process a scene that struck close to home. She could rewatch a sequence to examine its formal construction. And she could, upon finishing, open Instagram or Twitter and find thousands of other women articulating responses that mirrored, extended, or contested her own – constituting what this paper terms an *affective spectatorial public*: a networked community of gendered reception that transforms individual viewing into collective feminist meaning-making.

This paper argues that the OTT platform apparatus produces conditions of spectatorship that are qualitatively different from both theatrical cinema and broadcast television – and that these conditions are particularly consequential for female spectatorship in India, where women's access to public cinematic space has historically been constrained by patriarchal norms of respectability, mobility, and bodily visibility (Phadke et al., 2011). By examining how Indian women engage with gender representations on three critically acclaimed OTT series, the paper develops a feminist spectatorship framework that is specific to the platform era.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM MALE GAZE TO PLATFORM GAZE

Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" established the theoretical framework for analysing gendered spectatorship in cinema. Mulvey argued that the cinematic apparatus constructs a "male gaze": the camera, the narrative, and the spectatorial position are aligned with masculine visual pleasure, positioning the female body as an object of scopophilic and fetishistic display. While Mulvey's framework has been enormously productive, it was theorised for the specific apparatus of theatrical cinema – the darkened auditorium, the large projected image, the communal viewing experience – and requires significant modification for the platform era (Sobchack, 2004).

Feminist reception studies provide essential supplementary resources. Ien Ang's (1985) study of *Dallas* viewers demonstrated that female audiences do not simply absorb patriarchal messages but actively negotiate them through what Ang termed "emotional realism" – a mode of reception in which the pleasure of recognition ("this is how it feels") operates alongside and sometimes against critical awareness of the text's ideological limitations. Janice Radway's (1984) study of romance readers similarly demonstrated that the act of reading – the time and space claimed for private pleasure – constituted a form of gendered resistance even when the texts consumed reproduced patriarchal narratives. In the Indian context, Purnima Mankekar's (1999) ethnographic analysis of women viewers of *Doordarshan* serials revealed that Indian female spectatorship operates through complex negotiations of national identity, class position, and gendered subjectivity that cannot be reduced to either passive consumption or active resistance.

This paper extends these frameworks into the OTT era by arguing that the platform apparatus transforms spectatorship along three axes. First, *privatisation*: OTT viewing occurs predominantly on personal devices in domestic spaces, removing the social surveillance that shapes public cinematic spectatorship. Second, *temporal sovereignty*: the ability to pause, rewind, rewatch, and binge gives the spectator unprecedented control over the temporal experience of the text. Third, *networked extension*: social media platforms extend the spectatorial encounter beyond the viewing moment, enabling the formation of interpretive communities that collectively negotiate the

text's gender politics. Together, these transformations produce what the paper terms the "platform gaze" – a mode of spectatorship that is simultaneously more private and more public than either cinema or television.

III. ANALYSIS: THREE MODES OF GENDERED RECEPTION

3.1 *Intimate Identification: The Great Indian Kitchen*

Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) depicts the unnamed protagonist's daily experience of domestic labour within a patriarchal Nair Brahmin household with almost documentary precision. The film's formal strategy is radical in its simplicity: it shows, in real time and without narrative commentary, the grinding, cooking, serving, cleaning, and disposal of waste that constitute the protagonist's daily existence. No dramatic incident drives the plot; the plot is the labour itself.

The OTT platform apparatus was essential to this film's reception as a feminist text. Watched in private – on phones, laptops, and tablets in bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms – the film produced what the author terms *intimate identification*: a mode of spectatorial engagement in which the private viewing conditions enable a recognition so close, so bodily, that it transcends critical distance. Women reported watching the film while sitting in the very kitchens it depicted, performing the very labour it made visible. The smartphone screen became a mirror – not metaphorically but phenomenologically: the viewer's body and the protagonist's body occupied the same domestic space, performing the same gestures, subject to the same patriarchal architecture of obligation.

This intimate identification would not have been possible in a theatrical setting, where the social codes of public spectatorship – the presence of family members, the communal audience, the expectation of entertainment – would have mediated and potentially contained the film's affective impact. The private screen enabled a mode of feminist recognition that the public screen could not: the recognition not merely that "this represents my experience" but that "this is my experience, happening now, in this room, on this body."

3.2 *Critical Distance: Made in Heaven*

Made in Heaven (2019–2023), created by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti for Amazon Prime Video, presents a panoramic examination of gender, class, sexuality, and caste through the lens of Delhi's elite wedding industry. The series' two-season arc addresses dowry, marital rape, queer identity, caste discrimination, and the commodification of women's bodies within the institution of marriage – topics that mainstream Hindi cinema has historically treated through melodrama or moralism.

The OTT apparatus enables what the author terms *critical distance*: a mode of spectatorship in which the viewer's temporal control over the text – the ability to pause, rewatch, and reflect – produces analytical engagement rather than purely affective absorption. Several scenes in *Made in Heaven* address gender-based violence with a directness that theatrical release would likely have censored: the marital rape scene in Season 1, the caste-shaming sequence in Season 2. On OTT, these scenes could be paused, rewatched, and subjected to close reading – a practice that the author observed students performing spontaneously when the series was discussed in classroom contexts. The OTT platform transforms the viewer from consumer to analyst, not through formal training but through the affordance of temporal sovereignty.

3.3 *Affective Community: Networked Reception*

The third mode of gendered reception is what the paper terms *affective community-building*: the extension of the spectatorial encounter into networked feminist publics through social media. Both *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Made in Heaven* generated extensive social media discourse – on Instagram, Twitter/X, and Reddit – in which women shared personal testimonials prompted by the texts, debated their gender politics, and produced secondary cultural texts (memes, essays, video analyses) that extended the original text's feminist work.

This networked reception constitutes what Nancy Fraser (1990) theorises as a subaltern counterpublic: a discursive arena in which members of subordinated groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs. The women who posted Instagram stories about recognising their own marriages in *The Great*

Indian Kitchen were not merely “sharing their reactions”; they were participating in a collective interpretive practice that transformed a private viewing experience into a public feminist discourse. The OTT platform and the social media platform together constitute a new apparatus of feminist spectatorship: one watches privately but responds publicly, and the response becomes part of the text’s cultural meaning.

IV. DISCUSSION

The three modes of gendered reception identified in this paper – intimate identification, critical distance, and affective community-building – demonstrate that the OTT platform apparatus does not simply reproduce the cinematic male gaze on a smaller screen. It produces qualitatively different conditions of spectatorship that are particularly consequential for Indian female viewers, whose access to public cinematic space has historically been constrained and whose domestic viewing conditions now enable forms of feminist engagement that the theatrical apparatus foreclosed.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations. First, the OTT platform apparatus is not democratically accessible: subscription costs, smartphone ownership, and reliable internet connectivity constitute barriers that map onto existing caste-class-gender hierarchies. The female spectator who watches *The Great Indian Kitchen* on her phone in her bedroom is already positioned within a particular socioeconomic stratum; the woman performing the same labour without a smartphone is excluded from the spectatorial counterpublic entirely. Second, the platform’s algorithmic recommendation system does not neutrally distribute feminist content; it amplifies content that generates engagement, which may reward sensationalist or commodified representations of gender over critical ones. The platform gaze is never free from the political economy of the platform itself.

Third, the intimate identification that private viewing enables carries risks as well as possibilities. The same privacy that allows a woman to recognise her domestic labour in *The Great Indian Kitchen* without social surveillance also means that she processes that recognition alone – without the immediate support of a physical community. The affective community-building that social media enables is real but mediated: it operates through text and image rather than embodied co-presence, and it is structured by the platform logics of virality rather than the relational dynamics of face-to-face solidarity.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Indian OTT platforms produce a distinctive mode of female spectatorship that requires analytical frameworks beyond the cinematic male gaze. Through the analysis of *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Made in Heaven*, the paper has identified three modes of gendered reception – intimate identification, critical distance, and affective community-building – that are specific to the platform apparatus and particularly consequential for Indian female viewers navigating patriarchal constraints on public spectatorship.

The implications extend beyond media studies. As Indian visual culture migrates increasingly to OTT platforms, the conditions under which gender is represented, consumed, and contested are being fundamentally reconfigured. Feminist media scholarship must attend not only to what is represented on screen but to the apparatus through which it is watched – recognising that the smartphone screen in a woman’s hand is not a diminished cinema but a new site of cultural politics with its own affordances, constraints, and feminist possibilities.

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