4.

Streaming the Gaze: Feminist Spectatorship and Gender Fluidity in Indian OTT Narratives

Chitra Jha[1]

Abstract

The article critically examines how the Indian over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms reinforce gender, spectatorship, and visual politics within the dynamics of postmodern media culture. The OTT movies shift out of the parameters of normative cinema to provide an approximation of a free space that is relatively uncensored to develop feminist and queer subjectivities. Paying special attention to *Made in Heaven*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Kota Factory*, the article will discuss how these shows violate representational conventions by challenging the supremacy of the male gaze and pre-empting plural, fluid, and intersectional identities. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, Judith Butler's gender performativity, the oppositional gaze of Bell Hooks, and Henry Jenkins's participatory culture, the article argues that Indian streaming media enables a shift from objectification to agency and from passive spectatorship to engagement. Not only do these stories poke holes into the normative positioning of women and queers as an ambiguous subject, but they also upset the normative formations of masculinity, power, and desire. Furthermore, this article highlights the role of digital audiences in changing the face of feminist discourse through participatory acts, such as online critique, fan cultures, and social media engagement. By locating OTT platforms within a postmodern and transnational media ecology, the study shows how streaming culture disseminates impurity in fixed formations of identity and opens new horizons for thinking and imagining gender and representation. Ultimately, the article presents the platforms of Indian OTT as dynamic sites of feminist negotiation, where visual pleasure, power, and identity are constantly fought over and redefined.

Keywords: Digital spectatorship, Feminism, Gender performativity, Indian web series, Male gaze, OTT platforms, Postmodern media, Queer representation

---

1 Chitra Jha, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of English at MRM College Darbhanga, India. Email: chitrajha020@gmail.com

Introduction

With the explosive growth of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms, there is a profound shift in India's visual culture, not just in access and distribution but also in the politics of representation and spectatorship. Streaming media has changed the way audiences interact with narrative, shifting from passive consumption to active interpretation. The concept of the gaze, an important part of feminist film theory, needs to be taken into consideration in this evolving digital age. The very nature of OTT platforms, with their flexibility in narratives and relative freedom from conventional censorship, makes it possible to reconfigure the gaze, and the spaces within it become open to feminist, queer, and plural modes of seeing.

Historically, the cinematic image has remained in place as envisioned by Laura Mulvey as the male gaze in which the women are incorporated as the visual objects of sexual pleasure in a patriarchal Visual Economy (Mulvey 9). Nonetheless, this dynamic is complicated due to the emergence of streaming culture. Digital narratives women make more and more of something that can be referred to as a streaming gaze, inclusive of a ubiquitous, gesticulating, self-reflexive, participatory gaze, which is subversive of fixity in positions of the spectator and the spectacle. This subversion aligns with the theorization of gender as performatives rather than essential, and with theories that propose that a certain identification on screen cannot be held as consistent but is a performative identity created through narrative and reception (Butler 34).

OTTs such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar have become significant platforms for this change in the Indian context. Leaving behind the formulaic conventions of mainstream cinema, in such locations, one discovers images that explore gender, sexuality, and power in more in-depth and nuanced ways. Series like *Made in Heaven*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Kota Factory* exemplify this shift, as the characters in them do not subscribe to reductive stereotypes; instead, they are full of contradictions, fluidity, and intersectionality. The institutional power of women, the non-caricatured queer identities, and the questioning of masculinity itself are carried out with its weakness and recognition of feelings.

Moreover, the digital environment of streaming creates new spectatorial practices flowing beyond the screen. Drawing on Henry Jenkins's formulation of participatory culture, audiences today actively engage with texts through social media discussions, fan productions, and critical reinterpretations of their meanings, which "reshapes the meanings of these narratives in real time" (Jenkins 135). This participatory dimension turns this gaze into a dialogic process, with a circulation of power between a group of creators and viewers. Bell hooks' ideas about the "oppositional gaze" are particularly relevant here, as underprivileged audiences assert their rights to interpretation and cast doubt on the regime of visual domination (Hooks 115).

Within this frame, this article argues that OTT platforms in India enable a reconfiguration of the gaze through postmodern narrative strategies and digital practices of spectatorship. By analyzing *Made in Heaven*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Kota Factory* and highlighting the effects of streaming narratives, the present study shows how streaming narratives break the traditional male gaze and create alternative visual economies grounded in feminist and queer perspectives. These series reimagine the fluidity and performativity of gender importantly; they also revalorize spectatorship as an active, critical, and participatory process. In doing so, they represent a substantial shift in current Indian visual culture, where the politics of looking is constantly negotiated around digital spaces.

Theoretical Framework

To think of OTT platforms as sites of feminist transformation, this research employs an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that draws on feminist film theory, postmodern aesthetics, and digital media studies. Central to this analysis are the works of several theoretical interventions by Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Bell hooks, Henry Jenkins, Donna Haraway, and others, through which it has been possible to develop a certain ambivalence in considering gaze, gender, and spectatorship in the context of streaming culture.

At the heart of feminist film theory is the seminal concept of Laura Mulvey, the male gaze, which emphasizes how classical cinema turns women into objects of visual pleasure within a patriarchal visual economy (Mulvey 9). However, with the rise of

OTT platforms, this dynamic is somewhat complicated by the creation of alternative regimes of vision which break up fixed subject-object relations. In contrast to feelings of constant and similar misdirection towards the screen in traditional cinema, streaming narratives often lead to a more dispersed and reflexive mode of viewing in streaming form - the mechanics this article conceptualizes as a streaming gaze. Multiplicity, fluidity, and interpretive agency have been used to define this type of spectatorship in the context of the cohabitation of feminist, queer, and counter-gazes, which redesign power in the visual.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further supports this change of gender not as a stable identity but as a repeated set of acts influenced by social and cultural practices (Butler 34). Within the realm of OTT narratives, the characters are not submerged in stereotyped roles; rather, their identities develop through the appraisal of episodic structures that intrinsically reflect the instability and fluidity inherent to postmodern subjectivity. This temporal openness enables streaming media to bring the problem of gender into the spotlight as an unending process of becoming, rather than a predetermined state.

Expanding the topic of spectatorship, bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze offers an analytical tool for examining the agency of marginalized viewers through the dissident control of dominant forms of representation (Hooks 115). In the name of Indian OTT culture, the concept is particularly important, as it reflects audience interaction with narratives through culturally positioned and politically aware readings. This perception of looking is, hence, an intervention, and spectatorship is adopted as a space of criticism and resistance.

This change is also heightened by the concept of participatory culture introduced by Henry Jenkins, who highlights the aggressive nature of digital viewers in generating and exchanging meaning (Jenkins 135). The interaction in the social media space, fan talk, and Internet criticism help extend the longevity of the OTT narrative beyond the screen and alter its ideological and cultural significance. As a result, the streaming culture gaze is no longer restricted to the

visual text; it is a dialogic, active process of creating as well as viewing.

Lastly, Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg will also serve as a posthuman approach to digital spectatorship, highlighting the need to focus on hybridity and the indistinction between humanity and technology (Haraway 149). OTT viewing habits represent this cyberian state of viewers, existing in and between physical and virtual spaces, in interaction with algorithmically edited material and with discursive freedom. The fluidity of identity and perception in postmodern feminist media is supported by this hybrid form of engagement, given its nature.

Combined, these theoretical approaches enable defining OTT platforms as a place where the three categories, namely gender, gaze, and spectatorship, are constantly negotiated. Rather than simply representing feminist and queer identities, streaming media actively remakes the conditions for their production, reception, and remediation. In doing so, it creates an alternative visual and cultural paradigm, where the politics of looking is decentralized and participatory, and is inherently fluid.

Made in Heaven: The Plural Gaze and Queer Desire

Made in Heaven (2019-) is a very interesting example of how Indian OTT narratives reconfigure the politics of the gaze through feminist and queer interventions. Created by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti, the series is based on the characters Tara Khanna and Karan Mehra, who are wedding planners operating in the milieu of class, desire, and social performance in contemporary urban India. Although the institution of marriage, which is often imbued with notions of heteronormativity as well as patriarchal management, forms the backdrop for the narrative, the series is contextual in clearly questioning and challenging its ideological underpinnings.

At the level of visual and narrative structure, *Made in Heaven* rejects the conventional logic of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. Rather than objectifying its characters, the series builds something that may be understood as a plural gaze, in which multiple subjectivities coexist rather than being subsumed under a single visual sovereignty. The camera is not the one that fetishizes the female body and turns queer desire into spectacle, but in a sense

assumes the observational and empathetic stance that puts the interiority, contradiction, and ethical ambiguity into the limelight. By doing so, the series is included in the broader dynamics of the streaming gaze, in which spectatorship is malleable, reflexive, and open to various interpretive stances.

The best illustration of this transition is Karan's plot. Sensuality is not experienced in a way of sensationalism and marginalisation, but rather as a living experience, and his sexuality is characterized by intimacy, vulnerability, and social restraint. The instability and multiplicity of identity are emphasized through the visual language of the series, i.e., the deployment of reflective surfaces, pauses, and fragmented compositions, which are naturally related to postmodern aesthetics. Karan's subjective exercise, in this way, disrupted the heteronormative regimes of visual confirmation and repelled queer desire, and this is an inherent aspect, not a peripheral one, to the story.

In the same manner, the character of Tara reflects Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. The gender is revealed as a strategically changeable performance, as individual acting discourse demonstrated through social expectation and individual agency in her manoeuvring of marriage, class mobility, and personal desire. Tara is not presented as a moral ideal or reduced to a victim, but rather exists in a place of contradiction, where ambition, vulnerability, and ethical compromise coexist. It is this complexity that is melting in the presence of reductive categorization and the fluidity of identity streamed through the speakers that is being listened to in the narratives.

The series also uses postmodern aesthetic elements such as intertextuality, episodic fragmentation, and symbolic storytelling. Every wedding looks like a miniature micro world that discloses the hypocrisy of modern Indian society, in particular, the fact that the tradition of stereotypes about caste, class, privilege, and gender disparity is still haunting the laws of modernity. In this regard, what the spectacle of marriage signifies as an avenue of critique rather than celebration reminds Fredric Jameson of postmodernism as a place of ideological exposure and recontextualization.

Notably, *Made in Heaven* extends its feminist politics beyond representation into spectatorship. The series does not offer narrative resolution or moral simplification, suggesting that its viewers ought to engage critically with it and its characters. Hence, the series can be read as falling under the Bell Hooks concept of the oppositional gaze in which viewers engage in active interpretation and challenge the mainstream visual meaning. Within the digital ecology of OTT platforms, such engagement is further intensified through online discussions, fan interpretations, and critical discourse, rendering viewing a participatory and dialogic process.

Thus, *Made in Heaven* mediates the desire to recognise the Indian streaming as contingent digitally and govern it in line with gender and psychotherapy, to recognise the gaze of the Indian streaming as plural, instigating destabilized heteronormativity, and, last but not least, to recognise the eye of the Indian streaming as willing and active. It not only serves as a representative for the construction of two identities - feminism and queer but also recontextualizes the conditions of seeing, calling the viewer to participate in a more critical and inclusive visual culture.

Delhi Crime — Feminist Realism and the Morality of Authority

Delhi Crime (2019-), created by Richie Mehta, features a potent meddling of gender, authority, and representation in the crime genre. Based on the investigation after the Nirbhaya case in 2012, the series ditches the sensation-laden images depicting violence and places an emphasis instead on the institutional, ethical, and emotional aspects of policing. In so doing, it builds a type of feminist realism that works against the patriarchal narrative conventions and the spectacle-oriented logic of the mainstream crime media. The core of the show is Deputy Commissioner of Police Vartika Chaturvedi, who disrupts the traditions of masculinity attributed to authority and law enforcement. Contrary to the traditional symbolisations of power as a drain on the forces of aggression and domination, the authoritative ideals of Vartika are expressed in terms of compassion, personal sense of duty, and communication. This reconfiguration addresses feminist ethics, particularly the ethics of care, in which decision-making is grounded in responsibility and interdependence rather than control (Gilligan 24).

In terms of visual politics, the film *Delhi Crime* makes the term male gaze, as put forward by Laura Mulvey, especially tricky. Vartika is not an objectified nor a passive character in visual pleasure, but instead occupies both roles of viewer and agent in the active course of the story. The dynamics of the streaming gaze are present here as well, and the authority of visual meaning is distributed rather than centralized. This rejection of spectacle by the camera, which is quite minimalist and observational in style, is underscored by handheld shots, natural lighting, and minimal as well as dramatized elements, which serve to underline this rejection of spectacle in Favor of immersion and ethical engagement, leading to subsequent appreciation.

Another setting in which the series operates within a postmodern context is the presence of a given blur in the opposition between realism and representation. Although founded on documentary realism, it, conversely, focuses on the mediated character of violence, a notion consistent with Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra. The spectacle of violence is absorbed by a broader framework of systems, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, socio-economic inequalities, and (obsolete) patriarchal normative values, instead of imitating the same. This practice eliminates the focus on personal responsibility and introduces structural critique, therefore, transforming the narrative to situate it in an ethical debate rather than an ethical spectator. Notably, the series demystifies institutional authority by humanizing it, but without being idealistic about it. Vartika is an actress whose work is marred by allusions to her family life, disrupting the clear boundaries between public and private, rational and emotional. Such complexity disrupts the traditional association of masculinity and rational power as the prototype of leadership, offering an alternative model that involves affect, vulnerability, and accountability. In this regard, *Delhi Crime* is not merely renegotiating feminine agency, but also challenging power at the institutional level, meaning how genders occupy the bottom of power itself in the first place.

The series elicits a spectatorship mode, specifically one that is hyper-responsive and morally conscious, in the eyes of the spectators. It avoids sensationalism and narrative closure, forcing viewers to contend with the most unsatisfactory and unendearingly aspect of

systemic violence: that it is brought to their attention in the first place, as they confront their own position as viewers. This portrayal aligns with bell hooks' theory of the oppositional gaze, in which spectators cannot sit passively and receive the dominant visual discourses, but can actively participate in challenging these discourses and creating their own interpretations (Hooks 115). This interaction is further extended across the virtual spaces of OTT platforms, public discourse, social media discussions, and group contemplation, thereby entrenching the participatory aspect of the streaming gaze.

Therefore, *Delhi Crime* is a role model of how Indian OTT stories can contribute to changing the crime genre as a feminist intervention site. In a concentration on the equipment of ethical realism, relationships of power, and the origins of critical spectatorship, the series restructures the politics of the representative, flipping the gaze of the spectator between spectacle and responsibility. Thus, it is also subverting the patriarchal visual regimes and, in the process, it rekindles the terms of understanding violence, authority, and justice in the present media culture.

Kota Factory — Masculinity, Vulnerability, and the Postmodern Identity

This discourse on gender can be approached differently by foregrounding the emotional and psychological dimensions of masculinity in the highly competitive education system in India, as Kota Factory (2019-2021) by Saurabh Khanna does. The series takes place in the teaching hubs of Kota and follows Vaibhav and his friends as they struggle to cope with the demands of school, social pressure, and self-ideation. Contrary to classical representations of masculinity in Indian popular culture -and in many ways, much better prized as an indication of dominance, stoicism, and control of emotion -*Kota Factory* portrays masculinity as ambivalent and staged, prone to the subterranean tides of systematic pressures. Aesthetically, the grayscale aesthetic, which is characteristic of the series, functions as far more than style, therefore, becoming a metaphor of the smothering of feelings and the staleness of existence. This absence of colour represents a world structured by routine, discipline, and endless competition, in which the individual is brought under the

control of institutions. This aesthetics corresponds to postmodern aesthetics of alienation and fragmentation, due to the role of the narrative in broader criticism of neoliberal structures in which value is perceived as productivity and victory.

In the theoretical examination, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity offers insight into the processes by which masculinity is created in the series. The male characters are only engaged in socially acceptable ways of achieving success (rationality, endurance, and achievement). However, there is a great deal of anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion in the proceedings. Masculinity, consequently, is not an identity that is established, but rather a precarious and constant act that is dependent on external expectations. The episodic nature of the series' construction also fosters this instability, as the characters gradually change, revealing the boundaries and contradictions of hegemonic masculine ideals.

The character of mentor Jeetu Bhaiya plays a significant role in reconfiguring masculine power. He assumes the usefulness of traditional figures of authority, but, based on this assumption, has nothing to contribute to it, making him someone who would put the welfare of the contest aside. His personality conflicts with the paradigm of masculinity as control that prevailed, and provides another paradigm of masculinity founded on relationality and support. This reconfiguration of masculine power aligns with feminist discourses on patriarchal organization and, in particular, the concept of hegemonic masculinity in crisis, in which established rules of male superiority are disrupted in the present-day social setup (Connell 79). Speaking of spectatorship, *Kota Factory*, too, adds to the sum of the streaming gaze, engaging spectators to participate in the exposure of masculine weakness in ways that will never leave them mocked or put off. The story is based on factual descriptions of emotional collapses; it is not sensationalizing or romanticizing; it calls for a contemplative and sympathetic view. Such narration is a significant reversal, since it shifts the gaze from spectacle to interiority, thereby pointing to broader feminist strategies for dismantling hard-and-fast gender hierarchies.

Moreover, the series implicitly engages with bell hooks' oppositional gaze, offering viewers a chance to rethink the socio-

cultural construction of success and masculinity critically. The audience is not passive observers of the aspirational production of narratives but rather assumes the position of spectators who come in to criticize the same systems that produce the aspirations. In online structures of OTT platforms, involvement is further expanded through audience discussion and shared experiences, thereby confirming the participatory essence of existing spectatorship. In this way, the effects of *Kota Factory* extend the range of a feminist discussion, in that the critique of masculinity must follow the criticism of Patriarchy. The series gets more people on board with the genre of streaming culture by critiquing the hegemonic constructs of gender through vulnerability, complex emotions, and systemic critique, leading to a more inclusive dialogue around gender fluidity.

In the process, it complements the interventions of *Made in Heaven* and *Delhi Crime*, collectively depicting how Indian OTT narratives put the gaze back into a configuration of different gendered experiences.

Conclusion

The advent of OTT platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of visual culture in India, affecting not only the modes of content production and distribution but also the politics of representation and spectatorship. As this article has shown, streaming media is a shifting terrain in which gender, gaze, and identity are continually renegotiated within the framework of postmodern digital media. Moving beyond the boundaries of mainstream cinema, OTT narratives allow for more fluid, inclusive, and critically aware modes of storytelling that challenge conventional patriarchal visual regimes.

Through the analysis of *Made in Heaven*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Kota Factory*, this study has argued that Indian streaming narratives, taken together, contribute to a reconfiguration of the gaze, moving away from the fixed, hierarchical structure towards a dispersed, participatory mode of viewing. This transformation, conceptualized as the streaming gaze in this instance, can give rise to the coexistence of feminist, queer, and counter-hegemonic ways of looking at the world, thereby breaking the dominance of the traditional male gaze. Rather than positioning characters as objects to be looked at, these

series highlight subjectivity, interiority, and contradiction, thereby opening up the representational possibilities of gender and desire.

Importantly, this reconfiguration is not merely an on-screen representation but extends into the world of spectatorship. Digital audiences, through participatory practices such as online discourse, fan engagement, and critical reinterpretation, actively contribute to the production of meaning. In that regard, watching is, by definition, a dialogic, political process, and agreement with Bell Hooks's viewpoints on the oppositional gaze and participatory culture in the framework of Henry Jenkins. The demarcations between producer and consumer, text and interpretation are becoming increasingly indistinct; the decentralized, interactive visual economy is the outcome.

Meanwhile, the article does not refute the contradictions of streaming culture. The commodification of feminist discourse, the authority of algorithmic visibility, and the persistence of class and cultural hierarchies of existence make the liberatory possibilities of OTT platforms problematic. These tensions, nevertheless, are not merely constraints but the symptoms of the postmodern condition itself, in which phenomena of resistance and complicity coexist within the same cultural formations.

Finally, it can be seen that Indian OTT platforms are valuable sites of feminist negotiation, within which the politics of looking is reconstituted through fluid identities, the singular diversity of narratives, and other participatory interactions. This article, in some ways, helps predict how modern digital media not only reflects but actively seeks to redefine conceptualizations of television in terms of gender, power, and the spectator. Thus, by doing so, it places streaming culture as a new grid, whereby representation cannot be fixed but exists in a continual state of flux or negotiation, establishing the space for being open to newer possibilities of more inclusive and critically conscious imaginative visual futures.

Works Cited

Akhtar, Zoya, and Reema Kagti, creators. *Made in Heaven*. Tiger Baby and Excel Entertainment, Amazon Prime Video, 2019-present.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge, 1990.

Connell, Raewyn W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2005.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* Routledge, 1991, pp. 149–181.

Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press, 1991.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006.

---. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. Co-authored with Sam Ford and Joshua Green, New York University Press, 2013.

Kota Factory. Created by Saurabh Khanna and Raghav Subbu, The Viral Fever (TVF), Netflix, 2019–2021.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Mehta, Richie, creator. *Delhi Crime*. Golden Karavan and Film Karavan, Netflix, 2019–present.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

---. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. British Film Institute, 1996.