

THROUGH HER EYES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE VIEWERSHIP AND NARRATIVES OF MALE VIOLENCE ON DIGITAL STREAMING PLATFORMS.

Narayana Choudhuri ¹, Anshuman Kumar ²

¹Central University of Haryana

²Central University of Jharkhand.

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the interpretative frameworks female audiences employ when engaging with narratives centered on male violence on streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar. Moving beyond traditional text-centric or effects-based analyses, this research posits the "female gaze" as an active, critical mode of reception. It is conceptualised not as a biological imperative but as a socio-culturally informed viewing position that prioritizes subjectivity, consequence, and a critical interrogation of patriarchal power structures. Through a focused textual and paratextual analysis of two seminal Indian series—Sacred Games (Netflix) and Paatal Lok (Amazon Prime Video)—and their surrounding discourse, this paper delineates the mechanisms of this gaze. Findings reveal that female-oriented critique systematically deconstructs the glamorization of violent masculinity, demands narrative accountability for emotional and social aftermath, and engages in nuanced negotiations within genre conventions. The streaming environment, characterized by viewer control and community-driven paratexts, facilitates this form of resistive spectatorship. This study concludes that acknowledging the female gaze as a sophisticated form of audience intelligence is crucial for a holistic understanding of media violence in the digital age, offering significant implications for content creators, media scholars, and the broader discourse on gender and representation.

Keyword: *Female Gaze, Spectatorship, Media Violence, Streaming Platforms, OTT Media, Indian Digital Series, Audience Reception, Feminist Media Critique*

1.INTRODUCTION

The global rise of subscription-based video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms has precipitated a paradigm shift in narrative consumption, creating a content-rich ecosystem where depictions of male violence are both prevalent and popular. From grim crime procedurals to stylized gangster sagas, aggression is a frequent narrative driver. Predominant scholarly and public debates have traditionally orbited two poles: the potential socio-psychological effects of such media violence or its textual construction through a directorial lens, which has historically been male-coded (Mulvey, 1975). This binary often renders the audience, particularly women who constitute a substantial and influential viewership demographic, as either passive recipients or abstract theoretical constructs.

This paper argues for a necessary third axis of inquiry: the sphere of active, critical reception. It asks: How do women, as discerning viewers, interpret, negotiate, and critique narratives of male violence within the unique context of the streaming landscape? To address this, we mobilize the concept of the "female gaze." Divorced from essentialism, this gaze is understood here as a critical viewing stance—shaped by feminist thought and lived experience within patriarchal structures—that seeks emotional depth, character interiority, and is inherently skeptical of violence that serves as unexamined spectacle or masculine validation (Creed, 2007; Smelik, 2021).

Streaming platforms, with their architectures of choice (binge-watching, pause, abandonment), algorithmic personalization, and integrated social paratexts (reviews, forums), create a distinct "viewing contract" that empowers audience agency (Jenner, 2018; Lotz, 2022). This study, through a close reading of influential Indian content and its associated discourse, demonstrates that women leverage this agency to perform a sustained critique, enacting what Stuart Hall (1980) would term "negotiated" or "oppositional" readings. By illuminating this process, the paper contributes to a more dynamic and respectful model of audience engagement, one that recognizes viewers as co-creators of meaning in the digital era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated at the intersection of feminist media theory, audience reception studies, and digital platform scholarship. The review synthesizes these domains to construct a robust framework for analyzing the female gaze as a mode of critical reception to violent narratives in the streaming era.

2.1. From Male Gaze to Critical Female Spectatorship

The foundational critique of gendered looking relations originates with Laura Mulvey's (1975) psycho-semiotic concept of the "male gaze." She argued that classical Hollywood cinema is structured by an unconscious patriarchal lens, positioning the male protagonist as the active bearer of the look and the female figure as a passive, "to-be-looked-at" spectacle for heterosexual male voyeuristic pleasure. This framework presented a crisis for the female viewers, forcing an identificatory cross-gender alignment. In response, feminist film theory of the subsequent decades actively theorized the possibility and outline of female spectatorship. According to Author Teresa de Lauretis (1984) argued for the female spectator's complex negotiation of recognition positions, while Mary Ann Doane (1982) explored concepts like the "masquerade" of femininity as potential viewing strategies that create distance from the patriarchal text.

Expanding on this basis, the contemporary conceptualization of the "female gaze" employed in this

study moves beyond a simple binary reversal. Others scholars like Barbara Creed (2007) and Annette Kuhn (1994), it is defined as a critical and interrogative viewing position, shaped by feminist politics and lived experience. This gaze seeks to fundamentally alter narrative priorities: it looks *for* subjectivity, interiority, and emotional consequence rather than *at* objectified spectacle, and it thoroughly examines how power relations shape on screen action (Smelik, 2021). When applied to narratives of violence, this critical position naturally questions perpetrator motivation, explores systemic and psychological trauma, and centers the perspectives of victims and communities in common, action-packed storytelling, choices are frequently pushed to the narrative periphery.

2.2. Audiences as Active Meaning-Makers: Reception Theory

The theoretical pivot from passive audience to active meaning-maker is central to this analysis. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model was transformative, positing that media texts are polysemic and that audiences can decode meanings divergent from the producer's "preferred reading." His taxonomy—dominant-hegemonic (accepting the intended meaning), negotiated (accepting the broad framework while resisting specific elements), and oppositional (rejecting the framework based on an alternative worldview)—provides the crucial mechanism for understanding how female viewers critically engage with violent content.

A woman's social positionality, informed by navigating a world where male violence is a pervasive social reality (World Health Organization, 2021), inherently furnishes the resources for negotiated or oppositional readings of its mediated representations. This aligns with ethnographic reception studies, such as Janice Radway's (1984) work on romance readers, which demonstrated how women actively interpret texts to serve their own needs, often reading against patriarchal grain. Similarly, Ien Ang's (1985) study of *Dallas* viewers revealed personalized and critical engagements with melodrama. This body of work affirms the audience as an active site of meaning-making, where personal experience and social identity filter interpretation, a premise fundamental to analyzing the female gaze as a practice of critical decoding.

2.3. The Streaming Platform as a Transformative Reception Context

The rise of Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) platforms has fundamentally reconfigured the television paradigm and its attendant audience practices. Scholars like Amanda Lotz (2007, 2022) characterise this as a "post-network" era, marked by viewer control over time, pace, and selection through binge-watching and algorithmic pattern. This new "viewing contract" (Jenner, 2018) facilitates a more self-directed, deliberate, and potentially critical mode of engagement. the ability to pause, rewind, or leave a narrative empowers viewers to dissect problematic content at their own pace.

In addition, the paratextual ecosystem surrounding streaming content is integral to modern reception. Expanding on Gerard Genette's (1997) concept, Jonathan Gray (2010) argues that thresholds (trailers, reviews, social media discourse, video essays) actively frame and shape audience interpretation. Platforms that allow for immediate sourcing of criticism are integrated into digital networks. For feminist critique, this means the female gaze is no longer a private act but can be collectively articulated and amplified in online spaces like Twitter threads or YouTube analysis videos, creating a visible counter-discourse to mainstream textual analysis (Williams, 2020). Platforms like Disney+ Hotstar further specialize in localized content, embedding narratives of violence within specific Indian socio-political contexts, communal tensions, caste hierarchies, political corruption. An audience with robust cultural literacy then decodes these narratives, expanding the paratextual conversation with local feminist and social justice viewpoints.

2.4. Synthesizing the Framework: Addressing the Research Gap

While significant scholarship exists on media violence, feminist theory, and streaming platforms independently, a gap remains in research that incorporates these strands through a reception-focused lens in non-Western contexts. Studies on the female gaze or media violence often center Hollywood or European cinema (Creed, 2007; Smelik, 2021), while emerging work on

Indian streaming frequently focuses on industry, regulation, or textual representation (Kumar & Punathambekar, 2022), with less emphasis on audience reception.

This study addresses this gap. It synthesises the theoretical framework of the female gaze—as a critical, oppositional decoding practice informed by feminist standpoint theory—with Hall's model of active reception, situating this within the transformative technological and paratextual context of SVOD platforms. It investigates not only *what* is represented in Indian series like *Sacred Games* and *Paatal Lok*, but also *how* these representations are critically interpreted and contested by audiences, thereby contributing a nuanced, audience-centred perspective to global conversations on gender, violence, and digital media.

3. METHODOLOGY: A MULTI-MODAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING RECEPTION

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-modal methodological framework designed to triangulate data sources and analytical approaches. This design acknowledges that audience reception, particularly of a critical and discursive nature, is best understood through a combination of textual examination and the analysis of the public discourse that texts generate. Given the study's focus on interpretative frameworks rather than demographic effects, a qualitative paradigm is most appropriate to capture nuance, complexity, and meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology is structured in three interconnected phases: Case Study Selection, Textual Analysis, and Paratextual Analysis.

3.1. Phase One: Rationale and Selection of Case Studies

To ground the theoretical exploration of the female gaze in concrete examples, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select two Indian digital series as primary case studies. The selection criteria were as follows:

1. Cultural Specificity and Global Reach: The series must be original productions from India, addressing localised social realities, yet distributed on global platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime Videos), inviting both domestic and international viewership and critique.

2. Narrative Centrality of Male Violence: Violence, in its systemic, psychological, and physical forms, must be a core narrative engine, not a peripheral element.
3. Critical Acclaim and Discourse Generation: The series must have sparked significant public and critical debate, ensuring a rich paratextual field for analysis.
4. Representation of Different Sub-genres: To test the female gaze across narrative modes, selections should vary in tone and approach.

Based on these criteria, the following series were selected:

- **Sacred Games** (Netflix, Seasons 1 & 2, 2018-2019): A neo-noir crime thriller that intertwines the stories of a troubled Mumbai police inspector, Sartaj Singh, and the charismatic, philosophizing gangster, Ganesh Gaitonde. Its violence is multifaceted—personal, communal, political, and deeply entangled with misogyny and power. It generated immense buzz and controversy, particularly around its portrayal of women and its gritty aesthetic.
- **Paatal Lok** (Amazon Prime Video, Season 1, 2020): A gritty police procedural and social thriller that uses an assassination attempt to explore India's societal hierarchies—literally framed as Swarg (Heaven), Dharti (Earth), and Paatal (Hell). Its violence is explicitly linked to caste oppression, media corruption, and institutional failure. It was widely praised for its social commentary and unflinching realism, prompting focused discussions on caste and representation.

3.2. Phase Two: Systematic Textual Analysis Framework

A close textual analysis was conducted on key narrative arcs from both series to establish how meanings about violence are *encoded*. This involved a structured viewing and note-taking process, analyzing episodes through three established analytical lenses:

1. Narrative and Thematic Analysis: This focused on plot structure, character motivations, and thematic messaging. Questions guiding this analysis included: How is the violent male character constructed (tragic hero, pure evil,

product of system)? What narrative function does violence serve (advancing plot, developing character, creating spectacle)? What are the stated or implied consequences of violence for victims, perpetrators, and society?

2. Visual and Aesthetic Analysis (Mise-en-scène): This examined the cinematic language used to depict violence. Key elements analyzed were: *Camera work* (subjective vs. objective framing, use of slow-motion, close-ups on agony vs. action); *Editing* (pace, juxtaposition of violent acts with other imagery); *Sound* (use of music to glorify or critique, presence of diegetic sound of pain); and *Production Design* (the visual texture of violence—stylized vs. raw, clean vs. messy).
3. Representational Analysis: This lens specifically interrogated the portrayal of gender, caste, and power. It asked: How are female characters positioned in relation to violence (victims, catalysts, commentators)? Does the narrative critique, condone, or remain ambivalent towards the patriarchal and social structures enabling violence? How are hierarchies of caste and class visually and narratively implicated in acts of violence?

3.3. Phase Three: Paratextual Analysis of Audience and Critical Discourse

To access how meanings are *decoded* and publicly negotiated, a systematic paratextual analysis was undertaken. "Paratexts" (Gray, 2010) here refer to the vast array of texts that surround and shape the reception of the primary text. Data was collected from three distinct but overlapping spheres:

1. Professional and Feminist Criticism: A curated sample of articles, reviews, and video essays was compiled from:
 - Indian feminist digital media platforms (e.g., *Feminism in India*, *SheThePeople*).
 - Mainstream Indian entertainment journalism known for critical analysis (e.g., *Film Companion*, *The Wire Culture*).
 - International media outlets reviewing the series.

2. Structured Social Media Discourse: To capture more organic audience reaction, data was gathered from public forums:

- Twitter/X: Analysis of tweets using relevant hashtags (#PaatalLok, #SacredGames, #MaleGaze, #FemaleGaze) during the month following each season's release. Threads initiating substantive critique were prioritized.
- Reddit: Analysis of discussion threads in relevant subreddits (e.g., r/IndianOTTBestOf, r/Bollywood). Top-voted posts and extended comment

chains were examined to identify recurring themes of praise, critique, and debate.

3. User-Generated Reviews: A qualitative reading of a sample of audience reviews on platforms like IMDb was conducted to gauge broader sentiment patterns beyond critical circles.

3.4. Data Synthesis and Analytical Procedure

The analytical process was iterative and followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarisation: Immersion in the textual material (series episodes) and paratextual data (articles, posts).
2. Initial Coding: Generating initial codes from both textual and paratextual data. For example, codes like "glamorization of gangster," "critique of misogyny," "demand for consequence," and "appreciation of social commentary" emerged.
3. Theme Development: Sorting codes into potential themes, looking for patterns that addressed the research question. The themes identified (e.g., *Deconstructing Charisma*, *The Imperative of Consequence*, *Negotiated Engagement*) were then checked against both the textual encoding (how the show presents it) and the paratextual decoding (how it is critiqued).
4. Triangulation and Refinement: The findings from the textual analysis were constantly compared and contrasted with the themes from the paratextual analysis. This triangulation ensured that claims about the "female gaze"

were not merely projected onto the text but were demonstrably reflected in the audience's own articulated discourse. Discrepancies (e.g., a scene some critics found glorifying but others found ironic) were noted and explored as sites of negotiated meaning.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

- Ethics: All paratextual data analyzed is publicly available. Direct quotes are attributed to their public platforms (e.g., named journalists, publications). Anonymous social media usernames are not disclosed; discourse is analyzed thematically without identifying individuals.
- Limitations: This methodology does not claim to capture the private, individual viewing experiences of all women. It analyzes the *publicly expressed* forms of critique, which inherently represent a more vocal and often critically literate segment of the audience. Furthermore, the choice of two Hindi-language series, while rich for analysis, means the findings are culturally specific and may not translate directly to other regional or linguistic contexts within India or beyond. The study recognizes the variability of the "female gaze" across caste, class, and sexuality intersections, which would require more investigation in a larger study.

3.6. Analytical Framework

This study employs a dual-level analytical framework designed to connect the construction of violent narratives with their public reception. The first level involves **textual analysis**, conducting a close reading of *Sacred Games* and *Paatal Lok* to decipher how violence is formally and narratively encoded. This examines cinematography, dialogue, character development, and narrative structure to assess whether aggression is glorified, critiqued, or presented with ambivalence.

The second level consists of **paratextual analysis**, which systematically examines the critical discourse surrounding the series. This includes analyzing articles from Indian feminist digital media and critical entertainment journalism, alongside organized social

media discussions on platforms like Twitter and Reddit. By comparing the textual encoding with this public decoding, the framework maps how the female gaze manifests as a critical practice, revealing patterns of negotiated or oppositional reading that demonstrate sophisticated audience engagement with narratives of violence.

This paratextual layer serves as a proxy for public articulation of the female gaze, revealing the patterns of critique, praise, and debate that the texts engender.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Deconstructing the Charisma of Violence

Sacred Games presents a prime site for analysing the female gaze's resistance to seductive violence. Ganesh Gaitonde, portrayed by Nawazuddin Siddiqui, is charismatic, philosophically inclined, and often the narrative's dominant voice. A dominant or negotiated reading might be captivated by his agency and "rise-and-fall" saga. However, a female-oriented oppositional reading, abundantly clear in paratexts, pierces this glamour. Critics and viewers consistently highlighted his pathological misogyny, the brutal treatment of women like Kuku, the transactional view of relationships, and the use of sexual violence as a tool of power. This gaze reframes his philosophy not as wisdom but as the narcissistic justification of a tyrant. The critique extends to the show's own potential complicity, questioning whether the slick cinematography and narrative centrality unintentionally glorify the very toxicity it depicts (Bhasin, 2018).

4.2. The Imperative of Consequence and Emotional Truth

A recurrent demand in the analyzed discourse is for narratives to bear the ethical weight of violence. Paatal Lok was widely praised for its commitment to consequence. The violence inflicted upon the lower-caste suspects, particularly Cheeni, is not a mere plot point; its traumatic aftermath is lingered upon—showing the bodily and psychological damage, the impact on their families, and the corrosive effect on the conscience of the upper-caste cop, Hathiram Chaudhary. This aligns perfectly with the female gaze's orientation towards emotional realism and relational

impact. Paratextual discussions lauded the series for "showing the cost," contrasting it with shows where violence is "cool" and forgettable. This critique underscores a broader audience fatigue with violence that serves as empty spectacle, demanding instead that it be tethered to tangible human suffering and systemic critique.

4.3. Negotiated Engagement: Genre, Quality, and Social Commentary

The female gaze is not a blanket rejection of violent content. It involves sophisticated discrimination. Viewers expressed the ability to engage with violent narratives when they perceived higher artistic merit or a clear critical purpose. Paatal Lok's violence, for instance, was frequently accepted because it was seen as essential to its scathing indictment of casteism, media sensationalism, and police brutality. The gaze operated in a negotiated mode: "I am watching this distressing violence because it is in service of a powerful truth about my society." Similarly, the complex plotting and cinematic quality of Sacred Games could be appreciated even while its gender politics were critiqued. This demonstrates an audience capable of holding multiple, sometimes contradictory, evaluations simultaneously—a mark of highly literate viewership.

5. DISCUSSION

This analysis substantiates the thesis that female viewership of violent narratives on streaming platforms is a form of critical practice. The "female gaze" emerges as an analytical lens through which audiences deconstruct patriarchal power, insist on narrative ethics, and make conscious choices about their media diet. The streaming environment is not incidental but instrumental to this process. The power to pause a traumatic scene, to seek out corroborating or critical reviews instantly, and to participate in community-driven analysis on social media transforms viewing from a solitary act into a participatory, critical dialogue. The focus on Indian content reveals the cultural specificity of this gaze. The critique is not abstract but engages directly with localized structures of power—caste in Paatal Lok, communal politics and gangsterism in Sacred Games. This shows that the female gaze is a globally relevant framework that manifests in locally

informed ways, deeply engaged with the social text from which the media text emerges.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study fundamentally reframes female viewership of violent narratives from a passive to an active, dialogic process. Women do not merely consume these stories but engage with them as critical interpreters, operating from a viewing position that is inherently interrogative. This stance, conceptualized as the female gaze, equips audiences with a sophisticated analytical toolkit for deconstruction. It moves beyond simple acceptance or rejection, instead involving a continuous process of questioning narrative motives, assessing character psychology, and evaluating the ethical frameworks within which violence is presented. This critical activity is a conscious application of media literacy, where viewers dissect production choices, narrative tropes, and ideological underpinnings in real time, often leveraging the interactive affordances of streaming platforms—such as pausing for reflection or seeking supplemental commentary—to deepen their analysis.

Consequently, the female gaze functions as a robust, real-time form of audience feedback and a demand for narrative accountability. It challenges creators to evolve beyond stereotypical or gratuitous portrayals that serve only as visceral spectacle. This critical viewership calls for representations that engage with the complex ethical dimensions of aggression: its psychological roots, its traumatic aftermath, and its embeddedness within social structures of power, such as patriarchy or caste. The demand is not for the elimination of violence from storytelling, but for its responsible integration—where it carries thematic weight, consequences, and a point of view that considers marginalized perspectives. In this way, the female gaze acts as a crucial cultural corrective, pushing the creative industry toward more nuanced, thoughtful, and ethically engaged storytelling that respects the intelligence of its audience and acknowledges the real-world resonance of fictionalized aggression. This dynamic positions the viewer not as an endpoint for content, but as an active participant in shaping a more reflective media landscape.

7. IMPLICATIONS:

For Media Scholars: It underscores the imperative to integrate reception studies and audience discourse more centrally into analyses of media violence. Textual analysis alone cannot capture the dynamic meaning-making process.

For Content Creators: It signals a sophisticated and demanding audience. Success lies in respecting this viewer's intelligence by crafting narratives that offer more than spectacle—that provide psychological depth, authentic consequence, and thoughtful engagement with social power dynamics.

For the Broader Culture: It highlights how digital platforms can foster spaces for resistant reading and collective critique, empowering audiences to shape cultural conversations about representation, gender, and violence.

Future research could expand this framework through comparative studies across different cultures and platforms, longitudinal analyses of how such critique evolves, or by incorporating more direct ethnographic engagement with diverse viewer communities. The conversation between the screen and the viewer has never been more complex or more consequential.

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