

Power, Gender, and Resistance: A Feminist Re-reading of Gender Dynamics in the Web Series Delhi Crime

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Abstract:

This paper offers a feminist analysis of the critically acclaimed web series Delhi Crime (Season 1), which dramatizes the 2012 Delhi gang rape investigation. While the series primarily presents itself as a police procedural drama, it simultaneously reveals layered critiques of gendered power structures, patriarchal institutional behaviour, and the socio-cultural constraints that shape Indian law enforcement. Through the character dynamics—particularly those of DCP Vartika Chaturvedi and her colleagues—this study interprets how the series critiques structural misogyny, gendered workplace norms, and the symbolic negotiation of authority. Drawing from key feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, Bell Hooks, Sara Ahmed, R.W. Connell, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gayatri Spivak, this analysis highlights how Delhi Crime challenges male-dominated frameworks by representing female resilience, strategic navigation of power, and emotional economies of leadership. The work interweaves theoretical discourse with textual critique to contribute to larger discussions on gender, justice, resistance, and postcolonial subjectivity in contemporary Indian media.

Keywords: Delhi Crime, Madam Sir, Feminist Theory, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Power Dynamics, Workplace Discrimination, Indian Web Series, Representation of Women, Institutional Misogyny.

Introduction:

The 2012 Delhi gang rape case was not merely an incident of horrific violence—it catalyzed a rupture in India's gender discourse and exposed the failings of its law enforcement and judicial systems. The mass protests that ensued revealed a nation grappling with its conscience. Netflix's *Delhi Crime*, which dramatises the aftermath of the crime, engages with these

historical ruptures not simply through narrative fidelity but through a critique of institutional norms. It presents a gendered lens into the inner workings of Indian policing, portraying power hierarchies, ethical dilemmas, and emotional burdens shouldered disproportionately by women in positions of authority.

At the core of this dramatisation is DCP Vartika Chaturvedi, modelled after real-life officer Chhaya Sharma. Her character becomes a vessel through which the series explores systemic patriarchy while constructing an alternative narrative of female leadership in a masculinised space. This paper investigates how *Delhi Crime* subverts normative gender binaries, interrogates power relations, and highlights the struggles and strategies of women in law enforcement. Through close readings of key scenes, dialogues, and symbolic choices, informed by an interdisciplinary feminist framework, this study articulates how the series becomes a site of gender critique and performative resistance.

Theoretical Framework:

Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative—where identity is continuously constituted through repeated acts—illuminates the character of DCP Vartika, who must embody masculine-coded traits such as stoicism, assertiveness, and rational detachment to assert her authority in a patriarchal bureaucracy (Butler, 1990). However, this performance is not totalizing. Vartika's acts of care, emotional expression, and ethical clarity resist and exceed performative scripts, showcasing what Butler describes as the possibility of subversion within gender performativity. Bell Hooks' intersectional feminist approach underscores the interplay of gender, class, and institutional power. In the Indian context, caste and class intricately mediate gender experiences, and *Delhi Crime* reflects this through its portrayal of both victims and suspects. The class-based dehumanisation of the suspects during interrogation, juxtaposed with the dignified empathy afforded to the female victim, reveals systemic biases rooted in socio-economic hierarchies (Hooks, 1984). These moments call attention to the uneven application of justice and recognition.

R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how dominant ideals of manhood are institutionalised through authority structures. In *Delhi Crime*, the valorisation of emotional suppression, physical toughness, and command aligns with Connell's masculine hegemony. Female officers must often internalise and enact these values to gain legitimacy. Yet, their

resistance takes the form of relational ethics and quiet subversions. Vartika's moral compass, informed by compassion as much as law, challenges the gendering of ethical decision-making.

Gender, Language, and Institutional Power:

The repeated use of the phrase “Madam Sir” by subordinates encapsulates the tensions of gender and authority in institutional spaces. Linguistically, it fuses femininity (“Madam”) with the normative marker of institutional power (“Sir”), revealing how language compensates for the perceived incongruity of a woman in command. According to Butler, such linguistic formations are part of performative regimes that naturalise gendered expectations (Butler, 1990). Here, “Madam Sir” performs the paradox of a feminine subject authorised through masculine legitimacy. In one revealing scene, a junior female officer offers a comforting hug to DCP Vartika, only to be rebuked with, “Don’t cross the limit.” This moment exposes the emotional boundaries women in power must maintain. Public displays of vulnerability are policed even among women. Yet, in a later scene, Vartika embraces a male subordinate in celebration, suggesting that professional camaraderie is more acceptable across gender lines. Sara Ahmed’s concept of “emotional economies” helps contextualise this discrepancy—the social value of emotions is unevenly distributed, shaped by gendered codes that allow warmth from men to be normalised while emotional support among women is seen as excessive or unprofessional (Ahmed, 2004).

The character of the pregnant junior officer, often sidelined, embodies quiet resistance to gendered marginalisation. Her physical condition becomes a site of underestimated strength rather than vulnerability. Her unwavering participation in fieldwork underlines a silent rebellion against the fragility associated with femininity. Bell Hooks’ concept of “everyday resistance” is particularly apt here—the refusal to surrender one’s professional identity to gendered assumptions becomes a radical act (Hooks, 1984). Her presence redefines what competence and resilience can look like in a patriarchal institution.

Vartika’s leadership is constructed through contradiction: decisiveness without cruelty, compassion without compromise. She destabilises both patriarchal and essentialist feminist notions of leadership. Rather than subscribing to either toughness or nurturing, she melds both into an ethically engaged model of authority. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s idea of “embodied resistance”—the notion that women’s leadership within hegemonic systems is a political act—

finds resonance here (Mohanty, 2003). Vartika operates from within the system yet subtly transforms its relational dynamics.

Her positionality as a postcolonial feminist subject further enriches the reading. She navigates the vestiges of colonial law enforcement structures, patriarchal workplace norms, and the expectations placed upon her as a female officer in public view. As Gayatri Spivak articulates through “strategic essentialism,” women in marginalised positions may temporarily embrace essentialist roles to gain visibility and agency (Spivak, 1988). Vartika’s deliberate assumption of masculine-coded authority allows her to manoeuvre institutional power while quietly subverting its gendered assumptions.

Conclusion:

Delhi Crime transcends the boundaries of crime drama to emerge as a feminist text that critiques and reimagines gendered power. It articulates how women navigate, perform, resist, and redefine their roles in male-dominated institutions. Through the term “Madam Sir,” the denial and granting of emotional intimacy, and the everyday courage of sidelined women officers, the series renders visible the invisible labour and ethical burdens of women in power. By applying feminist theories to its narrative structures and character portrayals, this paper has demonstrated how *Delhi Crime* becomes a site of symbolic resistance and political imagination. It invites viewers to confront the paradoxes of power and to witness the emergence of new feminine subjectivities in institutional spaces. Ultimately, *Delhi Crime* enacts feminist agency not just through plot but through form, gesture, and voice—illuminating the potential of media to disrupt, challenge, and transform gendered realities.

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