

## Research Article

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## ***Making and Breaking: An Analysis of Representation and Nonrepresentation in Indian Matchmaking***

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### Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the Netflix reality show Indian Matchmaking through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory, focusing on the cultural and social implications of matchmaking practices depicted in the series. By utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir, Stuart Hall, and Michel Foucault, this paper explores how the show reinforces gender roles, caste hierarchies, and Eurocentric beauty ideals. Additionally, the paper integrates meme culture and humor as a medium of resistance against these established norms, highlighting how digital spaces enable viewers to critique the problematic representations within the show. Through this intersectional approach, the paper reveals how Indian Matchmaking perpetuates and critiques societal stereotypes, shedding light on the complex and evolving nature of identity, marriage, and social expectations in contemporary Indian culture.

**Keywords:** India, Matchmaking, Gender roles, Memes, Dissent, Representation

### Introduction:

The phrase "Marriages are made in heaven", puts a sacred value on marriage as an institution and thus has made it unquestionable. But with the rise of various discourses marriage has

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become available for questions and challenges. They have made us question various things centred around marriage, such as gender roles and heterosexuality that are reinforced by the institution of marriage. The documentary show, "Indian Matchmaking" brings these flaws that are inherent in processes like matchmaking and marriage on screen and acts as a mirror to the society.

The show being a hit has given rise to debates about gender norms, beauty standards and various other aspects. Social media has been flooded with reviews and memes about shows which challenge the dominant ideologies bringing the voice of resistance and dissent. The study of the show focuses on inherent patriarchy, colourism, and casteism presented through the show. The primary focus is to look at gender politics, and how it is represented in the show in the Indian upper class and diaspora. It will try to demonstrate the inherently regressive, heteronormative and patriarchal nature of the matchmaking process. Secondly, it will attempt to study selected memes which condemn the nature of the show and stand as a point of dissent to the dominant ideologies presented. It will also look at how certain communities are ignored and how it becomes the show that is elitist and exclusivist.

### **Methodology**

Discourse analysis is used to dissect and analyse the show's use of language and how it relates to its socio-political and historical context. It discusses the ideas and discourses of gender bias concerning the socio-political context of the participants of the show. It looks at how the show reflects the inherently regressive ideology. While discussing the memes, the paper looks at how the memes stand as a form of dissent to the dominant discourse presented in the show.

### **Literature Review:**

Irene Yang's study on "beautiful-and-bad" women in Taiwanese media reveals how media shapes gender constructs by portraying women who challenge norms, such as Chang in an Armani commercial, where beauty aligns with societal expectations but autonomy disrupts them. She introduces "bad woman feminism," where women adopt traits like ambition and rationality, historically assigned to men, redefining femininity. Similarly, Rahul Roy critiques masculinity's foundation in power, highlighting the pressures on men to maintain dominance and the fear of being relegated to "female" status if they fail. These insights intersect with Kathy Peiss's analysis of European beauty standards, which the beauty industry propagates globally, favouring fair skin, blonde hair, and slim physiques while marginalizing non-European features. This ideal infiltrates marriage markets, as seen in *Indian Matchmaking*, where grooms prioritize conventional attractiveness. Larry Gross further underscores the media's role in maintaining power structures, noting how non-representation marginalizes groups without material influence. This elitism is evident in *Indian Matchmaking*, which excludes queer, lower-caste, and lower-class individuals, reinforcing hierarchical exclusivity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, examines the role of women in marriage, highlighting their integration into their husbands' lives and identities. She notes that the husband often assumes the role of sole provider. However, economic shifts have begun to redefine marriage as a union between two autonomous individuals, freeing women from solely reproductive roles. This insight helps analyze how gender roles, traditionally embedded in marriage, are challenged or upheld in the show.

Foucault's theory of discourse frames humor as a tool to resist dominant paradigms. Power is both repressive and productive, enabling humor to critique societal norms while avoiding punitive backlash. Witkin supports this by identifying humor's capacity for "unmasking"—revealing flaws in established institutions. These ideas are critical for analyzing memes as counter-discourses that critique patriarchy, elitism, and heteronormativity in the show.

Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" model examines how audiences interpret media. Dominant readings align with the intended meaning, while oppositional readings reject it, reframing messages through alternative perspectives. Memes, as expressions of oppositional codes, offer unique insights into how viewers critique the show's messages.

### **Gender Roles**

Marriage in patriarchy becomes a weapon of men to keep women confined to the house. The societal norms and gender roles are constructed to keep the power in the hands of men. The participants of the show challenge these traditionally assigned roles by asserting their autonomy while a few participants and their family members are keen on maintaining them. Aparna is a 34-year-old attorney from Houston (Herman.A). She is an independent and successful woman who is clear about what she wants in her future partner. She says that she always knew that the person she picked had to fit her. (Indian Matchmaking 31:47). Nevertheless, Sima, the matchmaker thinks she is negative, picky, rude and stubborn. Talking about the 'high standards' that Aparna has for her future partner, she says "She wants open-minded, she wants that this, many of these are not important for a happy marriage." She further adds, "Aparna is the hardest type of candidate to match because she thinks finding a life partner is like ordering from a menu. (26:11- 27:06)"

Furthermore, she says that if females are lawyers in India, people are scared. Throughout the show, Aparna is vilified for being upfront and expressing herself. Irene Yang's concept of a 'beautiful-and-bad woman' can be brought in to look at the portrayal of Aparna. She further says, 'Bad woman feminism' referred to women learning the "rules of the men in the game", meaning women adopting the traits that were traditionally assigned to men, such as being active, expressive, ambitious, competitive, individualistic, rational, goal-oriented, calculative explaining the concept in her study on Media feminism and politics of construction.

Similarly, Ankita who is a career-oriented successful businesswoman is told "Life is never equal. It is our duty as women to understand that in a marriage the woman gives the emotional side of herself much more than a man does. (13:02- 13:11)" by Geeta, Sima's work associate. She also tells her she should be ready to give up her career while talking about how women sacrifice so much for marriage. Sima describes Ankita as a 'strong-headed' girl who cannot fit into a traditional family. Ankita says Geeta made women feel like inferior objects by narrowing down the conversation and felt disappointed after she met with her. Ankita finally decides that her work is her focus and is content with whatever she has. She takes a firm stand against the archaic process where women have to give up their careers and ambitions.

However, Aparna in an interview with Quint said that many things were going on behind the scenes and she was shocked to see how the show was edited to make it entertaining. Reacting to the comments like picky and stubborn, she says "When Sima asked me what kind of a boy do I want, viewers don't see this but actually only said two things. I said

I want someone really like laidback, quiet and introvert. She looked at me blankly, so I had to say it differently (Sharma. D)”.

In the case of Akshay, they are looking for a ‘Sanskari’ (cultured) girl who will make food for her husband and will take care of him. Preeti, Akshay’s mother, lays out the criteria for her son’s wife in her conversation with Sima Taparia. She says, her main concern is that the girl has to be flexible, she should be 5’3 or taller, family-oriented and someone like a daughter-in-law. Jinal Bhat calls Preeti the classic example of toxic femininity. Further elaborating on toxic femininity, she brings out the debate about how women in Indian culture are rarely given any position of power. Moreover, she says that once they are given the power “like in Preeti’s case where she controls the reins of her home, they feel that they have to run a tight ship or everything will go out of control.” They fear that a new member will disrupt the balance; hence they expect the daughter-in-law to adhere to the rules laid out, and that makes up the toxic mentality. (Bhat. J)

Referring to the assigned gender roles Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work “The Second Sex”, points out that a married woman completely integrates herself into her husband and his identity and that is what is expected. According to her observation, the husband becomes the sole provider in her world as he is the economic head of the family. However, Beauvoir also says that “the economic evolution of woman’s condition is in the process of upsetting the institution of marriage: it is becoming a union, freely entered into by two autonomous individuals” (502). Thus Aparna and Akita being successful, economically independent women pose a challenge to the institution of marriage in patriarchy which expects women to be submissive and passive by not conforming to the traditional gender roles. Moreover, they are also seen as highly undesirable women for marriage.

Vyasar another participant of the documentary challenges the conventionally constructed masculinity. He breaks the barriers that masculinity has created. He says that he loves cooking and would be happy to be a stay-at-home dad while his wife can earn. Giving up a career for the sake of their family is mostly something that women do. This breaks the patriarchal understanding of marriage. As Rahul Roy says dream equity can be achieved only by challenging this hierarchical structure of masculinity, Vyasar’s thoughts about his family attempt to break the power structure (25).

Further talking about the pressure that these constructs pose on men and boys, Rahul says there is a constant fear among them about falling to the category of a woman/female if failed. This fear can be observed in Akshay. He is heard saying, “I can’t do things around the house or raise kids. So, if my wife is working, then who do all that?” (7:10). when Radhika says that she would want to work and be independent. There is constant reinforcement as well as challenges posed to the gender norms in society. While few are breaking these norms and standing up for the right few are trying to reinforce them. Furthermore, we see many participants demand conventionally beautiful, unrealistic expectations from their future partners.

### **Eurocentric Beauty standards**

Tall, slim, handsome/beautiful, attractive was what mostly came up at the beginning of the criteria list among the participants. This mirrors society’s obsession with the Eurocentric beauty standards. This has led to many body image issues and social anxiety. Negative body images are said to have an effect on mental health, which can lead to eating disorders and

body dysmorphic disorders, where a person will have a difficult time to come in terms of their appearance and set highly unrealistic standards from themselves (Ahmed.T). Ankita Bansal is another victim of such standards. While talking to the life coach, she opened up about her past anxieties and body image issues and how she overcame them. She says that she has had people telling her to go to the gym and lose some weight to get married. She adds that she later came to the stage where she decided that a man could not accept her as she was. Moreover, Sima calls Ankita “not photogenic” while talking to her associate Geeta. We also see Pradhyan and Akshay looking for a conventionally beautiful and attractive girl. These notions come from a prejudiced idea of what beauty is set in the European market. Talking about these European beauty standards, Kathy Peiss brings out a debate about how they became norms across the world. She says everything became a market for beauty, including marriage, where beauty found the “highest bidder.” Moreover, she pointed out the blond, fair-skinned, fit, and active body, which became the norm.

### **Non-representation**

The show totally ignores the queer couples by making it exclusively heteronormative. There is no representation from the queer community; all we see is heterosexual people looking for beautiful/handsome partners. This shows how heteronormativity has become a norm in the society. Moreover, the show focuses only on the high class, elite community. By focusing on the elite, the show marginalizes various intricacies and layers the process of matchmaking and marriage that are there in the other classes and castes. This whitewashes the whole idea of marriage and matchmaking by not addressing issues like dowry which show us the ugly side of it.

Larry Gross rightly says that Mass Media has achieved a great reach with which it is possible for people to understand a culture without being connected to it. Further talking about the representation media offers, Gross says “representation in the mediated ‘reality’ of our mass culture is in itself power; indeed it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or power bases (142).” These power dynamics is evident in the show with it being exclusive and elitist and giving no representation to the oppressed communities.

### **Humour/Comedy and Dissent**

Meme culture in relation to *Indian Matchmaking* provides an alternative form of commentary on the show. While the show presents traditional, often regressive ideas about marriage, memes give people a way to resist and criticize these ideas in a fun, but thought-provoking way. They allow viewers to laugh at the show while also pointing out its flaws and contradictions—especially regarding issues like gender, caste, and social expectations. Memes become a space where people can express their dissatisfaction and challenge societal norms, thus serving as a form of cultural resistance

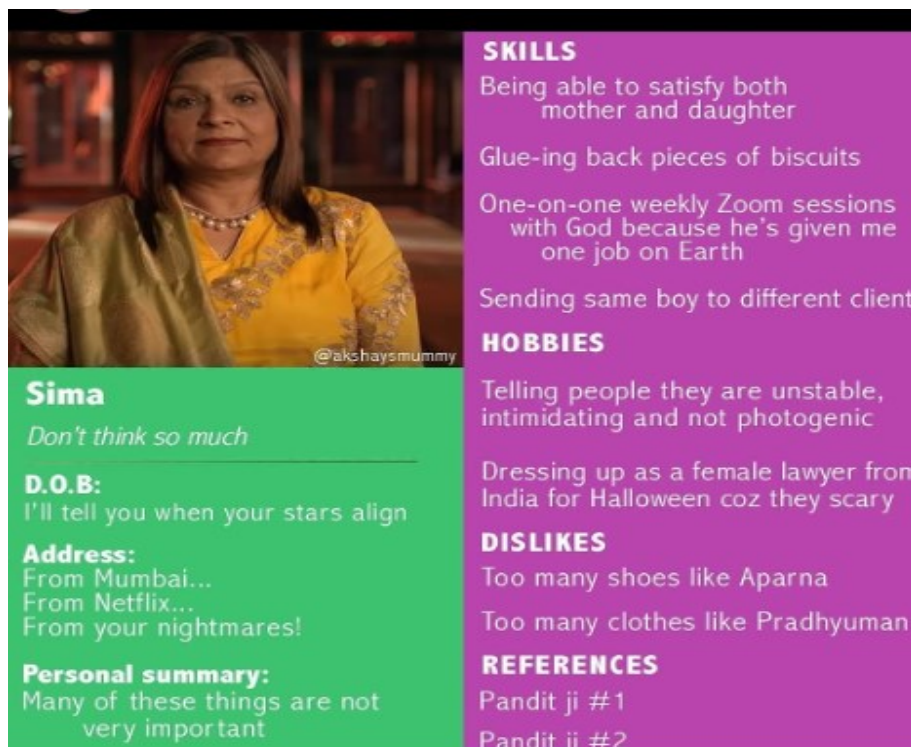


The above meme brilliantly expresses the voice of the other side. It uses references from the popular show Game of Thrones to express dissent. Sima Taparia keeps telling the participants that they have to compromise significantly for the women. The meme takes a dig at thought by referring to Cersei, the Game of Thrones character who belongs to the North in the narrative. Cersei is a woman who killed her husband to take over the power and her asking "will she compromise?" best articulates the opposition. This challenges the dominant discourse that dictates what women should or should not do. Foucault claims that the world of discourse is divided between dominant and dominated discourse. The dominant discourses silence "the Other." He further says that discourses can be both power and hindrance and that this hindrance becomes a starting point for opposing strategies. He also rightly states that the main function of power is repression (Young, R, 1995). In the case of the meme, it becomes an opposing strategy to the dominant discourse of patriarchy which tries to silence the 'Other'/women.



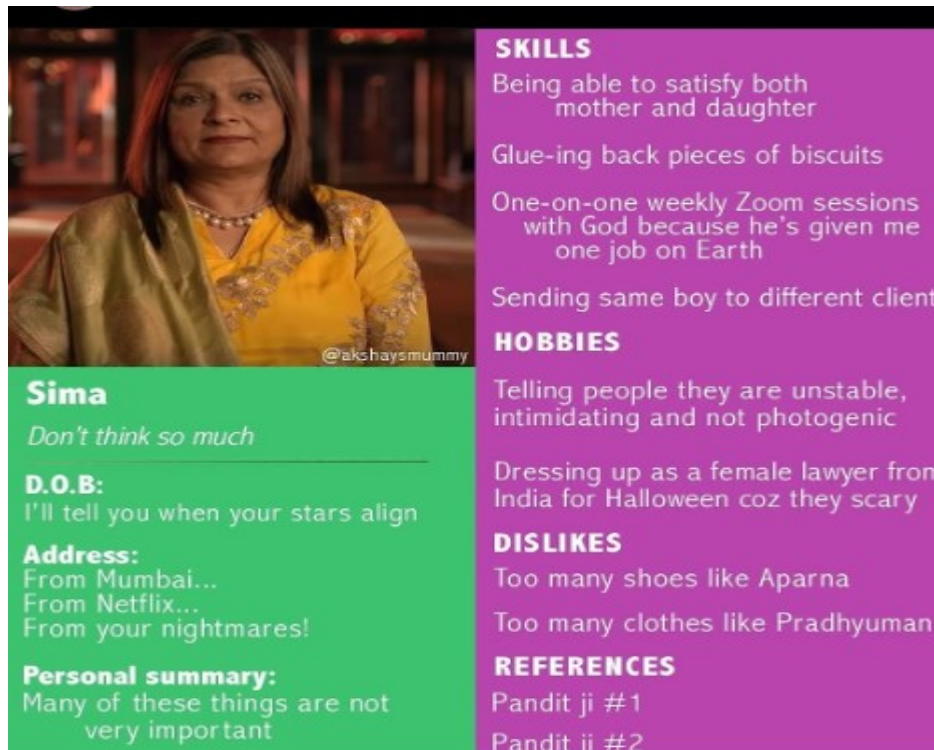


The above memes mock Askhay's mother Preeti for expecting a 'flexible' girl' for her son. These stand against the thought that expects women to deal with the situation and adjust. The second meme conveys a woman's voice by expressing her free will. Witkin, S states that humor serves a significant function in society, apart from personal and therapeutic benefits. It has provided a safe way for marginalized people to critique social order as it has multiple levels of meaning, and its critical dimension is shielded from the harsh, punitive response that it would otherwise face. Similarly, these memes become a way of saying that world women do not have to be adjusted, while patriarchy dictates them



The meme is combined with her quotes, making it look similar to a resume. It is made to make fun of the things Sima says in the show, which are absurd. She makes bizarre statements such as, "Ultimately, my efforts are meaningless if the stars are not aligned," She is not photogenic," and "People are scared if females are lawyers in India," and more. The

meme opposes Sima's underlying sexist attitude: it resists and opposes the dominant existing ideology humorously. This can be seen in Stuart Hall's concept of "oppositional codes. According to him, Oppositional decoding" occurs when the reader goes beyond the preferred meaning and interprets with or her social/political (national interest, class interest) position detotalizing and retotalizing the message with an alternative frame of reference. The above meme also goes beyond the preferred meaning and brings out an alternative frame of reference that opposes the ideology from which such thoughts come.



This meme mocks the whole show as overly conservative and archaic. Meme questions the attitude of the show, thereby also attacking the societal expectations of women. Here, the meme suggests that women are not allowed to question gender roles and are expected to blindly follow the rules already laid down by the power structure. This has become a way to mirror society. As Karmer says, subversive humor is significant for combating oppression. It takes oppressed people to establish psychological distance from third-party bystanders and makes them recognize the struggle they have been through or going through. Similarly, the meme becomes a way to talk back to oppressive power. The show offers us much to dissect and interpret. It is essential to be an active audience and to see how gender is represented and why specific communities are ignored throughout the show. It can also be viewed as a mockumentary outdated and archaic practice of matchmaking. Discussion of these gives us the ideological origins of media texts. Furthermore, the analysis of the memes using various ideas of humour as counter-culture or dissent helps the study in pointing out the voice of the "Other" and challenging the power structure.

In conclusion, *Indian Matchmaking* offers a window into the complexities of traditional matchmaking practices in Indian society, which are deeply rooted in ideas of caste, class, and gender. While the show has garnered attention for its portrayal of these practices, it also stirs important debates regarding the persistence of outdated norms in contemporary society. Memes, as a form of cultural commentary, serve as a critical vehicle for resistance against



these norms, using humor to highlight the show's reductive views on relationships, beauty, and social expectations. They provide an accessible, relatable space for viewers to critique these conventions while also reimagining what a more inclusive, equitable approach to marriage and relationships might look like.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the counter-argument that *Indian Matchmaking* does not necessarily promote the outdated values it portrays but rather reflects the reality of a certain demographic within Indian society. For some, the practices shown on the series may represent a reality of cultural preservation, family cohesion, and societal stability. From this perspective, the show could be seen as holding up a mirror to contemporary India, rather than as a vehicle for promoting regressive ideals. Memes, in this case, could be viewed as a form of resistance that might oversimplify or overlook the nuanced ways in which traditional practices coexist with evolving values in modern Indian society.

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