

Decoding Resistance: Fanfiction and Audience Agency in Indian Television

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Abstract

Fanfiction, a term for creative works based on existing works by fans, has been gaining attention for its diversity and cultural bearing. When readers/audience part take in the production of meaning within an established fictional world, the decoding mechanisms tend to challenge seemingly static premise of the established text. This paper attempts to read a fanfiction of the popular Indian television serial *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon*, to understand the how interpretive communities attempts to bridge the gap between encoded meaning and

alternative readings. The study analyses the serial and its fanfiction titled *Being Selfish* through the theoretical frame work of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model of communication.

Keywords: Fanfiction, Indian television Operas, Hall's Encoding/decoding, Resistance.

In the age of internet literature, fanfiction has increasingly attracted serious academic attention over the past three decades, emerging as a significant cultural practice that challenges traditional notions of authorship, readership, and meaning-making. Once dismissed as derivative and marginal, fanfiction is now recognized within media studies, cultural studies, and reception theory as a productive site where audiences actively engage with, reinterpret, and at times resist dominant meanings encoded in canonical texts. By transforming spectators into participants, fanfiction foregrounds the role of the audience as cultural producers rather than passive consumers, thereby reshaping the dynamics of storytelling in the digital age.

Early fan studies challenged the notion of the passive media consumer, instead positioning fans as active participants who reinterpret, rewrite, and sometimes resist dominant media narratives. Henry Jenkins' foundational work conceptualises fanfiction as a form of "textual poaching," wherein fans appropriate elements of canonical texts to produce alternative meanings that reflect their own values and desires (23). Jenkins argues that fan practices destabilise authorial authority and open up spaces for participatory culture.

Subsequent scholars have extended this argument by examining fanfiction as a mode of cultural critique. Abigail Derecho views fanfiction not merely as derivative but as "archontic literature," where texts exist within an open archive that invites continual expansion and revision (64). This understanding is particularly relevant for long-running or culturally embedded narratives such as television soap operas, where unresolved tensions and ideological contradictions invite reinterpretation.

Within the Indian context, academic attention to fanfiction remains limited but growing. Studies of Indian television soap operas have largely focused on gender

representation, melodrama, and the reinforcement of patriarchal family structures. Scholars note that Hindi television serials frequently position women as moral centres whose endurance of suffering reinforces normative ideals of femininity, sacrifice, and obedience (Butler 112; Uberoi 289). While these narratives claim to uphold “Indian values,” critics argue that they often naturalise emotional abuse and unequal power relations within romantic and familial spaces.

Audience reception studies complicate this picture by emphasising viewer awareness and critique. Viewers of Indian soap operas frequently recognise formulaic storytelling and ideological repetition, yet continue to engage with these texts due to emotional attachment, character investment, and affective resonance. This paradox aligns closely with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, which theorises meaning-making as a negotiated process rather than a unidirectional transmission (136). Hall’s model has been widely applied to examine how audiences resist or reinterpret dominant meanings embedded within media texts. According to Hall, while producers encode texts with preferred meanings designed to reproduce hegemonic ideology, audiences may adopt negotiated or oppositional readings depending on their social positioning and interpretive frameworks (137). Fanfiction provides a particularly visible manifestation of oppositional decoding, as it externalises interpretive resistance into narrative form.

Recent scholarship increasingly positions fanfiction as a feminist and counter-hegemonic practice, especially when fans rewrite female characters to grant them agency, sexual autonomy, and narrative centrality denied in canonical texts (Busse and Hellekson 9). In the Indian television context, where censorship and cultural conservatism restrict on-screen representations of sexuality and dissent, fanfiction functions as a parallel discursive space that challenges these constraints. This paper builds upon these critical frameworks by analysing *Being Selfish* as an oppositional decoding of *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon*. By situating the

fanfiction within Hall's encoding/decoding model, the study demonstrates how Indian television fandoms actively contest hegemonic portrayals of romance, family, and gender while remaining emotionally invested in the source text.

In the Indian context, fanfiction occupies a particularly compelling position due to the centrality of television soap operas in everyday cultural life. Hindi television serials, with their long-running narratives, emotionally invested audiences, and deeply embedded socio-cultural ideologies, generate intense fandoms that extend far beyond the televised text. The emergence of various online platforms and streaming services has freed these shows from their televisual limitations of geography, time, language and even generational gap. Shows such as *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon*, *Yeah Rishta Kya Kehlatha Hai*, *Ishqbaaz*, etc., have inspired vast archives of fan-created content across digital platforms, especially Wattpad, India Forums, and Tumblr. These spaces enable fans to revisit, revise, and reimagine canonical narratives, often engaging critically with issues of gender, class, family structures, and power relations embedded within the original text.

The emergence of fans and fandoms has significantly altered the paradigms of storytelling and media consumption. Active fan participation has transformed the way media messages are received, interpreted, and circulated. The advent of digital platforms has further democratized language and expression, allowing users from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds to articulate their interpretations without institutional mediation. This democratization has led to a revolution in interpretive strategies, where meaning is no longer fixed or authorially controlled but continuously negotiated within participatory cultures. Platforms such as Wattpad popular not only in India but also in other Asian media cultures have become transnational hubs of fan creativity, underscoring the global relevance of fanfiction as a mode of cultural expression.

Fanfiction offers a unique form of interpretation through storytelling, enabling fans to respond to the canon not through critique alone but through narrative reconstruction. The proliferation of fanfiction sites and fandom communities has created spaces where fans share stories, alternative plotlines, predictions, and character analyses. These spaces function as independent sites of meaning-making, often drawing upon the existing storyline while simultaneously questioning or reshaping it. Fanfiction typically emerges at the moment when a fan chooses to articulate their agreement, dissatisfaction, or resistance to the canon by rewriting it, thus transforming interpretation into creative practice.

While audiences have always been integral to cultural production, the relationship between producers and consumers has undergone significant change in the contemporary media landscape. Media texts particularly television narratives have evolved to accommodate audience feedback and preferences. However, this responsiveness has not substantially altered the ideological framework within which meanings are encoded, as the producers and institutional structures of media production largely remain unchanged. Consequently, the messages embedded within these texts often continue to serve dominant or hegemonic interests. The audience, seemingly unaware of their position as the 'objects' of media propagandas, display a capacity of sorts for critical thinking through these fan narratives. While not entirely breaking away from the televisual narrative, the fanfiction offers a possibility for an alternative by exposing the cracks with in the original texts. As a response to the monotonous encodings in the source text, audiences and fans have begun to decode these messages in markedly different ways, producing negotiated and oppositional readings that challenge the preferred meanings of the canon.

Fandom communities provide collective spaces where fans of a particular text come together to exchange interpretations, concerns, and creative responses. These fan sites are especially fertile grounds for amateur writers aspiring to professional authorship, as they offer

access to an already established and emotionally invested readership eager to engage through comments, critiques, and circulation of stories. Within these spaces, fan writers dissect the canonical text with a level of detail and critical engagement that is often impossible for a passive viewer. Through fanfiction, the canon is not merely consumed but interrogated, reworked, and resisted, making it a crucial site for studying audience agency and meaning-making.

Indian television soap operas have historically functioned as powerful cultural texts that disseminate dominant social ideologies while appearing to uphold “Indian traditional values”. These serials are marked by a seeming reverence for the family as a sacrosanct institution, adherence to patriarchal norms, and narratives that often privilege sacrifice, endurance, and moral conformity, particularly for women. While contemporary soaps increasingly foreground women-centric narratives, these stories frequently remain confined within romantic frameworks, positioning female protagonists as emotional anchors whose fulfilment is ultimately realised through marriage and familial acceptance. Another defining feature of Indian soap operas is their reliance on exaggerated emotional drama, protective concealments leading to prolonged misunderstandings, and idealised yet unrealistic family structures. Families are portrayed as unified moral collectives, even when individual members engage in manipulation, emotional coercion, or outright abuse. Such portrayals normalise suffering especially female suffering as a necessary precondition for narrative resolution. These formulas, refined over decades, have become recognisable to audiences, who often engage with them critically even as they continue to consume them.

It is within this televisual tradition that *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon (What Shall We Name this Love?)* (hereafter *IPKKND*) emerged, initially marketed as a departure from conventional soap narratives. *IPKKND* was introduced as a “unique” love story between two ideologically opposed individuals, Arnav Singh Raizada and Khushi Kumari Gupta, whose

differences in temperament, class position, financial status, and worldview formed the narrative's central tension. Arnav is constructed as emotionally guarded, hyper-rational, and deeply cynical, while Khushi is portrayed as naïve, idealistic, and emotionally expressive. The serial portrays the love-hate relationship between these characters. Their romantic trajectory is marked by intensity, emotional volatility, and persistent misunderstandings.

Despite its promise of novelty, the show frequently relies on familiar soap opera tropes: miscommunication as a primary narrative engine, prolonged emotional and physical suffering, and the justification of problematic male behaviour under the guise of "love." Arnav's repeated emotional aggression and moments bordering on physical abuse are narratively framed as expressions of passion/obsession rather than as behaviour requiring accountability. Both characters belong to traditional families, whose influence drives the central characters into making irrational decisions. The presence of a lecherous villain, Shyam, further complicates the narrative, drawing both the Raizadas and the Guptas into the emotional turmoil of the central couple. Ultimately, the show resolves its conflicts through reconciliation and marriage, reaffirming the ideological primacy of the heterosexual romantic union and the family structure. While the plot itself is largely redundant, *IPKKND* achieved immense popularity due to the palpable chemistry between the lead actors and the strength of the supporting cast. The character of Arnav Singh Raizada, and by extension actor Barun Sobti who portrayed the character, became a household name in India.

Crucially, audiences were not unaware of the show's problematic portrayals. However, many fans understood these elements as part of a long-standing televisual formula and were willing to accept them because of the emotional investment generated by the characters. Yet acceptance did not equate to satisfaction. The sheer volume of fanfiction produced across platforms such as Wattpad, Tumblr, and India Forums stands as testimony to audience dissatisfaction with the narrative and moral logic of *IPKKND*. Fanfiction functions here as a

corrective space, one in which viewers actively rework what they perceive as structural, ethical, and emotional failures within the canonical text. Despite the popularity of the character of Arnav Singh Raizada, the fans were well aware of the problems inherent in the character. The intense psychological trauma endured during his childhood; the suicide of his parents, abandonment by his family, shouldering the responsibility of the physical and emotional well-being of his sister and understanding the importance of wealth, made him a highly practical man with an intense desire to control everything around him. Initially when Khushi unintentionally breaks his patterns of control, she becomes the prime target of his rage. The show establishes an instant connection between the characters in the pilot episode (a trope often used in Indian soaps). Arnav's treatment of Khushi in the subsequent episodes was perceived as abusive by many fans. While some segments of the fans tried to romanticise this as Arnav's possessiveness over Khushi, many fans correctly pointed out the abuse and wanted the character to take accountability. The transformation undergone by Arnav's character seems momentary as relapses were dominant. This inconsistent character arc was a creative based on maintaining the TRPs rather than a plot necessity. The fans understood the implication of such choices by the producers.

Rather than rejecting the show outright, fans engage in what Stuart Hall would describe as negotiated and oppositional readings, retaining their attachment to the characters while resisting the ideological implications of the narrative. These fan-created texts attempt to "fix" the story by granting characters agency, emotional intelligence, and ethical clarity that the original text withholds. The fanfiction *Being Selfish* by Regina2812, written between 2024 and 2025 over a decade after the show's original airing exemplifies this impulse toward narrative redefinition. *Being Selfish* is a twelve-part fanfiction consisting of an introductory section followed by chapters titled after distinct emotional states: *Pain*, *Betrayal*, *Guilt*, *Excitement*, *Happiness*, *Anxiety*, *Love*, *Trust*, *Jealousy*, and *Anger*. This emotion-driven structure functions

as a deliberate narrative strategy through which the fan-author reworks the encoded meanings of the original television text. Each chapter foregrounds a particular affective experience shared by the two protagonists, though articulated with varying degrees of intensity and narrative focus. While Khushi's emotional subjectivity remains central, Arnav's gradual emotional maturation is traced across these affective stages, signalling a departure from his canonically encoded persona marked by emotional repression and masculine stoicism. Through this reconfiguration, the fanfiction enacts a negotiated, and at times oppositional, decoding of the source text, privileging emotional reflexivity and mutual vulnerability over the dominant ideological frameworks of the soap opera. By reorganising the narrative around affect rather than plot-driven melodrama, *Being Selfish* demonstrates how fanfiction operates as a site of meaning-making where audiences actively reinterpret, resist, and rearticulate the ideological and emotional codes embedded within the original media text.

Being Selfish reworks one of the central plotlines of *IPKKND*: Shyam's betrayal and its devastating consequences for Arnav and Khushi's relationship. In the canonical narrative, Khushi's decision to conceal Shyam's truth, motivated by naïveté and misplaced moral responsibility, triggers a cascade of misunderstandings, emotional suffering, and violence. Her refusal to communicate openly becomes a primary narrative justification for her victimisation. The fanfiction decisively alters this trajectory. Khushi does not discover Shyam's truth in the same manner as the show, and the narrative removes several canonical romantic entanglements, such as the relationship between Payal and Akash. Instead, the story opens with Arnav's emotional suffering following his rejection of Khushi's confession of love. Unlike the show, Khushi's confession is framed as an act of courage rather than impulsive vulnerability. Confession only happens much later in the show. Khushi's acceptance of Shyam's proposal in the show is a result of family coercion and Arnav's impulsive behaviour after what she perceived as a jester of affection. In the fanfiction Arnav's rejection is portrayed not as

romantic angst but as arrogance, and, crucially, as a decision for which he must bear emotional consequences. The fanfiction gives Khushi an opportunity to fight for her happiness, while it makes Arnav suffer for his indecision.

This inversion of suffering marks a significant ideological shift. Arnav, rather than Khushi, becomes the primary site of regret and longing. His later attempt to persuade Khushi to elope before her wedding is refused, not because of emotional confusion, but because Khushi consciously prioritises her family's social standing and dignity. This refusal reinforces her moral agency rather than her passivity. Khushi's choice of concealing Shyam's truth in the show is a decision based on emotional vulnerability than prudence. This decision leads to fans speculating Khushi's ability to make rational decisions and criticising the show's choice to perpetuate the trope of protective concealment. This particular trope used as a plot driver, serves as the root of unsolicited suffering, especially of female characters.

The exposure of Shyam's crimes before both families, his arrest, and Anjali's subsequent psychological breakdown form a pivotal moment in the narrative. Unlike the canonical text, where Khushi absorbs blame and guilt, *Being Selfish* depicts her recognising the dangers inherent in surrendering control over her life to others' decisions. This realisation catalyses her transformation. In that moment of realisation, she chooses to prioritise herself, a significant shift from the show counterpart. Khushi's constant need for validation in the show was evident from her attempts to be useful to those around her, akin to Arnav's associating his identity with his wealth. Khushi's need to be the "problem-solver" projects her lack of self-worth. Her identities were that of daughter, sister, friend, daughter-in-law or wife, never simply Khushi. She became the scapegoat in every adverse situation; someone to bare blame. The fanfiction rewrites this character trait with Khushi understanding the necessity for reclaiming her life; quite literally being selfish.

One of the most radical interventions of *Being Selfish* lies in its treatment of the family. While Indian soap operas traditionally portray the family as a protective moral unit, this fanfiction exposes it as a potential site of emotional exploitation and systemic inequality. Khushi's relationship with the Gupta family is critically re-evaluated. The fanfiction foregrounds a dynamic that many viewers had long noted but which the show never interrogated; the unequal treatment of Khushi and Payal. While Payal is sheltered and protected, Khushi is repeatedly reminded of her supposed indebtedness to the family, for raising her, a narrative tool that enforces obedience and emotional submission. This dynamic mirrors Buaji's repeated invocation of sacrifice in the canonical text, which Khushi never questions. Many fanfiction address this inequality in treatment and the exploitation Khushi is being subjected for the sake of the family. The obligation of financial sustenance was always on her shoulders. This left her vulnerable to abuse and humiliation, from the outside world while Payal remained protected within the domestic sphere. In *Being Selfish*, Khushi finally recognises this manipulation. When Shyam's is exposed, Khushi holds her Amma and Buaji accountable for forcing her into the marriage. Khushi's decision to 'restart' her life is seen as a misplaced anger by her family and is reminded of the necessity of matrimonial fulfilment in a girl's life. Khushi's choice to stand her ground and any future plans for marriage being on her terms, visibly shake them. Both Khushi and Payal try to come out of societal expectation and live a life of fulfilment. In the section titled 'Happiness' Khushi and Anjali have a conversation about their respective experiences and what Shyam has done. Blame is correctly levelled on Shyam and the women understand the danger of depending too much on external support to be happy. Khushi helps Anjali see the need to focus on oneself. The fanfiction does not extend forgiveness to the Gupta's easily. Madhumati Khushi's Buaji, was the driving force behind Khushi's and Shyam's alliance. Although done to ensure the well being of her niece, she did not enquire about Shyam's background, nor Khushi's consent in her decision. In her

conviction that Shyam would be a good husband to Khushi she forces Khushi into the marriage. Later when Shyam's truth is revealed, the show does not make a convincing redemption arc for Madhumathi, regretting her decision regarding Shyam. In the fanfiction Khushi holds a resentment towards her family and this turns into anger when she finds that her family prioritise Payal's wellbeing to hers.

When the Raizada family attempts to arrange a marriage between Payal and Akash and Manorama reject the proposal because she refuses to accept Payal's state of inaction, the Guptas attempt to assign blame to Khushi. Unlike her canonical counterpart, she refuses to internalise this blame. Khushi chooses to not interfere in the affairs of Payal and Akash as she believes, it's the responsibility of the parties concerned to make decisions about their future. She realises that much of her insecurities came from her treatment by the Guptas and the sacrifices she had made were in vain as her family never prioritised her needs. Her decision to sever ties with the Gupta family is not portrayed as rebellion for its own sake, but as a necessary step toward self-preservation and autonomy. The fanfiction thus articulates a powerful critique: sometimes liberation requires breaking away from the family itself. This represents a significant oppositional stance within the ideological framework of Indian television narratives.

Another notable departure from canonical norms is the fanfiction's treatment of romantic intimacy. Indian television soaps, constrained by censorship and judicial regulation, often avoid explicit representations of sexual relationships, even while constructing intense emotional and physical proximity between characters. Fanfiction, unburdened by these constraints, translates this intensity into explicit sexual expression. In *Being Selfish*, the consummation of Arnav and Khushi's relationship occurs before marriage and is framed not as moral transgression, but as an expression of mutual trust, desire, and emotional equality. Sexual intimacy is depicted as consensual and affirming, directly challenging the televisual

association between sexuality, sin, and punishment. But this sexual agency does not negate Khushi's respect for social structures. Arnav's proposal is motivated not by societal pressure but by his recognition that marriage holds personal and cultural significance for Khushi. His restraints from sexual intimacy before Khushi gives her consent shows how much he cares about Khushi's values and his reluctance to put her honour in question. Arnav's transition in the fanfiction is not affected by Khushi's love alone but from his realisation about the inherent flaws in his worldview. The narrative thus balances resistance with negotiation rather than wholesale rejection of tradition.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a critical lens through which *Being Selfish* can be understood as an oppositional reading of *IPKKND*. Hall argues that media texts are encoded with preferred meanings designed to reproduce dominant ideology, but audiences are not passive recipients. Instead, they may decode texts from a dominant, negotiated, or from an oppositional perspective (Hall 136). *IPKKND* encodes a narrative that normalises emotional abuse as romantic intensity, frames female silence as virtue, and presents family unity as unquestionable. While many viewers initially decoded the text in a negotiated manner, accepting its emotional appeal while recognising its flaws, fanfiction such as *Being Selfish* represents a clear shift toward oppositional decoding. By rewriting Khushi as assertive, self-aware, and unwilling to sacrifice herself indefinitely, the fanfiction resists the show's dominant ideological framework. It redefines love as mutual respect rather than endurance, family as conditional rather than sacred, and femininity as autonomous rather than sacrificial. In doing so, it exemplifies Hall's assertion that audiences actively produce meaning, often in ways that contest the intentions of the original text (136).

Being Selfish demonstrates how fanfiction operates as a site of resistance within contemporary media culture. Through strategic narrative alterations, the fanfiction challenges the hegemonic values embedded in *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon* while retaining emotional

fidelity to its characters. It showcases how fans, empowered by digital platforms, move beyond consumption to critical re-authorship. Even while questioning the original narratives questionable choices and giving accountability to characters, the fanfiction does not diverge from the shows primary objective; the union of Khushi and Arnav. The ideological complexity of this position in many fold: the fan is not willing to deviate from the ‘one true pair’ but not before modifications are made to the original characters and finding closure to unresolved issues within the narrative. The changes introduced in the fan narrative shows the unwillingness of the writer to negotiate with the show’s ideological views. So, when viewed through Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, this fanfiction stands as a compelling example of oppositional reading, one that not only critiques the canonical text but also imagines alternative modes of being, loving, and belonging within Indian cultural contexts. In doing so, it affirms fanfiction’s significance as a legitimate and necessary object of academic inquiry.

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