

# Eating Under Stress: An Analysis of Food Performativity among Women in Indian Films

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## Abstract

In many Indian cultural contexts, women are expected to control their emotions and their appetites. Eating in public, eating excessively, or eating for comfort is often judged as a sign of emotional weakness or lack of discipline. This paper argues that when women in Indian films are shown eating while under emotional stress, these moments should be read not merely as personal coping mechanisms but can also be seen as subtle acts that challenge such gendered expectations. This paper analyses selected scenes depicting stress eating in the movies *Jigra* (2024), directed by Vasana Bala, and *Dear Zindagi* (2016), directed by Gauri Shinde. In both films, selected scenes deal with stress/emotional eating where food becomes a medium for women to express feelings of fear, shame, and emotional unrest. Drawing on feminist approaches such as Affect Theory and Gender Performativity, this paper argues that stress eating among women serves as a quiet assertion of female agency. It shows how simple everyday choices can push back against cultural expectations that say women should keep their emotions in check and act a certain way.

**Keywords:** Stress eating, Food Performativity, Food as resistance, *Jigra*, *Dear Zindagi*, self-control.

## Introduction

Stress eating, often called emotional or comfort eating, is usually understood as turning to food when someone is feeling anxious, sad, or overwhelmed. In medical and psychological discussions, this behaviour is often treated as an eating disorder and a way of coping with emotions. But culturally, when it comes to women, eating is never just about hunger or biology. It is closely tied to culture, gender rules, class expectations, and social control. Food becomes a space where power and judgment operate. Society constantly watches and comments on what women eat, how much they eat, how they eat, and even where they eat. As a result, women's eating practices are loaded with moral meaning, turning a simple act of eating into something that is carefully regulated and often criticised.

As Pierre Bourdieu explains in "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste", what we like to eat and how we consume food are not purely personal choices. They are shaped by society, by class, by ideas of respectability, and by what is seen as morally acceptable. For women, these expectations become even stricter. Eating is often connected to ideas of control, discipline, and "proper femininity". A woman who eats openly, eats a lot, or eats when she is emotional is easily judged as lacking restraint or self-control. However, scholars argue that food practices can also take the form of small but meaningful acts of resistance. Women do not always resist through loud protest. Sometimes resistance appears in everyday, bodily acts such as choosing to eat, refusing to eat, fasting, or even eating more than expected. These

simple actions can quietly question social rules that expect women to deny their needs and constantly regulate their emotions.

Film studies scholars have noted that cinema often reinforces and reinforces gender expectations about women and food. In “Performing Heteronormative Femininity: The Embodiment of Cooking Mothers and Women Eating Onscreen”, Vineetha Krishnan explains that Indian films usually show women as caregivers cooking, serving, and feeding others rather than eating for themselves. Women are often associated with the kitchen, but their own hunger is rarely given importance. When women are shown eating on screen, it is frequently exaggerated, made into a joke, or sexualised. This creates the idea that a woman’s appetite is inappropriate, excessive, or something to be controlled. Krishnan argues that when women are shown eating freely and confidently, those scenes can be read as small acts of resistance against gender norms. However, most of these discussions focus on eating as pleasure or visibility, and they do not pay much attention to stress eating or emotional eating, which remains an underexplored area.

Feminist cultural writing also shows that eating is not just about food; it can be political. In “Eating as an Act of Feminist Resistance: Assertion of Need & Leisure Through Ingestion,” Soumya Mathew explains that women have historically been pushed to the margins of the dining table, and this reflects larger systems of gender inequality. Women are often expected to eat less, serve others first, or control their desires. So, when a woman eats openly, confidently, and without shame, she is doing more than satisfying hunger. She is claiming space and asserting her right to pleasure and need. In cultures that value women’s sacrifice and restraint, such an act becomes meaningful. Eating, therefore, can be understood as a gendered performance, one that quietly challenges expectations of silence, self-control, and invisibility.

Building on these ideas, this study does not treat stress eating as a medical or psychological issue. Instead, it looks at it as a cultural act, something shaped by social expectations about how women should behave, feel, and even eat. It focuses on selected scenes from *Jigra* (2024) and *Dear Zindagi* (2016), both of which present emotionally complex female protagonists dealing with fear, heartbreak, anxiety, and uncertainty. These two films are chosen because they are popular and easy for younger audiences to access. They are important because they let us look at everyday habits, like how people eat, which are often ignored in mainstream movies. These eating habits can have deeper meanings related to gender. By analysing scenes where women eat during moments of emotional stress, this paper argues that stress eating should not be dismissed as mere weakness or lack of control, and when women are seen eating in movies, it should not be overlooked. People often react in a profound way to overpowering emotions, showcasing the depth of their humanity. In various situations, these emotional responses challenge the traditional view that women should consistently present themselves as calm, composed, disciplined, and emotionally controlled. Such instances emphasise the importance of expressing emotions, reminding us that the willingness to show vulnerability is an inherent element of the human condition. What seems like a loss of control can actually reveal something more meaningful. Food becomes a way for women to express feelings they cannot openly voice. Through eating, they negotiate vulnerability, assert a form of agency, and find ways to cope and survive within cultural systems that constantly regulate their bodies and emotions.

## Methodology

This study employs qualitative close reading and visual analysis, drawing on feminist theory, cultural studies, and food studies. Selected scenes are analysed through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Sara Ahmed’s affect theory (affect economics), particularly her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. This approach allows the paper to examine not only what happens in these scenes,

but how emotions, bodies, and cultural norms interact through the act of eating.

### Theoretical Framework

- Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which understands gender as constituted through repeated acts rather than innate identity.
- Sara Ahmed's affect theory, particularly *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which conceptualises emotions as circulating between bodies, objects, and social norms

Together, these frameworks allow the study to examine eating as an embodied performance through which affect is managed, displaced, and made visible.

### Analysis

Judith Butler argues that gender is not something we are born with, but something we perform every day through our actions, how we speak, move, behave, and even eat. For women, eating is closely watched and regulated. They are expected to eat slowly, neatly, and with restraint. Eating properly becomes an integral part of how femininity is perceived and performed. When a woman eats too much, too fast, or without care about who is watching, she disrupts this expected performance.

In *Jigra*, Satya's behaviour on the plane clearly breaks these norms. She orders everything on the menu and eats compulsively, without paying attention to the flight attendant or maintaining social decorum, which are usually expected of a woman. This is not simply about hunger. Her eating is rushed, distracted, and excessive, which goes against the ideals of control and composure expected from women. Through Butler's lens, this moment can be seen as a resistance or breaking of normative femininity. At a time when Satya has no control over her circumstances, her brother's imprisonment, or the situation she is trapped in, her body finds a way to assert control. Eating becomes one of the few actions she can fully claim. Whether driven by stress or resentment toward her uncle, this act of eating functions as a performative disruption. Her body expresses what she cannot say out loud.

In *Dear Zindagi*, Kaira's relationship with food works in a similar way but is more emotionally complex. Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* helps to understand this. Ahmed argues that emotions are not just internal feelings; they move through bodies, objects, and everyday practices. Emotions often become attached to objects, and food can carry emotional meaning, absorbing feelings that are difficult to express. When Kaira eats noodles after her breakup, taking large bites at a roadside stall, the scene highlights her emotional confusion. Her eating is public, hurried, and unrestrained. Through Ahmed's framework, this can be seen as a way of managing emotional pain by shifting it into the body. Food becomes something that holds her problems and offers a temporary distraction and comfort. At the same time, this behaviour challenges the expectation that women should deal with heartbreak quietly and gracefully. And in the scene where she eats green chilli, where Kaira deliberately eats something that causes physical pain, she is not simply hurting herself. Instead, she is turning emotional pain into a physical sensation that feels more immediate and controllable. Ahmed says that when emotions cannot be openly expressed, they often find other outlets. Kaira cannot openly show her vulnerability, so her pain is redirected through her body. The chilli allows her to feel something sharp and manageable instead of overwhelming emotional hurt. By saying "it's just the chilli," she hides her emotional distress while letting physical pain speak in its place.

Butler and Ahmed help us see that stress eating and emotional eating in these films are not meaningless or passive acts which are shaped by gendered expectations and emotional pressure. In both *Jigar* and *Dear*

Zindagi, eating becomes a way for women to regain momentary control over their bodies when they lack control over their lives. By eating excessively, quickly, or painfully, Satya and Kaira step outside the socially approved and accepted performance of femininity. Their bodies communicate what words cannot. What looks like a loss of control can instead be understood as a quiet form of resistance, deeply emotional, situational, and rooted in everyday lived experience.

## Conclusion

This paper looks at moments of stress eating in *Jigra* and *Dear Zindagi* to show how food works as a quiet but meaningful form of expression in contemporary Indian films. By closely reading scenes where women eat while under emotional pressure, the study shows that these ordinary acts of eating take on deeper meaning within cultural expectations that demand emotional control, self-restraint, and composure from women.

The analysis that eating in these films is not shown as a cure for emotional pain, nor is it treated as a sign of weakness or lack of self-control. Instead, these moments capture small, bodily responses to fear, loss, and uncertainty situations where the characters do not have the space, permission, or words to express what they are feeling. Food becomes something immediate and accessible, a way for the body to respond when speech fails. In this way, stress eating functions less as just eating and more as an affective gesture, allowing emotions to appear through action rather than dialogue.

More importantly, the discomfort in these scenes is not felt only by the characters; it also comes from how society reacts to women eating in public. When Satya eats excessively on an aeroplane or when Kaira eats quickly at a roadside stall, their actions go against the common expectation that women must always look calm, graceful, and in control. These moments feel unsettling because they challenge the idea that women should hide their emotions and manage their appetites quietly. By focusing on these scenes, the films make us notice how women's bodies and behaviours are constantly watched, judged, and regulated in everyday public spaces.

This study does not argue that when women eat in such moments, it becomes a clear or complete act of resistance. Instead, it highlights the complexity of these scenes. These acts fall somewhere between vulnerability and strength, between simply coping and quietly challenging expectations. They do not completely break social norms, but they subtly disturb them, even if only for a moment. This ambiguity matters because it shows how women manage their emotions and survive within cultural systems that often restrict their behaviour. By focusing on food as a space where emotions are expressed, this paper adds to feminist film and food studies by showing that even small, everyday actions can carry powerful meaning about gender, emotion, and control. When we look closely at these ordinary moments, we begin to see how cinema portrays women's inner lives not always through loud resistance, but through quiet, embodied gestures. These subtle acts of eating reveal the pressures placed on women to manage their feelings and discipline their bodies, and they gently expose the boundaries imposed on their emotional and bodily autonomy.

## Limitations and Recommendations:

This research analyses scenes from only two movies. It relies on textual and visual analysis incorporating theoretical frameworks, but does not include audience response or their interpretations. And it focuses specifically on the portrayal of women stress eating, not men. A survey could be conducted to see whether these acts of eating under stress are perceived as resistance by the audience. A comparative study can be

done to see how Indian films and other foreign films portray how women indulge in emotional eating. And a study can be conducted to see how women and men are shown in movies, or in general react in moments of stress.

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