



Portrayal of Female Identity in Digital Media: An Investigation Based on Selected Indian Web Series

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Abstract: With the introduction of digital media platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar and other digital streaming services, the web series is viewed as an ideal platform for narrating female stories, reflecting their realities. What makes the internet so popular as an informative and entertainment medium is that it is comparatively free from censorship and budget clutches, providing the creators with much-needed independence with content, genre, forms, and narratives. This study aims to analyse the portrayal of the ideology of feminism in the selected Indian web series. The researcher has chosen some web series in Indian media for this analysis and examines how they represent feminism philosophy through their stigma breaking content.

Index Terms - Feminism, Web series, Textual analysis, Stereotypes, Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, through increasing coverage of the internet facilities and cellular devices, the Indian urban society became more and more enabled with modern appliances of communication like smart TVs and smartphones, which became the new means of content consumption. This ushered in a new era of digital opportunities, erasing many 'laws' regulating content selection on traditional TV channels. Ironically, as screen sizes shrank, they liberated women from the *saas-bahu* dichotomy. Fresh and youthful stories were telecasted that mirrored modern lifestyles and their problems with realism and honesty.

The last decade witnessed a phenomenal growth in the consumption of the internet across the globe. But it was just after 2014 that the 'web series' phenomenon started in India, and with no time, it created a large viewership with its large variety of content. As a result of the internet revolution, it is also observed that there has been growth in digital channels as well. From digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney Hotstar, Amazon Prime and Voot, to surfing for information on Google and Youtube, to using social media like Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp, to exploring E-commerce services like Flipkart and Amazon, there has been a significant rise in the use of digital marketing.

II. Web series in India:

Gone are the days where families sit together and watching television. While the Indian audience enthusiastically watched foreign series, they equally promoted Indian series, which came up with fascinating revolutionary content. With changing times, traditional television culture has evolved into digital platforms and thrilled all those millennials as well as most in the older generation. In the new wave, the digital visual culture's actual turn came up with YouTube a few years back when they started to show TVF Pitchers, Permanent Roommates and Bang Baja Barat. Since then, the web series phenomenon has expanded its viewership in India. Good web content was catalysed through platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, AltBalaji, TVF and others.

With increasing internet accessibility in India, content consumption went up to further levels. Digital renaissance has brought a handful of fresh and robust content to the audience to consume a whole new buffet of entertainment. Even Indian consumers become ready to pay a premium for quality content in Netflix or Amazon Prime. As the internet is full of choices, consumers who have a short attention span always demand snack-sized contents. Hence, the quality of the production, content, and casting plays a vital role in the reception of a web series. Therefore, the producers are very particular about producing fresh and relatable content that can seek millennials' attention.

III. Review of Literature:

In India, several studies have been done on the portrayal of female gender in commercial movies and serials and the representation of women in film. The stereotypical portrayal of women in Indian media has sparked debates among various feminist academics worldwide. Women's appearances in commercial Indian films are stereotyped due to historical and socio-cultural pressures but has improved significantly over time (Nandkumar, 2011). The male gaze is often used to objectify women in India's film industry (Nandkumar, 2011). Bollywood actresses are expected to have slim bodies, sharp eyes, and light skin

(Pendakur, 2003). The industry encourages actresses to remain 'new' in a male-dominated society. The public appreciates a blossoming, youthful, charming leading lady who looks attractive to the male protagonist and dances sensuously to music (Nandkumar, 2011; Ghanti, 2004; Pendakur, 2003). As a result, producers and directors are always searching for 'young faces', casting them alongside senior heroes who run the roost 'only to titillate the male libido' (Nandkumar, 2011; Pendakur, 2003). A young actress romancing a hero in his forties is trendy on Indian television (Ghanti, 2004).

Women are depicted in secondary or supporting roles in the bulk of commercial films today, considering advances. This conventional depiction of women in Indian film is primarily affected by historical and cultural factors (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004). Initially, women were not permitted to feature in films owing to cultural constraints (Ganti, 2004). As a consequence, when women started to act, directors had to adjust to societal expectations when depicting female roles. Women mostly played the roles of a daughter, a great wife, and a mother (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 2004).

The themes had a significant effect on the patriarchal social structure (Nandkumar, 2011). When it comes to a woman's social and individual identification in films, it is more or less tied to her marriage. But in Indian society, "Marriage, as a traditional institution, was charged with not only teaching a woman how to carry out her traditional duties, but also with providing a lot of fun and excitement". 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun' (1995) was one of Indian commercial cinema's highest-grossing films (Nandkumar, 2011). This film's plot revolved around passion, family values, and sacrifice (Koutaniemi, 2011). Young superstars who represented the country's youth played the leading roles. They do, though, adhere to traditional family ideals and are willing to put their love on the line to help their loved ones (Dwyer, 2005).

Most Indian actresses end their careers while they are still in their teenage years. They are referred to as 'old face' because they are in their late twenties or early thirties. Many male people who begin their careers in their mid-twenties have careers that last far into their late forties or early fifties (Nandkumar, 2011; Ghanti, 2004). Apart from that, male actors earn far more than female actors (Pendakur, 2003). As a result, modern films are often structured and written around the hero, who is tasked with sympathising with and defending the heroine in a male-dominated culture (Pendakur, 2003). Women are still shown as content-fillers in these films. In Bollywood commercial cinema, women's violence or assault is often exaggerated (Deme, 1999).

Sexual abuse against women has been glorified in many forms, including eve-teasing (a phrase used to describe teasing on women in public, such as making comments about their looks, attractiveness, and others), kidnapping, marital rape, and others (Birla, 2001; Ravindran, 2001). In other words, the bulk of these films presented coercion and physical invasion as suitable symbols of romantic love (Deme, 1999). Onscreen sexual harassment in an intimate partnership involving actors and actresses was widely accepted and admired (Ramasubramanian and Oliver, 1997). Despite the participation of a vast number of talented female performers, stories based on the heroine are very ordinary (Pendakur, 2003). The overemphasis on dramatic storytelling approaches in the Indian cinema has been chastised for being both too emotional and unrealistic. Realism is often misinterpreted as naturalism in fields like acting, dressing, music, and other areas.

Even though Bollywood produced many women-centric films, there is still a long way to go before they become mainstream. In reality, there has been a spike in women-centric cinema in the last decade, with these films attempting to convey optimistic messages about women's strength and influence in Indian society. This depiction may have a dual meaning: it may be an effort to avoid giving the incorrect message to the general public that women are submissive in their cultural livelihood and therefore should be viewed as wanted by men; it may also have a political or social significance (Sarkar, 2012).

Hindi films, which deal with these ideas in general, can convey a positive message regarding women in Indian society. Thus, women-centric films at the very least seek to change the attitude of Indian woman, which could involve introducing reform in how they raise their children, educating their sons to be respectful of women, or contemplating a strong alternative such as getting out of an abusive marriage or declining to approve a marriage proposal by refusing to comply with dowry requests (Sarkar, 2012).

IV. Objectives:

The present study aims to analyse the portrayal of the ideology of feminism in the selected Indian web series. It attempts to understand the diverse ways in which feminism is portrayed in India's selected popular web series.

V. Methodology:

In order to examine the objectives, the researcher selected 'Girl in the City' (in Bindass), 'Ladies Room' (in YFilms), 'Little Things' (in Dice Media), 'Lust Stories' (in Netflix), 'WTF' (in Dice Media), 'Made in Heaven' (in Amazon Prime), 'Ghoul' (in Netflix), 'Pushpavalli' (in Amazon Prime), 'Mirzapur' (in Amazon Prime), 'Made in Heaven' (Amazon Prime Video) and 'Four More Shots Please!' (in Amazon Prime). The methodology of the study involves textual analysis of selected Indian web series. The textual analysis consists of observations and the portrayal of various female characters. Through textual analysis, the researcher can interpret texts such as films, TV programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, and graffiti to get a sense of people's approach to the world around them in specific cultures at specific moments. Every society gains a better understanding of their own cultures by seeing the different ways in which reality can be interpreted because, in that attempt, they begin to see the limits and benefits of their sense-making practices.

'Textual analysis' is a technique for analysing media types ranging from simple films to more subtle forms such as news narratives, television series, films, and commercials. The researcher performed a 'textual study' of selected Indian web series for this research paper. The researcher looked at the interactions between feminist views of female protagonists and feminist philosophy in a few Indian web series for this analysis.

VI. Findings and Discussion:

Many web series have become popular through the increase in accessibility of digital platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar, Alt Balaji, Zee5, Voot and others. Web series dramas like 'Made in heaven', 'Four more shots please', 'Pushpavalli', 'Ghoul', 'Lust stories', 'Mirzapur', 'What the folks', 'Little things', and 'A girl in the city' had strong female characters and drew attention for their performances. The female representations in these series are modern, independent, strong, progressive and realistic. Digital streaming platforms have the potential to experiment with new and gripping content. The findings of the study are discussed in the following under different titles.

1. Women identity

The latest web series in India depict stories from a women-centric perspective. Netflix's Lust Stories has everything that the trailer promised: 'funny, emotional and exciting'. It is an anthology that explores new relationships through four different stories directed by four brilliant directors – Karan Johar, Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar and Dibakar Banerjee. Lust Stories portrays varied dimensions of love, lust, power, romance and status, from women's perspective. Either pre-determined design or accident, each of the Lust Stories films is emotionally centred on a female protagonist. In Anurag Kashyap's film, Kalindi (Radhika Apte) is a college professor who sleeps with her student while in a long-distance marriage. In Zoya Akhtar's short, house help Sudha (Bhumi Pednekar) has to go from starting the day in bed with her employer to waiting on his parents and the family of a prospective match. The other protagonist named Reena (Manisha Koirala) is having an affair with her husband's friend in Dibakar Banerjee's film; in Karan Johar's film, a young school teacher with a chaotic sex life seizes on a vibrant alternative.

Tara Khanna of the series 'Made in Heaven' is both confident and insecure. As the show progresses, one can see more layers to her character. She is from a lower middle-class family and uses her beauty and youth for her advantages. Tara is very ambitious. She got married to a family and co-owns a wedding planning company with her friend. Throughout the series, one can see a struggle between her heart and mind. Tara tells us that women can be vulnerable without losing the identity. She is courageous enough to tell her adulterous husband how she manipulated their relationship and made him married to her. She discovers that her existence does not need any support from her rich husband. 'Made in Heaven' feminises the image of a Big Fat Indian Wedding by gazing at it from the eyes of a woman. Every episode centres on a new wedding, which raises topics such as misogyny, honour killings, party politics, and more. The show unravels the problems of homophobia, dowry, and class that every wedding faces, forcing one to doubt the institution of marriage itself, thanks to its daring storytelling.

The show titled 'Girl in the City' is about a young girl who comes to Mumbai to live her dreams and aim at her aspirations. It is about her journey in the big city and how she deals with her life's ups and downs. In the story, Nikhil (Rajat Barmecha) is a PhD scholar by profession and fond of cooking and household work, while the girl Kavya (Mithila Palkar) is out achieving her dreams. Indian entertainment culture often paints girlfriends or wives as nagging women who crib about everyday problems. That is not the case with Kavya, she is in a live-in relationship, and although there are ups and downs, she maturely tackles them.

2. Taboo breaking content

Netflix's Lust Stories consists of exceedingly simple stories, but they are capable of breaking taboos like a teacher's obsession with her student, an extramarital affair, a servant's relationship with her employer and a newly married couple and their bedroom problems. In this series, lust takes the centre of space, and it is often unresolved and considered as taboo. The characters struggled to explain the reasons for their actions and relationship status on a notoriously prude culture that equipped with the tools to do so. The older generation is uniformly depicted as conservative, and for them, sex is neither seen nor heard of, and it should be referred to as shameful. The show portrays characters drinking, swearing, and talking about sex openly. Perhaps the web series indirectly points to the necessity of sex education in our society.

The same thing occurs in Dice Media's 'What The Folks(WTF)', which depicts a young man named Nikhil who is forced to live alone with his in-laws for a few weeks. WTF is a journey of how modern families break the stereotypes, overcome patriarchy and generation gaps, and draw new relationship goals based on gender equality. Dice Media's 'Girl in the City and Little Things' also talk about women's liberation and becoming independent in a metro, which no one can imagine a few years back in India.

3. Individualist

The protagonists of most series depicted here are independent and liberated in their lives. 'Lust Stories', 'Little Things', 'Girl in the City' and 'What the Folks' portray independent and strong female characters in their stories. 'Girl in City' depicts the story of Meera, a young girl from Dehradun who arrived in Mumbai in order to pursue her career and live a life of her choice. Dice Media's 'Little Things' too portrays a couple where they stay together in an apartment, loving each other, sharing the household works and sharing the bed space without getting into the institution of marriage. It deals with the mundane everyday love of an unmarried couple who lives in Mumbai, where the female protagonist enjoys the space of individual choices.

'Four More Shots Please!', a web series, aired on Amazon Prime, deals with the story of four unapologetically flawed women, two in their thirties and two in their early twenties, who are struggling with four typical problems of their own. The story revolves around female friendships, their lives as a single parent and single women, their flourishing and failing careers, their relationships and their routine lives. They live, love, make mistakes and discover what makes them tick through friendship and shots of tequila in millennial Mumbai. This story is very refreshing for the Indian audience since people are only used to watching male friendships in Bollywood movies.

4. Empowerment and liberation

In the web series 'What The Folks', the female lead Anita is married to a younger man than her and has absolutely no qualms about it. In fact, she accuses her parents of being regressive when they lie to their neighbours and friends about this fact. She is a contemporary, married woman who knows when to stand firm and when to be kind. Anita is a precise replica of millennial women. The same show portrays a strong modern brother-sister relationship where the male lead Nikhil and his sister smoking together on a road trip. This is a path-breaking scene for an Indian audience who used to see *saas-bahu* drama on TV where male characters dominate and control female characters. 'Mirzapur' is a crime thriller story which, in which the female lead Golu Gupta played by Shweta Tripathi showed us that a woman does not have to hide her sexual desires. 'Mirzapur' is about mafia gangs, power wars, rivalry, terror and violence. The series is highly dominated by strong male characters, had a scene in it that shows a lady from a rural area masturbating in the library while reading books. Golu is a level headed, strong woman with progressive ideas, who is studious and active in student politics. A scene that shows a woman embracing her sexuality stands out

because it normalises the sexual desires of a woman, which everyone experiences without gender differences. The content of the series is so empowering, and it becomes a step ahead to initiate new discussions that are necessary for the mainstream media.

'Ghoul', set in a dystopian future, brutally portrays atrocities. Nida Rahim, played by Radhika Apte is a military officer, is part of an ongoing fascist, authoritarian regime. She firmly believes that the ongoing regime will cleanse the crimes in society. As the story progresses, Nida learns some disturbing facts about the regime when she interrogates a terrorist. Nida is fierce and tender at the same time. Despite the gender norms, she proved that women could achieve success in stereotypically non-masculine activities, including analytical skills and combat.

5. Avoiding stereotypes

The show titled 'Ladies Room' deals with the story of two young besties named Khanna and Dingo. The show portrays their life and mental adventure to grow up. The protagonists hang out in ladies washrooms swearing like sailors and talking about the G-spot, wanting to have sex and not wanting to fall pregnant. The best part of the show is that it does not try to provide any lesson and portrays characters drink, smoke, party, and think and talk of sex, not as a symbol of how empowered women are, but portrays how women are in their natural spaces.

Dice Media's 'Little Things' talk about an unmarried couple living together in an apartment in Mumbai where both genders enjoy equal space. It also replicates the influence of popular culture on millennials in India. Tara, the protagonist of the series named Baked, is an ambitious woman who is not apologetic about her choices. When the male protagonist first meets Tara, she has just had sex and casually offers him a cigarette. The series 'Pushpavalli' tells us a unique narrative of a woman's obsession with a man. Pushpavalli played by Sumukhi Suresh, is a normal girl next door character. The story is cringe-comedy, but as the story progresses, the love story plot evolves into a serious obsession and later leads to serious stalking. Though we cannot agree with stalking and obsession, the story shown us that a woman can have shades of grey and yet be playing a protagonist because a woman protagonist does not necessarily have to be "good" all the time.

The present study points out the fact that the ideology of feminism is visible in Indian web series, and they get decent appreciation from the audience. What shields Indian web series from the threat of aping commercial Bollywood is the freedom to explore real Indian urban lifestyles and their sensibilities without any regressive censorship or crowd-pleasing tactics. Indian web series is brimming with fresh talent, experimenting with the visual medium and are definitely on their way to becoming an exciting and thriving industry. Web series have shown the Indian audiences that a woman can be ambitious, career-oriented, enjoying power, and at the same time, she can embrace her sexual desires and be feminine. A woman does not need to be tough, masculine, and a rebel to be taken seriously. She can be as feminine and at the same time embrace success, be ambitious and complex. She can be someone who fights for justice on men's behalf or could be someone who loves and enjoys sex way more than a patriarchal and judgmental society expects her to. Some web series gave us such women.

V. Conclusion:

The Indian web series have shown a better understanding of millennial women than Bollywood and tv soap operas. It is clearly evident from the study that the content which is being shown in web series satisfies the ideology of feminism. One of the most widely held misconceptions about feminism is that it is only appropriate for Western countries and not for Indian tradition and culture, which is incorrect. The huge rise in feminist web series is indicative of movement toward a more egalitarian and fair society. Even now, there is a lot to cover, particularly when it comes to content in regional and local languages, but the future of digital content remains promising, especially with the rise in viewer support for feminist content.

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