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DEBUNKING GENDERED REALITIES AND OTT: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Gender stereotyping is defined as an overgeneralization of characteristics, differences and attributes of a certain group based on their gender. Gender stereotypes create widely accepted biases about certain characteristics or traits and perpetuate the notion that each gender and associated behaviours are binaries. In today’s context because more and more of its target audience is using the internet, the entertainment industry has had to drastically alter how it operates. The OTT platforms' global expansion can be attributed in large part to this situation. The target demographic in India is also well-versed in the various genres that are available on various OTT platforms. This expansion has led to the rise of new and experimental content. Hence this study will look into how the Rise of OTT in India in the last few years is helping in normalising gendered ideas and breaking gendered stereotypes among Indian audiences.

Key Words: Gender, Gender stereotypes, Gendered entertainment, OTT , Audience Mindsets.

Introduction:

If satellite television revolutionised the broadcasting landscape in the 1990s, over-the-top (OTT) media have had a resurgence in the past ten years, surpassing even well-established channels like cable and DTH. Not only have streaming services enjoyed unmatched growth, but our tastes and preferences have also changed as a result of the way content is experienced and consumed. These days, we're more receptive to anything created in any language as long as it's interesting or elevates the standard of the narrative.

The four primary forces behind this streaming revolution are readily apparent:

1. The widespread use of smartphones, The accessibility and affordability of high speed internet & data.
2. The young people in who are eager to experiment with new formats, and
3. A thriving multilingual film and television industry that is continuously producing new content.

The fact that OTT made sure content became platform and device agnostic had a significant impact on patterns in video consumption. The ability to access content on any device, at any time, and from any location is a freedom that streaming services provide that is unmatched. It gave the audience complete control over how to satisfy their desire for amusement in the way that best suited and fit them. This Phenomenon also led to the openness and acceptance of various types of content on these platforms which diversified to look into problems and aspects of the Indian Society. Themes like gender rights, cultural stigma, stereotypes prevalent in the Indian society and many other such themes started to gain popularity among OTT audiences.

Review Of Literature:

Shruti Shukla and **Junali Deka** (2023) in their study “Indian Hindi Web Series (2017–2022): Female Cops Questioning the Gender Binaries” state With the rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) services, women's representation on screen has



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dramatically changed. The web series is, on the one hand, giving female performers a new platform to represent demanding careers. However, the directors have surpassed social norms by creating narratives that defy the conventional notion of femininity as a monolithic category. This article explores the dismantling of gender binaries and the non-homogeneous space created in a male-dominated territory, drawing on Butler's insight of "Gender Performativity" ('Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed').The noteworthy results show that the web series' material has the ability to challenge preconceived notions about gender roles and shatter the myth of hegemonic masculinity.

P K Padhi in his Study “Shifting roles of Women through the Lens of Indian Popular Media” reveals that The emergence of new communication technologies has led to an increase in the significance of mass media. The mass media shapes our perceptions of social reality by presenting only a fraction of the truth and by repeatedly using the same image and sound effect. Even though the media's format and subject matter have changed dramatically in recent years, stereotypes about women and their social roles have always been reinforced by the media. The media's portrayal of women's problems and the injustices they face has long clouded their contributions to society. It is imperative that the print and electronic media fairly portray women's diverse lives and contributions to society in an ever-evolving world.

Seema Sangra (2021) in her study “Deconstructing Masculinity: Changing Portrayal Of Indian Men On Ott Platforms”. The media has been using the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" and creating a monochromatic image of males that is linear, flat, and consistent with the conventional notion of manliness over time. Such exaggerated portrayals of males contribute to the upholding of discrimination against other genders, which negatively impacts men as well. The emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, which are contesting these portrayals, is a clear bright spot, though. These platforms lay forth the fundamental ideas of the theory of social construction of reality, which works to challenge "hegemonic masculinity" by creating new realities of masculinity. In order to comprehend how Indian OTT material blurs masculinity images instead of showing what cultural products are portraying, this study will critically explore and assess how masculinity is represented in various Indian OTT platforms' content. The analysis of the male protagonist characters, who are shown as genuine and approachable rather than compartmentalising their qualities into the pre-existing patriarchal male image, is another goal of the article. In order to comprehend how Indian OTT material blurs masculinity images instead of showing what cultural products are portraying, this study will critically explore and assess how masculinity is represented in various Indian OTT platforms' content. The study also aims to evaluate the positioning of the male lead characters, which does not divide men's qualities into the patriarchal male stereotype that already exists.

Objectives Of The Study:

Over the past few years the treatment to gender and gendered content is undergoing a metamorphosis in the Indian Context. With the increasingly growing popularity of the OTT platforms among Indian audiences there is also a changing narrative about gender and its identities in the Indian society. Hence the main objective of this study is to

- Analyse the role that OTT Platforms have played in deconstructing popular gender narratives in the Indian Context.
- To understand how OTT is paving the way to more gender driven content that popular mass media failed to see-through. And
- To gain a qualitative understanding of the content that is navigating through to debunking the gendered myths and stereotypes from the perspective of the Indian audiences.



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Methodology:

To Understand the study on hand popular Indian content from various OTT planforms was selected and analysed qualitatively. The Content that was analysed was selected based on the following criteria.

1. Recently Made Indian Series were selected for the study
2. The selection of the series were made based on their popularity among audiences
3. The content was chosen from the three most popular OTT platforms subscribed by Indian audiences.
4. The chosen content was analysed using the following criteria
 - Themes of the web series that were based on gender
 - Representations of the characters
 - Dominant Stereotypes existent in the Indian Society

Analysis:

India is experiencing a golden era of entertainment, with up - coming artists and producers producing ground-breaking, authentic, diverse, and relatable content. OTT platforms today has become the global screen of Indian stories. Authors that tell stories from a different perspective and avoid following trends are rewarded with recognition and the knowledge that every story, regardless of length or format, can find a reader. There are many options for writers to tell a story about anything these days, and they are taking bold, innovative chances.

Masculinity & Men:

The idea of masculinity is a social construct that has been gradually constructed by socialisation agents such as the media, families, and schools. Collectively, these agencies dehumanise men by categorising any form of deviation as insufficiently macho. But because OTT platforms distort conventional notions of masculinity, their arrival is perceived as a paradigm shift. Our realities are shaped by our experiences consuming content (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). It broadens the perspectives of its customers, increasing our acceptance and paving the way for a healthy kind of masculinity that deviates from the roles that are traditionally associated with men. Certain content on these platforms has significantly altered how males are portrayed, replacing the aggressive, domineering, and emotionless male characters with more nuanced, multifaceted ones. The fact that these works do not place their male protagonists inside the framework of "traditional" or "hegemonic" masculinity is a plus. Rather than being the stereotypical image of men as violent or physically strong men who save ladies and hover over everyone's life like supermen, the characters on the platforms are a breath of new air.

The Feminine & The Women:

Indian women's roles on television have evolved from being damsels in distress to powerful female protagonists shattering stereotypes.. The narrative is shifting and female characters are now being portrayed in new ways thanks to the rise of female directors, writers, producers, and actors. And we may thank streaming services for that. In the year 2021 alone The OTT Platform Netflix worked with 23 women writers including Gazal Dhaliwal (Mismatched S2, Feels Like Ishq), Alankrita Srivastava (Bombay Begums), Kanika Dhillon (Haseen Dillruba), Nupur Pai (Little Things S4). OTT platforms have been instrumental in breaking the long-standing stereotypes that have marginalised women in mainstream media. Contemporary Indian pop culture now features female characters who are multi-dimensional, flawed, and relatable. Unlike



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the one-dimensional roles typically found in movies and television, OTT series present women as strong, independent, and driven individuals. In the hit television drama "Never Have I Ever," Devi Vishwakumar represents an adolescent girl navigating relationships, schoolwork, and cultural identity. Her persona challenges conventional ideas of what an Indian girl ought to be, opening the door for more real and strong stories.

The Other Gender:

The short episode 'Geeli Pucchi' examines the lesbian relationship with an intersection of class, caste, and gender in the 2020 Ajeeb Dastaans Netflix anthology. Priya is a married woman from a Brahmin family of higher caste, while Bharti is a member of the Dalit group. A video on Bharti's phone and Priya's incessant memories of her childhood pal Kavita reveal their hidden sexualities. The difficulty of accepting and embracing one's sexuality is evident throughout the movie, even though the labels "lesbian" and "homosexual" are never mentioned. We learn from Priya's character that while adhering to heteronormative ideals may confer respect and prestige in society, they do not necessarily provide the inner contentment and pleasure that every person longs for. According to the cited research, these films have had a favourable influence on people's opinions of Indian society. It raises awareness and contributes to the normalisation of queer identities. It assists people in discovering that their sexuality is natural and not a sin that needs to be atoned for. The media, a potent instrument, has to reach its full potential and develop stories that further normalise and illustrate the complexities of accepting one's sexuality in oneself and in society. Even while they encourage individuals to explore their sexuality. For young people to securely negotiate their gender identity, sexuality, and reproductive experiences this is extremely essential.

Inferences:

The inferences drawn from the study are

- Gendered themes are gaining more popular among Indian content creators as they are seen experimenting with the idea more and more
- The popular gender stereotypes are being questioned in the content that is being created for these OTT platforms which is not the case on Televised Programs.
- Gender, Identity and Sexuality is going through a metamorphosis among Indian audiences consuming content through OTT.
- Regional Content on OTT platforms has also seen a steady rise in viewership for similar kind of content which is not the case with its television counterparts.
- India as an OTT audience is also opening up to accepting such content across all its platforms.
- The Indian Web Series that are analysed for this study show that certain themes have seen a steady rise on OTT platforms such as
 - a. Stronger women roles in the Web Series.
 - b. Strong women centric storylines.
 - c. Realistic Problems that exist in the Indian society.
 - d. Gender Roles that need not abide by the norms of the society.
 - e. Popular Representation of genders Vs Reality



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Conclusion:

One thing that the OTT platforms have changed for us is the abundance of shows that focus on women. These television programmes feature strong, independent women who celebrate their successes and resist giving up on their challenges. Some are fiction based on real-life events, while others are inspired by real life, The same OTT has also brought to light men who are sensitive and non-insecure of strong independent women in their life's. OTT seemed to also be inclusive of the other genders and its identities Digital storytelling are examining issues and experiences that were rarely explored on the big screen, levelling the gender playing field. Viewers are enjoying this freshness, which encourages the production of new shows of this kind.

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