

INDIAN WEB SERIES - REVOLUTIONISING THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN WOMEN IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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Abstract

The online streaming platforms are captivating the attention of the audiences and making the cash boxes ring like never before. They are tussling the content of television which was stagnant and blooming prospects of the rise of rich, good quality content. The overdramatic content of the television gives way to the fresh and relatable stories that online streaming platforms offer as they tend to replenish the entertainment industry. According to the facts and figures, the Covid 19 caused destruction to almost every sector but led to the rise of the Over The Top (OTT) platforms and witnessed a surge in their subscriptions. With the world locked inside their homes, and not having any means of entertainment, people resorted to web series as a means of diversion from the mundane existence. The web series was also seen to break the stereotypical portrayal of women and revolutionized the depiction of women characters in the mainstream media. The aim of the researcher is to analyse this renewed representation and a survey among the audiences was conducted. The data collected from the survey helps to understand the reasons for the popularity of the OTT platforms and how the audience is perceiving the changing portrayal of women in mainstream media.

Keyword: Indian web series, rudimentary practices, portrayal of women, social identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The web series streaming online on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and Hoi Choi has been

admired by the millennials for quite a long time. Indian cinema is also witnessing momentum growth due to technological growth in India. Technology especially the internet and smartphones is changing Indian television and cinema at a rapid speed. Social networking sites, new digital platforms, and wi-fi sticks are new techniques that are used to watch movies, documentaries, and other video programs by Indian audiences. (Singh, 2018) The content of the web series is more relatable to the young audience. Also, the authentic content and ease of being able to watch at one's own pace are the other pros. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of these online streaming services and boosted their sales. Especially at a time when the movie theatres are forced to stay closed due to lockdown and social distancing, the online streaming services are leaving no stone unturned to gain more memberships, and are quite successful.

Digital entertainment has become not only a trend but the need of the future. Another important trend is that the web series has changed the portrayal of women according to the current scenario. The media is considered to be a powerful agent of producing, perpetuating, and destroying different types of images or stereotypes of women. The stereotypical image of women which is often portrayed in mainstream media is challenged by the web series. They showcase women as people, who are making their identity without depending on men for their upliftment. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown has been a blessing in disguise OTT platforms in India (Bhattacharyya, 2020) like Netflix, Amazon Prime, ALT Balaji, Zee5, MX Player, Hoichi, just to name a few, leading to the collapse of the supremacy established by television channels and cinema theatres as the main

entertainment hub. India's lockdown and stay-at-home restrictions have forced citizens to turn to online entertainment and hastened a trend already underway as the biggest platforms spent billions to lure viewers from theatres (The Hindu, 2020).

New media is creating a new world and changing our daily lives. Internet is changing Indian cinema very rapidly (Singh, 2019). Entertainment is the biggest reason behind the use of Over The Top (OTT) applications. The second biggest reason behind using this service is the mobility of gadgets. The third is the availability of on-demand content (Singh, 2019). Internet traffic originating from mobile devices in India has already surpassed desktop internet traffic. Most of the users are now accessing the internet via mobile devices. Thus, producers and directors were aware of the fact that even after the removal of lockdown barriers; it will be difficult to get a place for their film within the theatre for an appreciable period of time. (Salih, 2020) Digital premieres weren't a novelty before the lockdown. Yet, with theatres remaining shut for over four months now, there has been a tectonic shift. (Mitra, 2020) OTT platforms are going to dominate the entertainment industry in near future, emanating from the trend of the increasing release of movies on OTT platforms (Salih, 2020). There are lots of films already completed and a few films are at the edge of completion. The release of *Gulabo Sitabo*, *Dil Bechara*, and *Shakuntala Devi* dozens of new Bollywood films are headed for a straight-to-OTT release, the genres vary from horror-comedies to historical war films (Mitra, 2020).

Gulabo Sitabo, a Bollywood film starring Amitabh Bachchan, was supposed to draw millions to cinema halls but it debuted on Amazon.com Inc's Prime streaming service as the coronavirus kept Indians home (The Hindu, 2020). *Shakuntala Devi* viewership figures are not shared by Amazon prime but it is estimated that it has 20 million paid subscribers in India and at least 20% of viewers would watch the movie so at least 4-5 million viewers should watch this movie on Amazon Prime. It was estimated to be sold to Amazon prime for 35 Crores giving a clear profit of 10 crores, as the budget of the movie stands 25 crores (Bollywoodmoviesreviewz, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Web series break free from staid television formats – there are no time frames to follow, no censorship issues (Nanda, 2018), and a way to keep an audience engaged and come back for more (Kumar 2019). An article in Outlook praises it as a “bracing antidote to repression. Every major character in “Made in Heaven” is waiting to break free from one form of repression or another” (Outlook, 2019). Soumya Shrivastava goes ahead to call it “The best desi original by Amazon Prime, it unmasks the shiny lies of big fat Indian weddings” (Shrivastava, 2019). Also, he mentions, “Unlike several shows and films being made today, *Made in Heaven* directly addresses and foregrounds current socio-political realities, especially the ones that don't conventionally fit into mainstream narratives” (Pathak, 2019).

With more video consumption in Hindi and other regional languages in India, these streaming platforms have an opportunity to produce content for a niche audience. If one looks at the content of the shows streamed on OTT platforms, he/she will be surprised as the language and presentation of the shows are bold, steamy, and adult in nature quite unparallel to the contemporary content broadcast on television (Pandit, 2020). The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators 2020 report, by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, says that out of the total internet subscribers, 96.68% use mobile devices for access to internet service, wired internet subscribers are 3.24% of total internet subscribers by September 2019.

As per 'Digital India - Technology to Transform a Connection Nation' by McKinsey Global Institute (2019), India will witness a surge in internet users by about 40 percent and the number of smartphones to double by 2023. It further says India has the second-largest number of internet users in the world—more than 550 million—and this figure could exceed 800 million by 2023, driven by the increasing availability and decreasing cost of high-speed connectivity and smartphones. The Digital India Initiative of the Government, attractive packages offered by the private telecommunication companies to internet users have boosted digital adoption and resulted in Indians using more than 54 times as much data in 2018 as they did in mid-2016. The report also mentions that India is digitizing faster than all but one other country in the study, Indonesia in digital user engagement in the

dimensions of texting, tweeting, shopping, and streaming. Following the availability of internet through mobile phones at a massive scale and low rates, the internet dark zones, especially the semi urban and rural areas have got access to content. Many of these users are first generation OTT content consumers, says Indian OTT Platforms R0eport 2019 by Mudra Institute of Communication Ahmedabad and Communication Crafts. Smartphones and internet services are not only a necessity but a new source of entertainment, causing a paradigm shift from television sets to the mobile screen. The new realistic innovation themes of the web series garner tremendous viewership as the youth are being targeted by them. It's a new-fangled platform for companies to invest, brands are evolving their branding strategies to be able to compete in the digital world (Nanda, 2018).

2.1 The portrayal of women in web series

Research reveals that women are overwhelmingly valued in a film based on their identification as a mother, wife, or lover (Lang, 2015). Women are portrayed as dependent on other characters, over-emotional, and confined to low-status jobs when compared to enterprising and ambitious male characters (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Contemporary prime-time narratives have reverted to formulaic depictions, which some commentators have characterized as constituting a 'backlash'. Independent women are presented as those requiring regulation and by the narrative's end revert to being doormats or shadows. The 'traditional' Indian woman whose activities focus on and are limited to the domestic realm is celebrated in these narratives (Sujata Moorti, 2007). "It's always good to see strong women taking the centre stage and owning up to their flaws and desires but this shouldn't come at the cost of the fluidity of the narrative. The show wants us to believe that the characters are ambitious but they hardly do anything to justify that. At a point, their strong-headedness, badass nature, and unapologetic selves look forced and without any solid base", says an article on News18.com. (News18) With the introduction of Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and various other streaming services, and their original content, the web series culture in India is regarded as a new wave of narrating women's stories, reflecting their realities (Wardhan, 2020). The characters like Poroma Sarkar in Love Lust and Confusion or Megha

in Lust Stories emerge as bold avatars on-screen in contrast to the socially accepted sanskari characters of conventional television soap-operas (Pandit, 2020). A lot of web shows have become very popular with the audiences, for example, Sacred Games, Mirzapur, Pitchers, Permanent Roommates, or Lust Stories, had powerful female characters, who drew high accolades for their performances. Though these tales majorly revolve around the male protagonists, female leads like Kubra Sait, Radhika Apte, Shweta Tripathi, Riska Duggal, Maanvi Gagroo, and Nidhi Singh, were successful in building a stronghold for themselves; creating an identity that begs to differ from that of typecast and stereotypical roles portrayed by women in TV serials. These characters are considered as modern, progressive and quite relatable (Wardhan, 2020). Tara from Made in Heaven shows the world that a career-oriented woman can be as feminine as she wants to be and yet be a woman chasing her dreams, leaving no stone unturned. Cukoo from Sacred Games is one of the only positive portrayals of a trans-woman on-screen, while, IPS Officer Vartika Chaturved in Delhi Crime showed us that women are empowering, fierce, they have great leadership quality and they root for one another (Wardhan, 2020). The female lead Shreya in TVF Pitchers prioritizes her passion over her relationship, giving the audience a strong message

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the paper is to critically analyze the web series to study the depiction of women in their content and how these are an aberration from the stereotypical portrayal of women in mainstream media. This renewed representation, which is a bit closer to reality, breathes in fresh air to the content. Also, the paper aims to study the popularity of the Indian web series among millennials.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

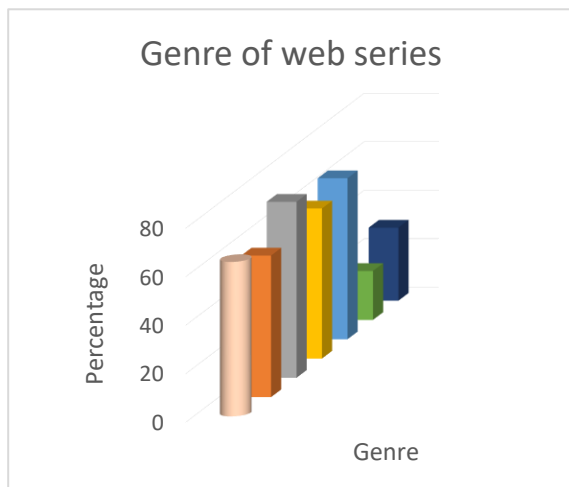
To understand the popularity of the web series in India, a quantitative approach was followed, and an online survey was conducted. The platform for conducting the survey was Google Forms and the responses of the responses were analyzed to study the reasons for the popularity of the Indian web series, and the acceptance of the new emerging identity of women as expressed in

the web series. Also, secondary information was collected to understand the research objectives of the paper, as to what impact this portrayal of changing role of women in the Indian web series is causing on society.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics: Based on the responses collected through the online survey, the age of the respondents is mostly 18-25 which shows that the millennials have responded the most but the survey range of the age group has been 18-45.

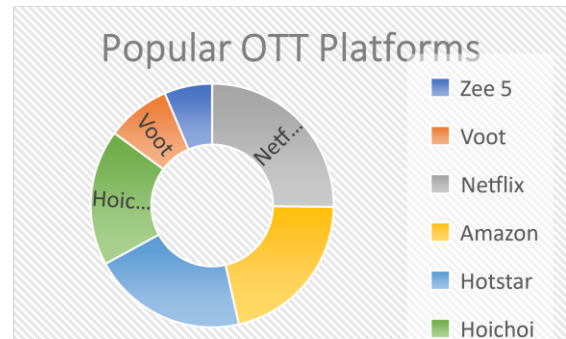
Genre of Web Series: Figure 1 shows the genre of web series, which are most preferred by the respondents, who are audiences to the web series. It can be inferred from the graph below that Action and Adventure (63.7%), Drama (58.4%), Comedy (72.6%) and Romance (66.4%) and crime (61.9%) are most popular, have higher affinity with the young audience and more likely to win accolades. Also, quite a reasonable part of the respondents was informed that Family and Thriller are a genre that is appreciated by them. According to the data gathered from the survey, 20.2% of people said that they are interested in watching content based on Horror/thriller. Whereas, 30.1% of respondents also like watching stories based on family life.



Graph 1: The genre which audiences prefer on OTT platforms

Popularity of OTT platforms: When the respondents were asked about the OTT platforms on which they watch the content, 45.1% of the them said they preferred Hoi Choi, 51.3% of them Hotstar, Amazon is

liked by 53.1%. Netflix attracts 62.8% of the respondents Voot is 21.2% and Zee 5 is preferred by 15.9%.



Graph 2: The most popular OTT platforms

Of the respondents, 9% people were of the opinion, that there has been no particular change in the representation of women in web series but a whopping 91% accepted that the content of the web series in terms of portrayal of women in revolutionising in their approach, and this huge percentage of audiences which are quite receptive of this as they believe this is going to bring a major change in the mindset and culture of the society. When asked whether there has been a major shift in depicting women's portrayal on Indian web series, a respondent said, "Yes, they are redefining the meaning of Indian women. A young media student said, "Women has always been the backbone of any nation worldwide, their contribution towards the society plays a hugely positive role. In India, we have a varied type of audience. Web Series are famous among the youngsters and that is why uplifting the topic of women empowerment through different series helps to educate people about the safety of women and not discriminate against gender or caste. Women are equally capable or in fact more capable than men." Another respondent was of opined, "Yes, it has opened various wide opportunities to showcase and portray one's talent through the script." Yet another confirmed the transformation by saying, "Yes of course.

For example, take Delhi crimes or Jamtara". A millennial criticizing the television serials discoursed, "Yes. Finally Indian web series are taking the portrayal of women out of the typical Saas-Bahu image. For E.g.- kavya from little things, Meera-girl in the city, Damini, Siddhi, Anjana-four more shots please, Chanchal- Tripling, and many

more. The list is endless." While discussing about the changing gender roles, the representation of the LGBTQ community cannot be ignored. A person raising this issue said, "Since, the general content consumers are young adults and teenagers, exploring women's sexuality or sexuality of people, in general, is not considered as "risque" as it is for TV channels. The taboo nature of women's sexuality including elements like LGBTQ, polyamory, and dominance is well showcased by the web series".

The data which was collected, the web series which the respondents appreciated particularly were Sacred games, Byomkesh, Kota factory, Little things, Girl in the City, Mirzapur, Stories by Tagore, A Family man, Ghost stories, etc. These were the series that were most favourite among the respondents. However, some of them said about Kota Factory, Made in Heaven, Charitraheen, Permanent roommates, etc. Commenting on the choice of costumes and make-up of the web series female protagonists, a respondent said, "First of all, there has been a significant shift in the way that female protagonists have experimented with their looks. Less focus on skin color/looks and more on the personality of the characters played as well as the elevated status of female protagonists in the storyline." A big admirer of web series was of the opinion that many web series are focusing on women empowerment and women play the role of protagonist too. However, a millennial was of the opinion that the web series creators should try and make different content instead of sticking to the same old storyline.

6. CONCLUSION

Cinema and web series are very powerful mediums of communication. Researchers are of the view that communication contributes to the maintenance, modification, and creation of cultures. A society can advance only when it tries to break the age-old traditions and thinking, which often serve as a bottleneck and restrict the growth and advancement of the society as a whole. The changing portrayal of women in the web series, also are breaking the bias in gender roles which are deep rooted in the minds of the people. These are very influential and transcendent and can bring out a positive development in the behaviour of people and change their outlook.

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