

Portrayal of women on OTT video streaming platform in India

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Renowned Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan said- "Medium is the Message". With the advent of the 21st Century, there has been exponential Technological advancement and because of this, the mode of media consumption has witnessed a drastic change. This shift from traditional media has resulted in a new form of content being desired by the audience, that is not constrained by the limitation of censorship.

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Media has always been a vanguard for the behaviour of society. The pattern for media consumption is transforming with the advancement in communication technologies in India. The majority of the population has achieved ease of access to the internet. This progression has allowed web-based streaming websites to gain exponential growth in viewership. The phenomenal growth has also resulted in the evolution of the content consumption behaviour of the audience. With this boom in demands, more and more content is uploaded every day on these Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms.

In India, there are more than 40 international and regional OTT platforms. The audience prefers these platforms because they remain unshackled from the chains of censorship and provide the audience exclusive control over the content they wish to watch. The creative freedom that thrives over these platforms allows the creator to implore realism in the content. These freedoms sometimes do not conform to the Indian societal norms. The portrayal of women over these OTT is one of the primary concerns of hostility for these OTT platforms in India. In this research, we will attempt an analysis of the portrayal of women through previously available literature on various sources to expand the cumulative understanding of the condition of the female gender over these OTT platforms.

Renowned Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan said- "Medium is the Message". With the advent of the 21st Century, there has been exponential technological advancement and because of this, the mode of media consumption has witnessed a drastic change. This shift from traditional media has resulted in a new form of content being desired by the audience, that is not constrained by the

limitation of censorship.

In this new age, the world has converged into a global village, and so has the media. This globalisation is because of the perpetual growth of the internet. This medium allows its users to experience versatility in the consumption of media while further allowing them greater independence of choice from an extensive collection of content.

In this technologically advanced age, Over-the-top platforms are the most commonly used medium for the consumption of media. OTT is a media platform that provides service directly to the viewers via the internet, thus bypassing the traditional controllers of the Media service like cable, broadcast, satellite television platforms. The direct access of media by the viewers using the internet allows these platforms an exemption from the censorship laws of the land, thus allowing the creator to practice greater creative freedom for the portrayal of their character. Moreover, because of the on-demand control over the content, these platforms have witnessed an exponential growth in their viewership.

In the context of Indian society, these creative freedoms have been a bone of contention among the traditional society and the Creators of OTT platforms. The portrayal of women over these streaming platforms is among the primary reason for this conflict. In the mainstream media, the portrayal of women has always been limited around the Patriarchal mindset, where in most cases, the female actors are subsumed in the shadows of their male counterparts. They are either encapsulated in an ideal role subjugated to the male actors, or they are portrayed as eye candy for the audience.

The GEC (General Entertainment Channel) broadcaster have operated under

the Censorship law of India, thus building a stereotype pertaining the women in the media industry, and in most cases, their role has only been limited to either a Cultured mother, Wife, daughter or a vixen, courtesan or a vamp. These Stereotypes have seeped into the minds of the Indian audience. But, ever since the onset of the Streaming platforms, the portrayal of women has witnessed a rejuvenation from the old stereotypic role. The content over these platforms- unfettered from the scissors of censor board have started exploring the genre of women Centric content where the women are not merely an object of gratification but a strong-willed protagonist, unwilling to give up. Although, this privilege of uncensored content Creation has also paved the way for intensely violent, nude, vulgar, Sexual, and profane portrayal of women.

OTT platforms has been a boon for the Women Centric content at a global level, being applauded by the viewer for the unique and innovative role for these characters, but, the Indian Creators have withheld themselves in a single mould of portraying the Women in their content either as a victim or Iconoclastic lady of the new generation. If this trend continues, it is hard not to say that women in OTT platforms will soon be restrained in these roles, thus breaking one stereotype and falling into another.

Portrayal Of Women In Ott Platform:- Since the beginning of the media industry, the women working in front of the camera have been castigated as a supporting cast for the male lead. In a male-dominated industry, women were objectified as eye candy or a character who becomes the motivation for the male lead to finding riches. Besides this, a stereotype has been established in the media industry that Female actors should be fair, slim, tall, and unwary about exposing themselves on the screen. Furthermore, the women were portrayed

as an inferior gender who silently accepts the atrocities that befall upon them, and the Confident hero of the film can only save them. Such portrayal of women in media has created a grim image of the female gender in society.

Throughout this period, only a handful of movies and TV Serials in comparison cast females in the leading role, even then those portrayals were tamed by the patriarchal mindset of the society, and the women were somehow made to seek recognition from the male gender, be it in the form of their father, husband, brother or some other male in the life.

The traditional media also created an unsavoury image about female characters that are firebrand and voluptuous. The audience in general lauds the sexist and vulgar depiction of women on screen, yet, they despise those similar characters in real life. Empirically, these mediocre portrayals of women have also set a vibe in society that sees women as second-class citizens. Apart from all these aspects, the traditional media has also transformed women into objects of sexual gratification while showcasing the bosom and the buttocks, particularly in song and music videos.

OTT platforms have emerged in recent times with a new outlook towards the portrayal of women. The content served over these platforms is much more unprejudiced towards the typical portrayal of women. OTT Streaming platforms like Netflix, amazon prime, Disney Hotstar, Hulu, Voot, and many regional streaming platforms like Hoichoi have begun focusing on the women-centric role. Strangers things, Orange is the new Black, She, Aarya, Skater Girl, Queen's gambit, et cetera are some of the content streamed over these platforms that have portrayed women in –a unique and refreshing roles.

The adrift from stereotypical portrayals

of women in GEC channels is bringing in a dynamic and latent change in the perception of the rudimentary image of women in society. Unstrained from censor's, the OTT platforms have allowed the creator to explore Tabooed issues like homosexuality, child abuse, nudity, sex, marital rape, Causal sex, Gender biasedness, etc. more potently and vividly. For women-centric content, OTT could be considered as a boon as these streaming platforms transcend the typical physical aspects of the female character in media, i.e. complexion and physique. Because of such complex subjects selected up by these Streaming platforms, the need for talent in the portrayal of the role becomes utmost necessary, thus providing opportunities for new female actors in the industry.

Despite the creative upliftment, OTT platforms have provided to the Creators, In the Indian context, it seems that the Creators have somehow begun re-castigating the women in the OTT platform as victims taking a stand or vindictive character out for revenge or privileged women having fun while being confused about their Life choice. This trend is evident from a show across all streaming platforms like *Bulbbul*, *Guilty*, *She*, *Mirzapur 2*, *Masaba Masaba*, *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*, *Aarya*, and *Bhaag Beanie Bhaag*, *Delhi crime*, *Bombay Begums*, and many more. The Inability of creators to explore innovative roles for female Protagonists has steered the contents towards portraying intense violence, nudity, sexuality, and profanity from and toward women to garner larger viewership.

It is evident that ever since the trend of exploiting the privilege of uncensored content publishing for portraying women through sexuality, profanity, abusive language, violence has boomed, the demand for bringing OTT platforms under censorship law has also gained

momentum. In the current scenario, it seems like women are out of one box into another.

Portrayal of women in web series:- Web series are the most popular segment of all OTT platforms, and binge-watching series has become a fad among OTT users. The wide popularity of web series is because of the elongated dose of intense suspense, thrill, and drama. Although, male protagonists dominate OTT web series, the proportion of women-centric content with strong narratives, portraying women as ambitious, strong, and self-dependent has increased. This diversion from the typical representation of women in Traditional media has been lauded by both the male and female viewers of the streaming platforms, and according to data, the proportion of male viewers is much higher for women-centric content in comparison to females.

The shift in women's character in the Indian context from typical feminine roles a GEC channels, has received massive appreciation from the audience, but in the last few years, these revolutionary changes in the portrayal of women have become stagnant. Either Rape, Murder, or child abuse, or privileged women's take on life has become a convenient backstory to explain women's mental or physical health issues to make the character interesting and edgy for the viewers.

Consider the characters: Pooja Batra's Character Rani Irani in '*Bombay Begums*', who has been sexually abused at workplace in her journey to success. Kiara Advani's character Nanki in '*Guilty*' was sexually abused as a child and suffered from those scars in her adulthood. Aaditi Pohankar's character of Bhumika Pardeshi in '*She*', a female cop who has been abused as a child, goes undercover as a prostitute and battles against society's expectations of morally appropriate behaviour. In '*Mirzapur*', Beena's

character, was raped by her father-in-law. In the non-fictional genre, series like 'Delhi Crimes' explores the Nirbhya Incident, the most gruesome crime against women in recent times, or 'What the Love', where a participant shared that as a child, she has been sexually abused.

In conjunction with the sexual abuse narrative, there is a spectrum of privileged women who fun, confident, independent, Educated, good-looking, and working. They drink, curse, party, and have casual sex. Consider the ladies of 'four more, please' or Swara Bhaskar's role in 'Bhagg Beanie Bhagg' battling with the societal dogma's to achieve her life goal. The anthology series 'Feel the Ishq' revolves around the gambit of female characters struggling for love, and in 'little thing' Mithila Parker plays Kavya, who has to encounter many difficulties in a living relationship.

All these portrayals of women have generalised women either in the ambit of Furiousity or insecurity, while adding the edginess via using sex, profanity, violence, and Substance abuse. In a platform that allows extreme independence to bring out huge diversity, the horizon of the content theme must be broadened. In the Indian context, content creators must push the envelope and expand the possibilities of female-driven narratives instead of succumbing to the temptation of compartmentalising women into easy to 'manage' boxes.

The Portrayal Of Women In Film:- Films are the most communicative format of media communication. It submerges its audience in the emotion portrayed by the narrative. It can make them laugh, Cry, feel disgusted, or angry. The manner in which film can communicate with its audience has always been a matter of great curiosity for filmmakers. Hence, the message delivered by these films becomes exceptionally

crucial in shaping the narrative about any subject.

According to a report By Geena Davis Insititute released at 'Global Symposium on Gender in Media' the gender ratio in the Indian Film industry one woman in every 6.12 men. Subsequently, another 2017 reports unveiled that the screen time received by women was only 31.5% compared to 68.5% for men. These statics can be considered as the ultimate scenario of women in conventional Indian films. (Davis, 2017)

Before the onset of OTT, Conventional media had built up an image about women which portrayed them as allying mothers, cheerful sisters, obedient wives, or a vamp. According to Srijita Sarkar in her thesis 'An analysis of Hindi women-centric films in India.':- In Hindi films, the image of an ideal Indian woman is always glorified as the woman who accepts injustice and violence dispensed out towards her by men and society. Hence, violence against women has always been one of the standard elements of Hindi films.' This analysis of the portrayal of women is grave and ominous. (Sarkar, 2012)

According to Sowmya Nandakumar in 'The stereotypical portrayal of women in commercial Indian Cinema':-'Indian commercial cinema works as a vicious circle in which both audience and filmmakers prefer the films which fall under the socio-cultural framework and power structure of the Indian society'. This is an extremely crucial statement as it dictates the threshold for the portrayal of women in films. (Nandakumar, 2011)

These perceptions of women have slowly but gradually seeped into the minds of the general audience. Despite being an integral part of every film story, this perception has curtailed women's creative talent and has also downgraded their image, constraining them

only to be eye candy for the audience.

With the advancement in the reach of OTT, the stigma towards women's portrayal in the film has seen a receding trend. The streaming platform has allowed women's characters to be portrayed in new light, backed by innovative storylines dedicated to exploring diverse scenarios in women's lives. These unique women-centric story has begun shaping a new perception towards women, that is not fixated to the stereotypes of the traditional film industry. This progress has provided ample opportunity for women in the film industry to rather showcase their talent than merely being eye-candy for the audience.

Almost every prime streaming platform like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Voot, Zee5 has ventured into diverse genres based on strong female-fronted narratives. This is evident through original films like 'Mimi', where a surrogate mother is left with an unclaimed child. 'Hassena Dil Ruba', which tells a story of an urban woman struggling with her arranged marriage. 'Kanaa' portraying the character of an aspiring girl who wants to be a cricketer. Tripti Dimri's character in Bulbbul narrates a traumatic story of child bride who later seeks revenge or Lust Stories which sheds light on modern relationships from the viewpoint of the Indian woman. This list for women-centric film over OTT platform goes on, films like 'Choked', 'Masaba Masaba', 'Netrikann', 'Mrs. Serial Killer', 'Paris Paris', 'Mohini', 'The Great Indian Kitchen', 'Raat Akeli Hai', 'Dolly kitty aur chamaktesitare', 'Soni', 'Chopsticks', 'Bombay Rose', 'Shakuntala Devi', et cetera. This trend of portraying women as ambitious, Fun, Daredevil, and voluptuous has been applauded by both genders alike, and this phenomenon is compelling filmmakers to develop more female protagonist stories.

The majority of contents in the context of

Women-centric films added over OTT platforms are unique, allowing them an upper hand over the conventional film. Being unregulated by the censor is one of the crucial factors which allows the creator to work in-depth on sensitive issues related to women. As the content in these platforms does not restrain from using profanity, nudity, and sexuality, the audience finds the content portraying realism, thus, more interesting, engaging, and relatable.

Films released in the OTT platform has not been able to match the grandeur of traditional Box Offices, though it is evident from the trend that big media house has also begun opting these platforms for the exclusive release of their films. It is quite possible that in the recent future OTT Platform will begin releasing movies exclusively, thus rendering cinema halls obsolete.

Therefore, In the ambit of uniqueness and realism, it can be accurately said that the OTT has been a game-changer in the portrayal of women in media, transcending the pre-defined stereotypes of complexion, and physique. Adding further, if this trend of women-centric narration continues, OTT will help uplift the image of women in the film industry and their issues in society by eliminating the prejudice: how women should behave.

Portrayal of women in erotica:- In the Indian Context, erotica content has always been synonymous with 'B-Grade' movies. For GEC channels, the censors have always held a tight grip on: what is obscene and what is not. Conventionally, the women working in erotica had always been polarised by the mainstream media. Only a handful of female actors got their names recognised by the general audience. 'Silk Samita' is one among those names that have made a mark in the film industry, but , the semi-biographical film of 2011-'Dirty Picture' shed

light on society's perception of her real and reel life character. While her career expands over 450 films in 5 different languages, she has always been casted to add the touch of sexuality and edginess to these movies.

The scenario for soft porn platforms in India is booming; there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of platforms that serve the particular content. Platforms like AltBalaji, hotshots, Ullu, Primeflix, Nueflix aka Flizmov, Gup Chup, and many more cater erotica based on the fantasy of Common Indian Middle- class families. Another reason for the popularity of these content is the vernacular that is typical to the audience. According to Sachin Mohite, an erotica content creator for AltBalaji: 'We have seen erotica before, but woh erotica humnesheherkedekhe ha(but those belong to the cities). You have a swimming pool, bikini-clad women, a champagne bottle, and muscular men. Nobody had seen erotica of real India. So, I thought why not make something for Bharat, instead of India'

The portrayal of women in these platforms is extensively sexual, obscene, and crude. They serve women as a commodity for sexual gratification, solely focusing on the breasts and buttocks to compensate for the mediocrity of the story. Referring to Series Like 'Gandi Baat', based on erotic stereotypes in the rural environment or 'Kavita bhabhi' which narrates the life story of a call girl and her customer's sexual fantasies and desires. 'Saheli', casually touches on the issue of homosexuality, perhaps normalising it for the audience, and the list for such content goes on.

While most female actors try to use these platforms as slingshots for their career; gaining fame and money in a short time-span but in the long run, some of these actors believe that exposure to web series of these genres is

a significant predictor of sexual objectification, dis-empathy and commenting about women's bodies, and insulting unattractive women behaviour.

Thus the portrayal of women in these platforms plays a significant role in navigating the stance of women representation and perception in society and the media industry.

Conclusion:- The portrayal of women in the OTT platform can be compared to a two-edged sword. On one side, the boom in women-centric content over the years and the performances of the female actors, and the storyline have received acclaim from both the critics and the audience. On the other side lies the fact that since these OTT platforms don't conform to the standard censorship laws of the land, they have begun exploiting these perks to use sexuality, profanity and nudity to propel their content to the viewer. While, the latter method can be considered a good recipe for commercial success, it jeopardises the character diversification of women. Ultimately, depicting and distorting women in the fold of commoditisation of her body parts which is the biggest violation of human rights.

In the Indian context, Over-the-top platforms, have brought in a phenomenal change towards the perception of women in the media and society. Especially, the younger generations, who can easily relate to the content served in these OTT platforms. These Platforms have also addressed taboo of Indian society, while depicting women portraying these roles in strong characters. Issues like homosexuality, child abuse, rape, workplace harassment have been boldly addressed by these platforms, which have brought gradual ease in being vocal about these issues that impact women all-around.

Finally, it can be said that OTT platforms empower the women's portrayal in society and have been a prominent tool in eliminating pre-

defined stereotypes of women in the media industry.

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