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Constructing Womanhood in Digital Media: A Case Study on select web series on Netflix OTT India

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the creation of Indian womanhood in the digital media based on a case study of the selected web series on Netflix OTT India, such as Delhi Crime, Made in Heaven, and Bombay Begums. The context places OTT platforms in a transformational zone where gender, power, and identity discourses are reshaped outside the cinema and television. The feminist media studies literature shows the democratization of storytelling through digital platforms, which is an anticipatory expression of victimhood, resilience, and empowerment of women. The methodology of the research is a content analysis of a qualitative nature using interpretivism research philosophy, inductive research approach and exploratory research design. The data analysis of OTT narrative patterns, the depiction of characters, and the thematic representations of women set in a contextual theme in the selected series was used. Findings indicate that there is a two-sided construction of womanhood, women are shown as the victims of systemic violence in Indian society and are subject to patriarchal oppression, and at the same time as women as agents of justice, reform, and transformation. The discussion highlights that OTT narratives being disruptive to break conventional stereotypes, broaden cultural discourse, and give presence to the various female identities thus redefining Indian womanhood in the global digital spaces. Finally, the research contends that Netflix India is not just a mirror of experienced reality of women, but is also actively involved in rebuilding gendered identities through factual incidents portrayed through digital media, creating a central platform of negotiation of power, agency, and feminist images in the modern India.

Introduction

The media change in consumption of entertainment content particularly in terms of cinema and platform based OTT content has gradually changed in the 21st century audiences (Simlote, Indora, & Singh, 2024). The availability of internet, low-cost penetration of smart phones has facilitated streaming visual media content, which provides variety in the daily soaps, films (Paul, 2024), helping people to adapt their leisure time adaptability has

challenged films in theatres, television series (John, 2023). Traditional form of entertainment in theatres and cable channels Indian audience has evolved structurally to platform based over-the-top (OTT) platforms (Chatterjee, & Pal, 2020), that are available via smart tv, computers/tablets and smart phones (Basu et al. 2022). The genre of film based entertainment media was distinguished by cinema, and now web-series, has now become one of the most powerful mediums of audience engagement binding power (Golwalkar & Mishra, 2023) which got a boost in new media consumption during COVID19 (Sharma & Lulandala, 2023). Conversely, it is shattering their established ideas, stereotypes, value system, preserving an inner force of challenging forces that are present in adult people in their lives (Rao, 2021), as well as challenging the patriarchal values and dismantling the traditional images of women. Parmar & Pandit (2021) argued that digital entertainment has been the fundamental issue to redirect the audiences to the OTT providers. Fitzgerald (2019) argued that since the dawn of the cinema of women in stereotypical characters, both in Bollywood movies or art films, has undergone a vast transformation which Soi (2021) explained to be traced in the expression of the female gender in the new media.

The present research paper will highlight the remarkable contribution of digital media via OTT platform on re-branding the role, images of adult women in Indian society in relation to dark truth of female rape, rape stigma, humiliation, ostracized in society, when viewed through the lens of gender. De (2021) argued that it is a social malice, women as objects in item songs, casting couch, with press reporting of women, is a trend of patriarchal thinking process of authorities. Deshpande (2021) explained that narratives to protect the rapists for the heinous acts, has changed perceptions of other genders, under the influence of OTT.

Justification behind the current research on OTT platforms, initiated in India, as every single day it reveals different forms of content that united viewers and assist in connecting with reality, with real storyline prevailing over fiction, that is helpful in influencing thoughts and principles, standards that can be adopted to transform the Indian society. It is impossible to avoid certain stories, producers and directors attempted to present to the viewers to demonstrate the fact and circumstances on real events awakening the curiosity of the audience, anticipating the darker sides of society, how these are handled in an orderly manner in people of authority and status within the Indian society. These OTT with a theme and forms a genre that has longer scripts that are divided into series. Based on story like male/female centric content, social message content, nature content, game and reality show, talk show, gender equality based story, female domination and female centric content, content like untold story in the past history, reality based story are the classification categories of OTT contents. The research in question currently aims to address through content analysis, of the dark adult activities, includes the rape incident in urban area, deconstructed to viewers desired to know who the excited makers were to produce such splendid content.

2.1 Literature review:

OTT platforms:

OTT platforms have revolutionized the media consumption process because they provide unprecedented access and options (Khanna et al. 2025). Antecedent factors like internet penetration, users are able to view streamed content anywhere, anytime, on any platform

has led to faster new media adoption (Jain, 2021). They do not be bound to conventional broad-casting schedules of time slot tv viewing (Nair, 2021). On the mobility side, this is augmented by the smooth viewing experiences, whether it is personalized recommendations or multi-screen services that increase the interest of the household even during lockdown in COVID19 (Sharma & Lulandala, 2023). Patni, & Ansari, (2024) explained that consumer needs to be considered is cost-effectiveness because OTT subscription services offer the ability to select the plan according to the needs, whereas Sadana & Sharma, (2021) argued that the pay-per-view service offers access without relying on certain schedules. Ghalawat et al. (2021) stated that OTT streaming in real-time also enhances the experience allowing viewers to see what is happening in the world or in the space or in the sports competitions promoting the feeling of urgency and closeness. Chakraborty et al. (2023) argued that the emergence of local content (UGC user generated content) has made storytelling more democratic, providing regional filmmakers with a platform and freeing audiences of the language barrier with its translation functions. Such inclusiveness increases the cultural reach and inspires new creators. Furthermore, OTT services flourish through original and diverse stories and attract different audiences across the globe supporting gratification theory (Sharma, Sreen, & Baishya, 2023). The most important thing is convenience because the viewers can consume content at their own convenience without strict schedules (Hallur, Aslekar, & Prabhu, 2023). Lastly, Soren, & Chakraborty (2024) explained that the democratization of the creation process has given small-budget creators the ability to share films/series and creating equal visibility and opportunity for continuance in belief, flow and habit of viewing. Altogether, these characteristics outline the OTT platforms as economical, inclusive, and interconnected media systems across the globe.

Women gender identity in OTT

The women characters of these series are contemporary, self reliant, powerful, progressive and true to life (Uniyal & Mirza, 2024). The digital streaming platforms tests the new and engaging content. The majority of the story depicts the different aspects of love, lust, power, romance and status that women have in mind (Qadiri, 2023). The good plot is either unplanned or pre-destined plot. Women are not exposed to losing identity in the work place, as well as in life, in playing various roles (Mukhopadhyay, 2023) and has been portrayed in films, advertisements (Bala & Saxena, 2022). Main female character is brave enough to confront her unfaithful lover, how manipulation in relationships to marriage and the masking of female gender in Indian society would shine in the visual media against men (Agarwal, 2022) and reveal the soft power of the female gender. Sharma (2021) explained that the majority of OTT depicted female characters, the viewer finds that life in the plot, does not require any assistance, on the part of the prosperous husband, but true values are necessary to keep relationship alive. Other OTT focuses on novel types of development in pre and post wedding that brings about issues of misogyny, honour killings, party politics, and others bringing in gender equality portrayal (Tanaji, 2024). The show exposes the issues of homophobia, dowry and class to which, each wedding is subjected, hate speech, which makes one question the institution of marriage itself, courtesy of its provocative storytelling (Gupta, 2023). The culture of Indian entertainment tends to portray girlfriends or wife as nagging beings who whine over the daily issues, cohabiting and despite the troubles and hardships; she is of a mature age to address them (Khan & Hemalatha, 2025). In constrained OTTs, lust occupies the centre of space, and it is not always resolved and regarded as a

taboo. The characters found it hard to articulate the reasons of their action and relationship position on a culture, redefining feminism (Hada & Chatrapati, 2025), deconstructing masculinity (Sangra, 2021). The elder generation is homogenously portrayed as conservative and in their case, sex is neither seen nor heard and it is supposed to be called shameful with third gender rights in India (Arya, 2023). The female characters in the show are depicted as drinking, swearing, and talking about sex freely in Indian narrative has broken taboo (Suri, 2025). The web series may indirectly refer to the need to have sex education, gender sensitisation in our society and are usually aired in vernacular languages (Dey et al. 2025). The one that is shown by some OTTs is the journey of the modern family defying the stereotypes, managing to overcome the patriarchy and generational differences and to attract new relationship goals founded upon the equality of genders (Chitre, Mahale, & Mazgaonkar, 2022). OTTs are also women in their thirties and those in their early twenties who are grappling with the four common problems of their own (Sharma, 2023). The plot lines are centred on female friendship, their lives as a single parent and single woman in the Indian society, their successful and unsuccessful career, their relationship with their partners and their daily lives (Rao, 2021). OTTs also link socio legal cases, how they lead their lives, love, make errors and find out what makes them tick in terms of relationships (Gupta, 2024).

New identity of women

New identity of women exists, and OTT presents taboo breaking content, individualist and liberated version of lives. Sharda, (2014) stated that it is a development where female gender regardless of urban or rural environment has demonstrated greater taboo discussions (Suri, 2025) which has hitherto not been dramatized in Indian Bollywood stereotyping films (Rathee, 2023). OTT example demonstrated that females lead characters were hanging out in women washrooms cursing like their male counterparts, issues of religion-caste (Chandawarkar, 2024), discussing their sex life, longing to have sex with someone, and were not in need to have a pregnancy. Fathy, (2025) argued that the most enjoyable aspect of the OTT, however, is that it does not attempt to offer a lesson and reflects facts of life, in which the female characters drink, smoke, party, and think and talk about sex. It does not represent as a symbolising of how empowered women in India are but reflects on how the women were in their natural locations that the media failed to show us (Hada & Chatrapati, 2025). Under Indian media consumption, web series has served the needs of matured Indian viewers because any woman can be ambitious, career-driven, loving power and at the same time (Rana, 2024), she can also be feminine and enjoy her sexual desires. A woman must not be a hard, manly, body, and a rebel of mind who questions the male power and dominance in the Indian society (Sharma, 2021), causing both curiosity and solemnity in the way gender is handled. Indian woman can be as feminine, and, at the same time, experience success, become ambitious and complex revealing the natural and darker side. Contemporary image Indian woman is depiction, struggles to seek justice on behalf of men or maybe even the lover, having sex in her own feminine manner, than a patriarchal and condemnatory society that wants her to act blended with dark crime, thriller (Rashmi & Sood, 2021). Tagore, (2025) stated that unlike in films, Indian OTTs has developed over time to become unafraid of social issues, taboo themes, the leading evolution in female gender representation phenomenon, threatening commercial Bollywood storylines of stereotyping, and increasing surrealist aspect of female beauty, female body in Indian celluloid fantasy, to reveal a stark reality portrayal that was suppressed. OTTs assisted in its release as an aesthetic freedom

provided by the platform without Indian censor boards (Bhutia & Rastogi, 2025). Karimpaniyil,& Koudur, (2025) found that OTT is assisting in the exploration of real female Indian life not ideal role models, deviation in personal habits, psychological experience in human sensibilities without regressive censorship and crowd-seeking approach.

Dasgupta & Roy (2021) stated that girls express their willingness to post their pictures on social media more frequently, whereas guys were more prone to share pictures and comments that they considered to be self-promotion is linked to income (Dasgupta, 2018) and showing of body assets, creating sexism in digital marketplace (Serttas et al. 2023). Normal and sexual aberrations of sex, drinking-smoking allusions are common in the projections of societal behaviour in the media (Santoniccolo et al. 2023). This conduct violates the stereotyping of gender and, on the one hand, the media creates a portrait of a commodified woman (Pirzada & Pirzada, 2025), whereas on the other hand, the domineering stable depiction of man (male chauvinism, masculinity) is marginalized (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). Teenage girls are subjects, more inclined to the open social strategy (linking, hooking) revealing aspects of an open sexual harassment (physically) reported in print media (Adhikari, & Guha, 2018), or cyberbullying (online) cases uploaded in social media reflects gratification model, women liberation induced social behaviour reporting (Oripeloye & Abimbade, 2025). Gender inequalities, are sediments within the digital Indian culture. Gowda, (2024) acknowledged that females and boys are raised differently as per traditional cultural ideals. In the conventional media, there are gender differences and portrayal of gender stereotypes just like in the internet world.

In their article Kanwar Vandana and Singh Meenakshi (2021) elucidated the gender representation in media to have an influence on how people perceive the various gender roles that society has given them. Nevertheless, the effects of the modern media platform can play the role of a transformational agent breaking the stereotypes and norms of various societal issues. The even representation of the various genders may assist in shaping a culture on gender to the viewers. The internet series establishes a discourse on female rights of equality, sexuality, and discrimination at different stages of their lives.

2.2 Academic gap:

In OTT, priority in centric plot development is paid to women, as women characters are depicted in very dignified, progressive and realistic ways. The directors and producers of OTT attempted to display the strength of a woman and depict them as a goddess or simply as ordinary people with supernatural abilities. This is what evokes male character(s), who is traditionally depicted as a hero with super powers, which is extremely lame in reality in Bollywood. The functions of feminine gender vary, these are homemaker, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a plain common girl. This may differ in terms of storyline setting women protagonist in such socio-demographic categorization as middleclass family or a wealthy family, how women can enable their intensions, choices to pursue their self-identity, walk their own paths, resolve issues, fight and win the battle of the society, however they may. The modern socio-political themes, economic abuses and the existing injustice, according to caste, creed and gender, are being produced audaciously, and with powerful plot lines. In the modern life when media and communication become the essential part of life, gender and sexuality are still at the centre of the identity, as perceived by society. The media influences gender identities to a great extent. Besides, the media also shows various images

of women and men, messages regarding their sexuality. These are examples of the character, which shape the thinking of Indian women regarding their sexuality, gender, and lifestyle. Conversely, the media has been of essence in awakening the awareness of women to their potentials as change-makers in the society. No scholarly research shows that gender portrays OTT women to the point where they engage in rape, women to cause structural challenge in investigation of cases that disrupt the male stronghold in media studies.

Research objectives:

RO1- To analyze narrative strategies and character portrayals in selected Indian OTT web series (e.g., Delhi Crime) that shape the representation of women as victims, survivors, and agents of change.

RO2- To evaluate how digital media platforms contribute to the democratization of gendered storytelling, highlighting the intersection of cultural norms, feminist discourse, and audience reception in constructing Indian womanhood.

Methodology:

The methodologies in the research are secondary data analysis, interpretation research philosophy, and inductive research. The research design will include exploratory research analysis and purposive sampling of one series of 'Delhi Crime' OTT series that focuses on purposive research sampling technique.

Results:

Episode 1 -The show begins with the rape followed by murder of a young woman in Delhi and it preconditions the investigation. Vartika Chaturvedi (Shefali Shah) of ACP assumes leadership and enlists her team to help in following up the offenders. The episode lays stress on the panic and rush in the post-incident events. The pivotal role of the story makes Indian womanhood both submissive (the victim) and orderly (the female ACP), a dual mode of building women as victims of violence and as perpetrators of justice in digital media.

Episode 2 - The cops assess the evidence, suspects with help of surveillance and intelligence. In the episode, the issues of bureaucracy and lack of resources are highlighted. The momentum comes to focus on the leadership of Vartika. The key connection occurs when foregrounding how a woman officer will resist systemic challenges, the series creates a sense of Indian womanhood as resilient enough to work through the institutions of patriarchy as it is challenged to refute the stereotypes of women being passive.

Episode 3 -The suspects are hunted in various areas, and the police are in the race against time. The story is escalated with the description of logistical headaches and emotional pressure on the crew. The critical connection represents the female in law enforcement underscores their capacity to be sensitive to emotion and professional to the extent of transforming the digital media image of women as multi-faceted leaders.

Episode 4 -The police narrow down on main suspects, culminating into confrontations and arrests. The episode is able to capture the severity of the crime and the diligence of the

detectives. It is a pivotal connection wherein Indian womanhood in uniform (police officer) is made to behave as an act of moral courage-women are not only portrayed as victims, but as agents of justice and it supports the empowerment scripts in digital storytelling.

Episode 5 -Interrogations allow seeing the disgusting truth of the offense and shaking the wome-male police team as well as viewers. Vartika has to deal with the psychological burden and still be professional-focused. The show emphasizes emotional work of women in power, as it creates Indian womanhood as sympathetic yet as strong, which is frequently stressed in the digital media representation of female leadership.

Episode 6 -The case is almost closed, and the confessions and evidence bring it together. The police team are under scrutiny and political pressure of the people. Presenting women in the publicity of their accountability, the series creates Indian womanhood as sturdy in the eyes of society, the way in which digital media constructs women as responsible and responsive role models.

Episode 7 -The case ends with the charges being brought forward, justice being served in fast track court, and Vartika revealing the ills at the system. The season is a note of truth of social changes and strength. The final creates Indian womanhood as shaping--women are shown as agents of systemic change overturning power, and one of the elements of the so called cartels of control over the system to be shattered, strengthening OTT digital media in the creation of new discourses of women empowerment and reform.

Discussion and analysis:

The demographic coverage of literature and cinema has not been extensive even though they have been instrumental in creating awareness. Critical societal issues like female foeticide, honour killing, rape as the underlying disturbing factors, ramifications and creation of collective response in the society have traditionally met slow and limited success in India, through media initiatives. Results of OTT content on Nirbhaya rape case has demonstrated women as tough female characters living with their identities in the world of patriarchy, which persists in the Indian society has been discussed previously by (Ghai, 2022). The women-oriented narratives have enabled them to paint the image of women as powerful, focusing issues and problems and serving as a place where women can narrate their stories and portray themselves as fearless, strong-willed and bold characters who defy all the gender stereotypes.

Here, the social media has objectified women in India through sexism, which has been a vivid reality in the OTT lens. The Indian environment where women have to overcome more challenges that their male counterparts in order to gain any recognition has been affected by various types of sexist advances in every field of life. It is not procedural, and is firmly embedded within the attitudes held by those who hold power in family, in institutions (which are mostly men), a larger reluctance of the society to accommodate women, women receiving justice that the formal society disregards. There is the cultural stereotyped gender roles that determine the behaviour of women, their roles in the society and goals, which are in most cases, an insurmountable obstacle. Findings showed that traditional Bollywood, print media of the past have made Indian women shun a career in sports, entrepreneurship due to victimization of roles, domestic violence in the media (George, 2023). Their

marginalization was habitually reinforced through suppression with sexual act that curtails women rights, existence in the society in India and is displayed in the Bollywood Hindi films of the past. OTTs on the contrary showed new boundaries raised, social standards requiring Indian women not to conform and live as passive creatures. They embody not only perform domestic duties, against the unfavourable environment, act as superwoman in society, replying to those who can break these standards at the societal level were reflected OTTs. Nevertheless, the gender behavioural change in women, as captured in the narrative produced the psychological effects of such marginalisation of victims, which was tentatively examined in the OTTs exposing the men (Gupta, 2023). The psychological conflict of female gender, within the context of patriarchal forces of the Indian society, is symbolic as far as the victim of rape is concerned, in a storyline of rape, in which the protagonist attempts to negotiate with the outer forces, the norms, judgmental force. Nevertheless, OTT representation attempt to change and dismantle her sense of identity, based on vile defence and struggle to bring justice against male toxicity (Makhanya, 2023), which has traditionally been depicted as feeble, in terms of rape portrayal in Bollywood movies in India.

Connecting the 'feminist media theory', which revolves around women representation in the media and its ways of reflecting the power relations, the gender roles and traditional stereotypes, the OTT showed in question revolves around the complex relationship between media representation, production, and consumption, and how those aspects are affected by and, in turn, affect the gender dynamics and power structure. Second theory is the 'intersectional theory', in OTT which depicted intersections of gender (not female, or male but third gender storyline), socio-economic class (throughout societal fabric) and geographic locations (urban-rural). These led to alternative attitude to the female gender characterisation, subjected to such invasive and humiliating tests emphasizes the general cynical view of female athleticism in society, employing taboo words/activities. This kind of gender marginalisation being eliminated in OTT which is a confirmation of a practice is not an infringement of personal dignity, but it is the presentation of the truth and validity of the repression of women in Indian society. It is recreating a story that they need to prove their success by not through discriminatory patriarchal prism of visual media.

The comparative terrain of the Indian OTT platforms has also continued to pre-empt the stories of ladies experiences especially those concerning violence, strength, and empowerment. The case of vicious Nirbhaya rape in New Delhi (2019) that is dramatized in 'Delhi Crime' OTT is a typical example of violence against women, where male violence is inherently condoned by the system and the Indian law enforcement in general is opposed by the leadership of a female ACP, Vartika. Likewise, Made in Heaven, another OTT dwells on the frauds of the Indian high society, in which such problems as marital rape and gendered oppression are embedded in the discourse of weddings, revealing the way patriarchy lives under the glamour. The film Bombay Begums describes the women bargaining on power, sexuality, and vulnerability in the business and personal spheres, emphasizing the sexual harassment, exploitation, and female silence. The trend indicates that the OTT series are triggering an audience and are developing a new image of the Indian womanhood in online media where diverse issues, multifaceted and multidimensional dimensions are forming sharply, revealing various facets of the contextual event in Indian society. The Indian women are depicted as survivors of horrendous crimes which are deliberate, they are also the confronts the patriarchal values of Indian society, and change agents. The demonstration

of rape is a daring representation of gendered violence, which has been changed in the Indian celluloid, in the wider socio-cultural, medico-legal settings. The OTT platforms did not only focus on the factual depiction of the gender of women against realities but also rewrote the new Indian womanhood as it is portrayed with visual media through their constant struggle, resistance, and empowerment.

Conclusion:

The film Delhi Crime (2019) is a strong synthesis of gender and power in Indian OTT storytelling. The series creates the Indian womanhood as authoritative and vulnerable by contrasting the barbaric rape of Nirbhaya with the relentless drive to deliver justice by ACP Vartika. Women are portrayed as both victims of systemic violence and law enforcers, thus resilient and empowering. This two-sided presentation women as rape victim versus women in police, emphasized the restructuring of India, gender patterns control in society, its portrayal in digital media, as both women are not only subjects of oppressive processes male dominance, but also agents of justice and societal change. Nevertheless, the authority of position is an attestation, which enables female police officer to identify loopholes in male dominated societal organisations, justice systems, which shatters societal stereotyping. Female gender has been portrayed as more of 'doing gender' in the context of gender socialisation, doing things right for social issues. Exclusions of female gender in social oppression, social atrocities portrayed females as sexual minority, weaker and powerless have found OTT as a platform to vocalised narratives to audience breaking feminine roles and stereotypes.