



Illustration of the Female Cast in Indian Web Series - with Special Reference to MAI and Dabba Cartel

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Abstract: *With the increased accessibility of smartphones and high-speed 4G and 5G internet networks in almost all places in India, the content consumption has seen massive progress, and so is the concept of binge-watching content at one's suitable time and place, without any disturbance from frequent ads. This has led to increased demand for various content genres, with the audience producing and consuming content alike. A significant change is observed in the depiction of female actresses, with strong, progressive, and intricate storylines that have received critical acclaim from women audiences and are acting as a counterincentive to leave a positive impact on society in general. This study has opted for a qualitative discourse analysis of the two Netflix series, and it has been found that, although Bollywood has done a commendable job of showcasing the nuances of each character, it has still failed to create something completely free of gender bias and stereotypes. With the expansion of digital spaces (the pandemic acting as a catalyst as the whole world came to a standstill), creative freedom was made available to women, thereby increasing the scope of experimentation with women's roles. This led to empowerment in the roles assigned to women. For this study, two web series have been selected for analysis of their female characters. While one has shown compelling, layered narratives, the other has depicted something called "controlled representation," in which typical gender norms were needed between the agency and resilience of the female characters. There is not an iota of doubt that the women protagonists play strong, progressive roles. However, it is still in an evolving stage, as there is still a long way to go toward full inclusivity in women's representation, free of gender stereotypes.*

Keywords: Agency, Female-driven, Nuanced, Nemesis, Empowerment

Abbreviations

OTT – Over the Top

I. INTRODUCTION

Like the mainstream women-centric movies, even the female illustrations in the OTT space have gained enormous momentum in the 21st century, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It has gained popularity to the extent that several noteworthy women-centric series have been produced, in which the female lead has a strong narrative arc and her own agency. And turns out that even the female audience has accepted it.

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wholeheartedly and is encouraging more such strong storylines and narratives to break down the clichés that were and still are reinforced in many forms. The rise of several OTT platforms has led to greater diversity in representation. Though some stereotypes persist, the female characters are portrayed as strong protagonists, with roles that share characteristics with those of typical male heroes in the series. The female protagonists have complex, nuanced, and compelling storylines, which make the overall content more inclusive and diverse. With the rise of several OTT platforms in India, many feminist storylines have been developed, and they have received widespread acclaim from audiences alike. The element of the female gaze is present in some noteworthy series, which has also increased their fandom and popularity among viewers. With media and technological advancements advancing at a rapid pace, cross-cultural networks and communications across national boundaries have increased, thereby driving massive fandom and popularity in the digital space. This has enabled makers and producers to explore and experiment with concepts and ideas that Bollywood has never explored, without budget constraints, thereby signifying diversity and inclusivity across all genres. With the advent of digital platforms, the female cast in web series and films has undergone major changes, ditching traditional gender stereotypes and regressive clichés, and showcasing progressive storylines with strong female agency.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Given below are some related literature works that are reviewed to gain knowledge on the topic conducted for this study: -

- Vaishnav V.S., in her research paper "Portrayal of Female Identity in Digital Media: An Investigation Based on Selected Indian Web Series, have discussed that OTT platforms provide creative freedom as there is less censorship [1]. Due to its limited scope, the researcher has chosen a few Bollywood web series that portray women as strong, empowering, and independent protagonists with intricate, compelling narratives, discarding traditional, idealistic narratives [1]. To conduct her study, she has chosen textual discourse analysis as her research methodology [1]. Her findings include that feminist discourse is gradually being normalised within the Indian diaspora and is no longer a "western" concept [1]. It has paved the way in breaking stigmas and stereotypes surrounding women, and even the audience is accepting progressive gender narratives [1].
- Dr. Ankit Ghildiyal and Dr. Sudhashu Jayaswal in their research paper, "Media Representation Of Women's With Respect To Ott Platforms In India", have discussed that given the surge of OTT platforms accessibility all

over in India, there has been an increase in women-driven storylines and narratives, which has increased its popularity among the audience as a significant chunk of OTT users are women [2]. It has shown a major shift in the way stereotypes are broken [2]. Even though OTT content is progressive, it still lags in portraying gender equality in leadership roles and in decision-making scenes [2]. The writers also discuss various regulations governing OTT, such as an ethical code for content, age-based classification, and a three-tier grievance redressal system [2]. The popularity of digital spaces has given rise to creative spaces and experimentation with diverse storytelling, and the writers conclude that it is still in an evolving stage, with some stereotypes persisting [2].

- Sneha Singh in her research paper “The Stereotypical Portrayal of Female Characters on OTT Platforms in India: Interrogating the Intersectional Dialectics of Power, Prejudice and Patriarchy in the Construction of Convenient Boxes as Symbols of Gender Identity” has discussed that in today’s time and zone, women characters are represented in such a way that women are depicted in a way that showcases a new label of stereotypes which the female protagonist conforms to [3]. The researcher has chosen her methodology, which includes discourse/textual analysis of selected female-centric movies and series, as well as male-centric series, in which she has conducted analyses of female leads [3]. She emphasises how past physical abuse and mental trauma have been used as tropes to build the female character as strong and empowered [3]. It has highlighted the intersectional aspect in which only upper-class women are portrayed, while other sections are marginalised [3]. It argues that OTT portrays commodified feminism as it continues with the traditional media, with the reinforcement of gender stereotypes [3]. It highlights the male-dominated production setups, which make OTT spaces not exactly liberating spaces for female visibility [3].
- Dr. Chitra Tanwar, in her research paper titled “The Portrayal of Women’s Empowerment on OTT Platforms: A Study of the Netflix series Delhi Crime”, discussed women’s empowerment with real issues and scenarios [4]. The OTT platforms have compelling female-driven narratives and depict strong female agency and leadership [4]. The researcher has chosen the series Delhi Crime as her case study, and her methodology is content analysis [4]. It argues that the series has portrayed the female protagonist in a positive, strong light and has portrayed the women characters in Delhi Crime exceptionally [4]. It has portrayed progression, empowerment, and strong willpower in a male-dominated police force [4].
- Ms. Swati Agarwal and Ms. Moumita De Das in their paper “Indian Web Series - Revolutionising The Portrayal Of Indian Women In Mainstream Media” discusses that the with the coming up of various OTT platforms and its popularity amongst the younger audience especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, the representation of women has significant progress, ditching away the typical ‘Saas-Bahu’ saga and embracing storylines that encourage progressive, independent and leadership roles[5]. The writers have employed a quantitative methodology, including a Google

Forms survey and secondary information, to analyse the audience’s perspectives on the changing depiction of the female cast in more compelling and complex narratives and plots [5]. The findings indicate that the audience prefers web series over television, as greater experimentation with women characters is observed [5]. Ditching the typical mainstream Bollywood movies, the web series culture has shown a more progressive mindset in its representation of women in diverse roles [5]. It concludes by arguing that, although strong female portrayals are shown, it is not fully inclusive, as all social groups are not equally represented [5].

- Shalini Prasad and Dr Rahul Amin, in their paper titled “Portrayal of women in web series: A study of viewers’ perspective”, examine how the female cast has been portrayed in the digital platforms and how the audience has perceived it [6]. It argued that content censorship should be addressed more effectively and that web series realistically depict gender dynamics [6]. Compared to mainstream film and television, the female cast is more empowered in series and has helped inculcate the concept of the female gaze, encompassing emotional, mental, and sexual agency [6]. It also argues that gender stereotypes are still being reinforced, and this shows dual representation of women in OTT platforms [6]. It concludes that although strong, progressive women’s representation is evolving, it remains problematic because stereotypes are not fully eliminated [6].
- Aastha Tiwari, in her paper “Portrayal of Women on OTT: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Content Released From 2017-2022”, discussed the portrayal of women characters in select films and series using the critical discourse method [7]. The researcher found that OTT spaces are transformative platforms where realistic and diverse representations of women are seen [7]. The paper found that in the selected works, some female characters were portrayed as strong, progressive, and less dependent on their husbands. In contrast, some were portrayed in realistic societal settings, focusing solely on her life and personality, while others had less screen time and dialogue and no proper storyline of her own, except as the male lead’s emotional support [7]. Even though representation has expanded on OTT platforms, it is not fully progressive, as stereotypical gender norms define women’s identity relationally rather than in terms of their own agency [7]. The researcher concluded that although the Bollywood industry has produced strong female-centred narratives, it still produces content in which women have negligible screen time and limited agency [7].

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this study include observing and analysing the representation of the female protagonist(s) in Indian web series, and studying whether the character arcs of the female protagonist and the cast are diverse, with particular attention to ongoing feminist movements, feminist ideology, and goals.





IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this study involves textual analysis of two selected Indian web series, namely, *Mai: A Mother's Rage* and *Dabba Cartel*. It falls under the category of Qualitative research methodology. The discourse analysis involves close observation of the female characters of the series (Descriptive analysis), their interactions with the other cast (conversation analysis), and the comparison of the female cast with feminist views and ideology (interpretive analysis). The sample size is 6 (episodes) for the *Mai* series and 7 (episodes) for the *Dabba Cartel*. The total duration for *Mai* is 284 minutes (4 hours 44 minutes), and for *Dabba Cartel* it is 334 minutes (5 hours 34 minutes).

V. OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

Mai is a 2022 Netflix-released Hindi-language thriller drama series starring Sakshi Tanwar as Sheel, Wamiqa Gabbi as Supriya, Seema Pahwa as Kalpana, and Raima Sen as Neelam. This series is about how a grieving mother goes to extreme lengths to avenge the tragic death of her speech disabled daughter, who was a practising doctor. It has been exceptionally portrayed how far a mother can go and get her hands dirty to figure out the real cause behind her daughter's murder and the ones who have caused her death. It has an impressive male cast, including Anant Vidhaat Sharma as Prashant, Vaibhav Raj Gupta as Shankar, Prashant Narayanan as Jawahar Vyas, and Vivek Mushran as Yash. The female cast has done a fantastic job and is in the foreground of the series.

- The character of Sheel is that of a transformative and deeply complex character as seen throughout the 6-episode series. In the beginning, Sheel is shown to be a devoted wife, a gentle and dedicated mother, and a woman whose contributions and daily hard work go overlooked and undervalued. She is also a caring nurse at a senior citizens' home whose dream was to become a doctor. But after she witnesses the tragic death of her daughter in front of her eyes, she undergoes emotional and mental shock and an alteration of nature, that is, from meek and submissive to a morally grey and resourceful protagonist. To bring out the truth, she was more than willing to get her hands dirty and overcome external threats and internal pressure from her own family. She refused to be subdued and dismissed by her own family and society. Her emphatic nature is also seen when she tends to the ones who have been indirectly involved in her daughter's murder. Her empathetic nature is also exploited by her own family when she is forcefully required to give consent to her son being adopted by a relative. As the series progresses, Sheel is seen to be more than ready to undertake risks and face dangers tactfully, which gradually blurs the lines between right and wrong. Even after knowing that, in some way or another, her daughter Supriya had been drawn into the criminal underworld, she adapts quickly, showcasing emotional intelligence, diplomatic skills, and the ability to outsmart powerful rivals. What drove her to this extent was also her emotional distance and lack of understanding of her daughter. Thus, her character arc shows her as a nuanced, deeply layered, and intricate figure whose transformation

takes an emotional and psychological toll on her and her immediate family, making her a driven nemesis, overcome by rage and grief.

- The character of Supriya, a mute practising doctor and the daughter of Sheel and Yash, is brave, empathetic, independent and showcases zero tolerance to corruption and wrongful deeds and practices. When she was forced to get her hands dirty with ill-got money, instead of being greedy and remaining silent, she chose to donate it to social welfare, thereby portraying her moral uprightness. Being independent, she maintains her own apartment and makes major life decisions, which shows her independent mindset that her mother deeply respects. Her character is central to the narrative as her tragic death becomes the turning point in the series, which leads to her mother's transformation from a mild, nurturing caretaker to a revenge-driven vigilante. Though her character is shown as independent, she still has to face prejudice and societal judgments due to her disability and romantic relationship with a Muslim man. Her relationship with her mother is deeply complex and rich, as her mother's emotional vulnerability is shown when she sets out to avenge her daughter's death, even if it means getting her hands dirty and being a direct participant in corruption to get the truth behind her death. Thus, her character sets the tone and plot of the series and also drives the narrative of the future developments.
- The character of Kalpana is that of a supportive one, which is complex and whose personal life history shapes the emotional landscape of the series. Throughout the series, she is seen to be an occasional helper and a true ally to Sheel. She is depicted as a realistic and resilient woman who has learned to survive harsh surroundings. She has been a victim of an abusive marriage, and this gives the viewers a hint as to why she has built a tough exterior. Since she is not always in the forefront, her conversion to a criminal is not shown in detail, leaving gaps in her character for future developments. To cope with her vulnerability and inner pain, she builds a complex persona on the outside, making her a morally ambiguous figure in the series. Her character arc is complex and compelling, with a layered representation that depicts the blurred lines between helplessness and practicality.
- The character of Neelam is that of the antagonist of the series. Her linkage to the medical corruption syndicate has arisen from her marginal beginning, that is, she is said to have been a sex worker, and to make ends meet, she has been associated with the world of scams and crime. The noteworthy fact about her character is that her antagonistic arc differs from traditional male villain arcs. Her calculated moves and strategic approaches to maintain her position as the gang leader show her established agency. She shows her strength through subtle moves and shrewdness. Her resilience, tough ambition, and determination have earned her a position in the criminal gang, where she can exercise significant power and authority. Her relationship with Sheel is central as it drives the narrative. The similarity

between the two is that they both change when they face threats and tragedy, confronting and questioning their own worlds and morality. As the plot delves deeper, Sheel becomes sure of Neelam's direct involvement in Supriya's orchestrated death, and thus, the rivalry and Sheel's quest for vengeance are solidified. She meets her untimely demise at the climax when Sheel poisons her asthma pump before she can give her testimony to the police about the entire medical scam. What makes her character different in the series is her slow-burning approach and her refusal to follow typical male crime tropes. Her character is a symbol of both adversity and authorisation, making her a self-made, nuanced, and compelling figure.

Dabba Cartel is a 2025 Netflix-released Hindi-language crime drama series that stars Shabana Azmi as Sheila, Shalini Pandey as Raji, Nimisha Sajayan as Mala, Jyothika as Varuna, Anjali Anand as Shahida, Lillite Dubey as Moushumi, and Sai Tamhankar as SI Preeti. This series is about how, under the guise of a business involving tiffin (Dabba) delivery to various places, various types of drugs are distributed in the market. Supplying and distributing drugs within a stipulated time in the market involves myriad dangers and challenges, and the major challenge is that the identity remains anonymous during the entire process of supply and distribution, as well as the safe transaction of huge amounts of money between the dealers and suppliers. All of this has been beautifully portrayed in this series, and the entire female cast has done a remarkable job. Initially what started as a simple food delivery business handled by Raji and Mala (house help of Raji), due to an initial blackmail from Mala's boyfriend Santosh with an inappropriate video of Mala to deliver weed secretly with the tiffin deliveries along with a 5% cut, in the next episode we find Shahida, a junior broker agent has joined to distribute Molly, a superior quality drug in the market with a 20% cut, provided that Santosh deletes the video he has got of Mala. From the 3rd episode onward, we see Varuna joining the team to revive her clothing enterprise, Sitara, which was on the verge of going out of business. Even Sheila joins the team in full swing when she gets a whiff that her daughter-in-law, Raji, might be up to something. As the series progresses, we find that Sheila is a seasoned veteran of the underworld, who at one point was actively involved with drug dealing and was forced to leave Mumbai to start anew. Even though this series has a strong male cast, including Jisshu Sengupta, Gajraj Rao, Bhupendra Jadawat, Santanu Ghatak, Sandesh Kulkarni, and Sunil Grover, the female cast is in the foreground. In contrast, the male cast is in the background.

- The character of Raji, a small-town Marathi girl, the wife of Hari (Jadawat) and daughter-in-law of Sheila, is a meek yet assiduous housewife who runs a food delivery service along with Mala, to earn money to support her husband's dream of shifting to Germany. She is portrayed as someone who possesses virtue and truth, and as someone whose hard work, contributions, and support are overlooked by her husband. In the first episode, it is revealed that she secretly sells vitality pills alongside the food, but she upholds her moral standards, stating that she is assisting people in need of them. Throughout the series, she oscillates between guilt and necessity. As the plot delves deeper, Raji faces obstacles, dangers, moral

compromises, and an emotional toll as the stakes of her double life heighten. In the last episode, the audience is shown a contrasting behaviour of a then heavily pregnant Raji, who is given an extremely tough choice to save her family from the looming dangers as a result of the drug cartel, thus battling her inner moral conscience and culminating in an act of violence. Even her relationships with the team's comrades are layered; her association with Mala is fundamental: what started as support ultimately became shared guilt, sorrow, and necessity. Her relationship with Sheila was initially that of a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, but later Sheila became a guide to her, who was surrounded by the drug cartel. In conclusion, Raji personifies the everyday woman who is forced to make extreme choices amid internal and external pressures, and as a result, the lines between right and wrong blur.

- The character of Mala, the house help of Raji, is a resilient, strong-willed and fiercely protective of her only daughter. She is seen to be facing gender oppressions and marginalization from the elite strata of society (in this case, Varuna) and from this issue of her belonging to lower background, stems her strong determination to make her ground and identity strong and provide a stable and big future to her daughter. Basically, her poor economic condition and her being a woman have compelled her to get involved in the drug business and get her hands dirty at the same time. In the first episode, her helplessness is clearly depicted when her so-called boyfriend blackmails her with an erotic video of her in exchange for selling weed secretly (even without the knowledge of Raji) inside the tiffin boxes, thus taking advantage of her dire circumstances. She has a complex narrative to her character: as a strong-willed woman and a hope for a better future for her daughter, she refuses to be suppressed and discriminated against. Her inner strength is so strong that she stands for herself and her daughter against society. It is not that she joins the cartel team (or, rather, is the catalyst for the whole team) out of greed or ambition, but rather out of survival and desperation.
- The character of Shahida, a junior broker, is a dynamic and practical one who prioritises emotions less in the entire series. Initially, she was portrayed as a normal real estate agent who rents out a place to Raji and Mala to help run their food delivery service smoothly. But when her first two customers (Raji and Mala) got unwillingly involved in the trafficking of drugs, she, without any ifs and buts, got into the game, with the intention of improving her economic condition and lifestyle. Throughout the series, she has given her loyalty to the team by doing the needful as and when the situation arises. She also has a layer to her character that is quite progressive, given the judgmental society. She is romantically interested in SI Preeti of Thane, thus showing the complexity of her character. As the plot thickens, she is shown to be juggling two lives: that of a broker and of a cartel member. She is a contrast to other team members in that she is less sentimental and



more willing to seize opportunities for personal profit. She has the mindset of crossing the threshold of being morally virtuous and is open to accepting and facing the impending dangers which a drug racket involves. At the end of the series, her character had a more complex arc than ever: her romantic interests, criminal activities, and her previous job life gave her a pivotal role in the future developments.

- The character of Varuna is multi-layered, as she is seen struggling between. Traditional societal expectations, personal ambitions, and career. She is an intelligent and ambitious woman and was previously the head of a pharmaceutical company called Vivalife. After her marriage to Shankar (played by Sengupta) and the birth of a child, her personal choices seem to have taken a back seat. Even though she belongs to the upper strata of society, she is seen as facing identity issues that signal the universal woman's struggles across classes. Because of her husband's dominating behaviour and his taking her life decisions instead of her, their marriage is on the rocks. After her child is born, she runs a clothing boutique named Sitara, but it is facing a financial crisis. So out of her helplessness, she joins the clandestine cartel group to secure money to save Sitara from going under. As the series progresses, she is seen bonding with women from all walks of life, irrespective of class or background, but facing parallel forms of oppression. Thus, her character becomes a powerful and nuanced representation of the obstacles women face today, fostering empathy and understanding for other women and adding depth to her arc.
- The character of Sheila is very complex and intricate, with various layers. At the start, she is portrayed as Hari's mother and Raji's mother-in-law, but she has little screen time or dialogue. But from the 2nd episode, her past life and dark story begin to unfold. She got the hunch from the beginning of the 2nd episode that her daughter-in-law was up to something, given her strong intuition and sense. Throughout the rest of the series, she has significant involvement with the cartel, thus solidifying her character arc. She becomes the guide and the main leader who takes dangerous decisions and stands face-to-face with Chavan, who kidnapped Raji for secret drug distributions. She is resilient, strong-willed, and shrewd, who enjoys the thrill of the dangers and powers of the underworld and has prior experience of it, having been closely associated with a fictitious, powerful underworld gangster named Sultan Mirza. On the outside, she adorns the traditional domestic life of a family matriarch. Still, on the inside, she craves mafia adventures and a thrill-filled life, as that is where she created an identity for herself, in stark contrast to the oppressive patriarchal Indian society. Just for reliving her old life once again, she lures, rather uses, the other women of the gang to continue with the drug trafficking, under the pretext of requiring financial stability for survival and a better future. Her main flaw was that she never cared about the dangers that loomed around the lives of the other women of the group, and ethical lapses, and this arc makes her an "Anti-hero, instead of an idealised figure. Her inner life, filled with suppressed desires and uncontrolled yearnings, was catalysed in the remainder of the series,

giving depth to her character arc and thus offering a refined representation.

- The character of Moushami is deeply heartrending as it has got shades of loyalty, emotions and sacrifice to its core. In the first few episodes, we see her as a staunch, loyal friend and associate of Sheila, who also has a thrill and passion for underworld activities and adventures, and has been closely associated with the infamous mafia kingpin Sultan Mirza, just like Sheila. But unlike Sheila, she now wants to move far away from the unstable, dangerous lifestyle and lead a quieter, more peaceful, and more anonymous life, out of sight of the world. But as a twist of fate, due to her old established contacts and wisdom along with her loyalty, she is once again pulled back into the old life of drug trafficking by none other than Sheila for her own reasons. In the entire series, we see her as a character who has made immense sacrifices, like giving up her own son Hari to Sheila so that he doesn't have to suffer because of her past lifestyle and giving up her dear life in the end of the series to save the other cartel members from their personal loss as ordered by Chacko (played by Grover), an infamous drug lord, as she was secretly distributing drugs made by the cartel gang and not the ones given by Chacko. Thus, her character arc culminates in a sad ultimatum that signifies one cannot escape one's past, and that, in this case, her inability to escape her past life brought her ultimate downfall. This arc of her tragic ending gave birth to new emotional dimensions and an avenging story arc in the series' future developments.
- The character of SI Preeti is that of a fiery, courageous, resourceful, tenacious and street-smart police officer who is hell-bent on getting herself a promotion in the police force and proving herself in the male-dominated field. Although she is not directly linked with the cartel gang, she is assigned a high-profile case of detecting the source of illegal selling of banned drugs of a pharmaceutical company named Vivalife, linked with the cartel drug trafficking, along with a veteran drug inspector, Ajay Pathak. Her character arc also has a personal dimension, as she is romantically interested in Shahida, the only queer woman in the gang, thus adding to the emotional complexity. Her constant struggle to find her own agency and respect in a field designed for men showcases her resilience and refusal to be subjugated by her superiors and other male colleagues. It serves as inspiration for all the women out there that not only economic independence but also a self-built identity is required to stand out against gender marginalisation in the workplace. Her characters depict the pragmatic challenges that women professionals face daily, such as sexism and invisibilization across all sectors.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study has conducted an in-depth observation and analysis of female characters in two select web series. It can be said that though the characters have different shades and angles, there is a deeply ingrained presence of gender



stereotypes which women, even in the 21st century, have to deal with. Tropes that were at one point considered taboo by Bollywood, like same-sex attraction, are now represented and centred around the female protagonists and supporting characters, which shows progressiveness. The Hindi film industry, which has long considered and represented women as virtuous and upholding moral values, is shown as willing and able to step outside moral boundaries and get their hands dirty to fight evil and uncover the truth. So, a complex, multi-layered characterisation of different shades is evident in each character, making the series as a whole both enriching and entertaining, and, no doubt, modern and progressive.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

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