

INDIAN WEB SERIES AND GENDER ROLE REVERSAL: MEDIA AND FEMINISM PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

Digitalization has brought free Wi-Fi and internet connections with it. This free internet has led to the uprising of the web series in India. Indian web series have grown to become one of the best sources of entertainment and inspiration, with the advent of Netflix and Amazon Prime. Series like Sacred Game, Mirzapur, Permanent Roommates, etc have not only kept the Indian audiences in edges but have also garnered a strong fan base outside India.

As it is seen, the web series are being able to provide a strong and stable platform for the upcoming talents as well as to the legendary actors of Indian cinema and television industry. Ground breaking acting of actors like Pankaj Tripathi, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Saif Ali Khan, Radhika Apte, Sumeet Vyas, Ali Fazal, Vikrant Massey in various series have come as a breath of fresh air in the world of highly dramatised Indian serials. These web series have also been able to give a stable platform to the female characters by providing the female actors with strong thought provoking roles and a freedom to explore the various aspects of acting and not just being portrayed as an object for male gaze (as referred to by Laura Mulvey)¹ or as a piece of entertainment. Female characters in web series have meaty roles and their agenda is not only to look sexy on the screen but to be represented as a headstrong personality making bold decisions. The characters of Radhika Apte, Neha Dhupia and Kiara Adwani in lust stories, Swara Bhaskar in its not that simple, Sayani Gupta, Bani J, Kriti Kulhari and Maanvi Gagroo in Four more shots are some of the remarkable roles in the Indian web series.

Though the question arises that are these web series reversing the gender role completely? Are these web series in representing female characters as bold women are trying to establish that a woman who drinks, smokes, uses men for entertainment and bullies men are the ones who are able to reach success and feel empowerment? This research paper is an attempt to

¹Laura Mulvey coined the term male gaze, as a way of seeing women and the world, the sexual pleasure derived from looking at someone or something.

understand that are these series selling gender role reversal in the name of feministic freedom?

2. Objectives

- i) To understand whether the Indian web series are selling gender role reversal in the name of feministic freedom.
- ii) To study the female characters and understand whether in creating strong women role models are these series encouraging them to adopt unconventional behaviour?
- iii) To evaluate the elements in the Indian web series that upholds feministic freedom and also to evaluate the gender role reversal shown to justify unethical behaviour.

3. Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that these series in order to establish empowered female characters, project them similar to their toxic male counterparts by objectifying their behaviour and actions.

4. Significance of the Study

The topic is relevant in the present day, as the web series in India has grown in demand in the recent past, from 2015 till now it has increased amount of shows releasing every year and also the number of fan base is growing steadily within the country as well as outside India. The young generation of today have a fast pacing life style and so they want their entertainment to be fast paced as well. These web series consist of a few episodes which can keep the young generation hooked on to it. Most of these series have 6 to 7 episode per season, though it may vary from one series to the other, but it does not keep elongating the show for years at length only to garner TRP. Shows like *Kiyu Ki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Sasural Simar Ka*, *Yeh Rishta Kiya Kehlata Hai*, etc are some of those Indian serials that had nearly 2000 to 3000 episodes, garnering huge TRP by running for years after years.

These series represents the new age modern India and the growth of gender equation in India, which is again something that the younger generation can relate to. Shows like *Girl in the City* explores the story of a girl dealing the ups and down of life in a new city, which is something every person who has relocated in a new city for their studies, job, etc can relate to.

This study has a potential in the present times as people watching these web series can relate to them. Thus this study is an attempt to understand the varying dynamics of gender role reversal in the present age and the role played by web series in projecting it.

5. Statement of the problem

These web series are able to uphold women/female characters by presenting them in strong and bold roles and not objectifying them like mainstream television shows and cinema, as the damsel in distress. But in doing so they have also been portraying them as more manly in nature, while suppressing their feministic ideals and values, like in the series *Four More Shots* there is a scene where all the four female leads vandalize the bar they frequent, just for fun and also to get the attention of the bartender. So the question arises whether these web series implies that for a woman to be empowered and get her freedom, she has to leave her female side and adopt various unethical ways like drinking and getting into fights, using men for sexual pleasure, etc. in order to present herself equal to her male counterpart.

6. Area of study

Three trending Indian web series on various platforms like Netflix, Amazon prime and Voot, with female protagonists are taken as the area for the present study. Shows like '*It's not that simple*' (An urban housewife is stuck in an unhappy marriage, until she's invited for a school reunion and meets two of her ex-almost-boyfriends), '*Four more shots please*' (Inspired from Sex and the City, the series depicts how four friends, living in India, struggle to find career success, love and orgasms), '*Lust stories*' (The story aims to break a stereotype revolving around Indian women and their physical pleasures and plunges to set a new normal), are the three web series that are being taken as the subject for study, as these three series have been trending and redefining the role of female characters in India in the last few years.

7. Methodology

The study for the research paper was Qualitative in nature. Detailed study of the three selected web series '*Lust stories*', '*Four more shots please*' and '*It's not that simple*' on platforms like Netflix, Amazon prime and Voot respectively, with female protagonists in the lead formulated the primary data for the study.

Other relative findings through various newspapers, journals, books, websites, digital publications, etc. have formulated the secondary data for the study.

8. Conceptual Framework

Web Series: Web series are series of scripted and non-scripted videos, which are generally in episodic form, released on the Internet and are a part of the web television medium. It first emerged in the late 1990s and became more prominent in the early 2000s.

Female Protagonist: Female protagonists are the lead female character of a film, around whom the whole story revolves.

Role Reversal: A situation in which someone adopts a role the reverse of that they normally assumes in relation to someone else.

9. Analysis of Data

It's not that simple: the series featuring Swara Bhaskar, Vivan Bhatena, Akshay Oberoi and Karanveer Mehra, revolves around a woman and her stand on marriage and love. This series is written by Charudutt Acharya and directed by Darish Aslam, which streams on the Voot app.

The story revolves around Meera (Swara Bhaskar) as the busy mom and unhappy wife, who longs to be appreciated and respected. In this messy situation she gets invited to her school reunion which along with memories also brings back the lost Meera who begins to question as to what makes her happy.

Four more shots: It is an Amazon Prime Video web series directed by Anu Menon, starring Sayani Gupta, Bani J, Kirti Kulhari and Maanvi Gagroo.

The story of series is based on the flawed lives of four women who are in their mid 30s and early 20s as they fall in and out of love making mistakes and rediscovering their friendship along with tequila shots in millennial Mumbai.

Lust stories: Lust Stories is a sequel to the anthology film *Bombay Talkies*, consisting of segments of four short film directed by Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, and Karan Johar and it is co-produced by Ronnie Screwvala and Ashi Dua.

Anurag Kashyap's short film is about Kalindi (Radhika Apte), who is a college professor, inspired by her husband's adventurous stories of love and numerous short-term relationships; she embarks on a mission to explore her own sexuality.

Zoya Akhtar's short film is about Sudha (Bhumi Pednekar), who is a maid at Ajit's (Neil Bhoopalam) house, secretly involved in a passionate sexual relationship, but as Ajit's parents arrive to stay with him for a few days he starts ignoring her. Sudha learns that Ajit's family has finalized his marriage and Sudha though heartbroken resumes her normal routine as the maid.

Dibakar Banerjee's short film is about Reena (Manisha Koirala), a banker, wife and mother, has an extra-marital affair with her husband's best friend Sudhir (Jaideep Ahlawat) for 3 years. When Salman (Sanjay Kapoor) her husband relays to Sudhir that he suspects Reena is cheating on him, she reveals to him that she is having an affair with Sudhir, and Salman breaks down, asking her to stay with him for the sake of their children. Finally she leaves with her husband, asking Sudhir not to meet her again.

Karan Johar's short film is about Megha (Kiara Advani) who is married to Paras (Vicky Kaushal), discovers that during sex he is not aware of her dissatisfaction. His family believes that the only pleasure that a woman desires is to bear children. Megha decides on using a vibrator for sexual pleasure but eventually climaxes into an orgasm as her in-laws witness it in shock.

10. Observation

- These series have mainly focused on the want and desires of a woman and how being a woman must not stop her from exploring their sexuality, but in doing so it has encouraged the fact of women having extra marital affairs is justified. Though adultery is not a crime anymore but it is something which is looked down upon even when done by a man.
- Drinking is the choice of a person and the question here is not about whether women should drink or not but the question here is whether drinking and abusing and also vandalising personal/public property and putting lives at risk makes a woman equal to a man. All the three selected series have shown women doing unruly behaviour and putting lives at risk after getting wasted, like the scene in *Four more shots* where the four girls break the sign of the bar they frequent to irk

the bartender or the scene where Kirti Kulhari's character drives her girl to the hospital in inhibited condition as she does not want to rely on her ex-husband or his muse to do the same and finally ends up in an accident, the scene in *It's not that simple* where Sameer's wife vandalizes the whole kitchen in her agitation with her husband.

- Another prominent element in the selected series is that most men in these series are shown as helpless folks who are at the mercy of the female protagonists, as their lives take a drastic turn by the steps taken by these women. Like in *Lust stories* Kaliyani gets intimate with one of her student and in the final scene he confesses that he loves her and she should stay with him, to which she replies that is he mad as she is a married women, again in the same series though Reena cheats on her husband with his best friend, he begs her to stay with him and also asks her not to reveal to his friend that he knows about their illicit relationship. Similarly in *It's not that simple* Meera's husband even after knowing that she has cheated on him Google out ways to get his wandered wife back. In the same series Sameer is at the mercy of his wife, who is okay with him having an extra marital affair as she had been unfaithful too, but she insists on staying married to him and he is shown to helplessly accept it.
- The usage of cuss words by the lead female characters is shown as a symbol of being equal to men, but abusive language does not make a woman empowered and give them status equal to their male counterpart. Instead it showcases their uncultured behaviour and using abusive cuss words on the name of mother, sister or female body parts marks them as disrespectful towards their own femininity.
- Stalking is unethical in any relationship be it a life-long commitment or a passing fling. Radhika Apte's character in *Lust stories* is shown stalking the student she has sex with, to confirm if he is lying to her by having relationship with some other girl, while she herself is married to a person named Mihir. She is shown confessing at the beginning of the series that boys/men tend to get obsessed with their partner ones they have sex and she does not want her student to obsess over her but later herself is seen doing the same.

11. Conclusion

It can be concluded that these series have mostly focused on women based stories and her wants and desires, but in doing so it has also stripped out the female aspects of the characters. In order to portray the lead female protagonist as outgoing, free-spirited women, have made them a caricaturist version of toxic males, by making the characters freedom only related to her sexuality and finding sexual pleasure from multiple men. Though a few stories try to uphold some serious issues but it gets lost as there is very less feminine touch to the stories. Women characters are shown to be career driven thus they treat their being a mother or motherhood as a mistake or as a setback. The male characters are just as supporting cast, who do not add any real objective or thought to the stories. Lot of effort is put into the female characters of these series but in portraying them to be empowered they are cemented in a way that they have given a feel of male characters rather than female characters. In portraying independent female characters these series have mostly dealt in sexual freedom of the female protagonists.

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