

***Portrayal of Women on OTT:  
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Content Released From 2017-2022***

Aastha Tiwari, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, India

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The arrival of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms like Amazon Prime Video, Hotstar, Netflix, and Sony Liv has brought an evolution to the entertainment industry. It has made a century-old film industry reach the pockets of audiences through digital distribution technology. It stands among the most popular and influential mass media as it has made audiences habitual of binge-watching. The content presented in both films and web series depicting numerous realistic situations through different characters in their storylines has been a prominent reason for promoting cross-cultural exchange in social values. Women characters have been too significant since the dawn of cinema that their presence cannot be overlooked now on the OTT. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand how various films and web series released on OTT platforms depict them in different storylines. The study analyzes the portrayal of women characters in select Hindi films and web series released on the mentioned OTT platforms through a critical discourse analysis method of the qualitative research approach. The selected period for the study is 2017 to 2022. The study tries to ascertain how women characters are placed in different social and cultural settings in OTT-based content. It aims to examine the significance of their roles in the storylines of the films and web series on OTT platforms released during the last five years. The study also attempts to determine how various (social, personal, and romantic) relationships of women characters have been treated and represented in them.

Keywords: OTT, Women, Portrayal, Films, Web Series

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

India has a population of approximately 1.42 billion, and women in India have always been considered “Aadhi-Aabaadi”, i.e. half of the population (denoting that they are equivalent to the other gender in the country). They are treated as Goddesses and have always been a holy symbol as per numerous Indian mythological stories and folk tales, but their position and treatment in society remain an issue of discussion.

Indian cinema is known for depicting realities of society, weaved in numerous emotions filmed in different storylines. Women characters have always been central elements in the storylines of numerous films. The significance of women in cinema can be traced back to its advent in India when male actors used to dress up like women and portray their characters. But later their presence came into the limelight both onscreen and off-screen. Women characters have always addressed numerous social issues. Thus, their significance in the entertainment industry cannot be overlooked, which makes it crucial to study their portrayal on the big screen.

The industry saw rapid growth in the last 100 years in the context of both content and technology. “Over-the-top” (OTT) platforms are a prominent example of digital distribution technology, which has become a technological revolution in the entertainment industry. Initially, India saw the launch of OTT services in 2008 with BIGFlix by Reliance Entertainment. Later, platforms like SonyLiv, Hotstar, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Eros Now, and Jio Cinema etc; also came into existence. These OTT platforms have grown so fast that they made the entertainment industry easily accessible to audiences and available on their computer and smartphone screens. According to the report of Business Today, India has more than 119 million active OTT subscribers *S. Vidya (2023)*. These Over-The-Top services (OTT) broadcast numerous Television programs, films, web series, live shows and many more belonging to different genres and languages. It has attracted audiences and also made many of them habitual of binge-watching OTT-based content.

The study analyzes the portrayal of women in select films and web series as OTT content. They have played a significant role in the cross-cultural exchange of social values, traditions and lifestyles through films, and web series across the globe faster than ever. Their storylines and characters have always had an impact on audiences. The study considers the Hindi language-based OTT content as it is the most popular language in the entertainment industry. According to a report, Hindi language films have earned a revenue of 36.4 million with their 91 films in 2023 till now *Sacnilk Tech (2023)*, which is the highest among all other language-based film industries in India.

The study tries to analyze the women characters from select films and web series from chosen OTT platforms namely, Amazon Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar, Netflix, and Sony LIV. The films and web series selected for the study are from 2017 to 2022. One film and one web series are selected from each mentioned OTT platform. These are: **Karwaan (2018)** and **Panchayat – Season 2 (2022)** from Amazon Prime Video, **Khuda Hafiz (2020)** and **Karm Yuddh (2022)** from Disney+ Hotstar, **Pagglait (2021)** and **Kota Factory – Season 2 (2021)** from Netflix, and **Salute (2022)** and **Gullak – Season 3 (2022)** from Sony LIV. The study examines the settings, positions, relationships, and significance of women characters placed in select OTT content.

## Literature Review

*Rashmi & Sood (2021)*, cite OTT as an unconventional form of communication. The research discovers that web series belonging to the crime genre showcase a huge amount of violence, sexual abuse, and offensive language toward women characters in their storylines. The research also finds that cinema has portrayed women in stereotypical and idealized characters.

*Medhi (2022)*, states the emergence of OTT platforms in India has brought a shift in the media consumption habits of Indian audiences. The study also discovers that web series on OTT platforms showcase Indian women in a different social status in contrast to dramatic saas-bahu sagas in mainstream film and television content.

*Sharma (2021)* discusses gender representation and hate speech in OTT-based content. The research discovers that web series frequently feature abusive language and showcase gender discrimination in numerous scenes.

*Saha & Prasad (2021)*, state the arrival of OTT as a new evolution in the media and entertainment sector. The study discovered that the growth of internet penetration has turned out to be one of the most prominent reasons for the increased binge-watching habits of audiences.

*Agarwal & Das (2022)* in their survey, examine how audiences perceive the evolving representation of women in mainstream media. The study finds that the content on OTT platforms is redefining women in Indian society.

## Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study are:

- To study the role and the settings in which the women characters are placed in select OTT content.
- To identify the positions in which women characters appear in select OTT content.
- To analyze the importance of the role of women characters in select OTT content.
- To examine the personal, social & romantic relations of women characters featured in select OTT content.

## Research Questions

Based on these research objectives, the research questions of the study are:

- How women characters have been portrayed in different social settings?
- Do women characters hold a significant role in the storyline of the select OTT content?
- How positions of women characters have been treated in select OTT content?
- How personal, social, and romantic relations of women characters have been treated in select OTT content?

## Methodology

The study analyzes the women characters in select OTT-based content (films and web series) through critical discourse analysis, a qualitative research method. In the context of women on OTT, CDA identifies the patterns and trends of their portrayal on-screen.

- Language isn't limited to words and grammar. According to Norman Fairclough, it is a crucial part of our social practices *Study Smarter, (n.d.)*.
- The language delivered to audiences through mass media messages (generated by images, texts, films, music, etc) can have connotative and denotative meanings. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis critically analyzes written, spoken or visual language and decodes it in the context of knowledge, ideology, power, culture and society *Scott, (2023)*.
- Critical Discourse Analysis helps researchers to analyze the forms and the content of the message, how the message communicates the ideas and beliefs, and the institutional or organizational factors which affect the message (*Wimmer & Dominick*).

## Data Analysis & Discussion

### Amazon Prime Video: Karwaan (2018): Mithila Palkar as Tanya

Akarsh Khurana directed the film *Karwaan*, which was released on Amazon Prime Video in 2018. Mithila Palkar portrays a university-going student Tanya. She is portrayed as an independent girl who stays away from her home in a university hostel in Ooty. The film begins with the weird exchange of dead bodies of her grandmother and Avinash's (Dulquer Salman) father, who died in a bus accident. Along with her frank and bold image, she is portrayed as emotionally weak after her grandmother's demise. Meanwhile, the male lead character Avinash begins a journey to Kochi with Shauqat (Irrfan Khan) to receive his father's dead body and give her grandmother's dead body at her mother's home. Both of them pick up Tanya on their way to Kochi. The character holds an open-minded personality and argues with Avinash over the sexual choices of women. She is portrayed as younger among them but motivates Avinash to follow his passion for photography. She faces numerous questions from Shauqat and becomes part of an argument for wearing short dresses, asking to drive a car and smoking, but later they reunite at the climax of the film. Her on-screen presence makes the story an amalgamation of tragedy and comedy. The character holds a significant place in the story as it's her grandmother's dead body that gets exchanged with the dead body of Avinash's father. The director has filmed their journey as "Karwaan" of a lifetime, in which Tanya comes out as a strong and understanding person. This journey changes her careless attitude towards life.

### Amazon Prime Video: Panchayat – Season (2022): Neena Gupta as Manju Devi

Deepak Kumar Mishra directed *Panchayat – Season 2* web series in continuation to its first season, which was released on Amazon Prime Video in 2022. The series portrays Neena Gupta as Manju Devi, the gram pradhan of Phullera village in Uttar Pradesh, like the earlier season. On one hand, where Season 1 of the series portrays her character as a rubber-stamp gram pradhan, Season 2 breaks this stereotype where she participates more actively in village politics compared to the previous season. It becomes evident when uneducated Manju Devi tries to learn the national anthem for the flag-hoisting ceremony at Panchayat Bhawan.

Unlike the other scenes, the character here drapes a silk saree with broad borders, which makes her look confident, powerful and responsible. She fails to learn the national anthem correctly but tries to sing it in front of the District Magistrate who came to the village for inspection so that she can safeguard her identity and pride. She attempts to win the sand deal at convenient rates without having any business experience with the help of her husband Brij Bhushan Dubey (Raghubir Yadav) and Panchayat secretary Abhishek (Jitendra Kumar). Later, she boldly stops a photo-opportunist MLA from joining the funeral ceremony of the martyr and drives him away. Her social relations bring more screen time and political competition for her. Bhushan (Durgesh Kumar) and Kranti Devi (Sunita Rajwar) keep pointing out the flaws in the governance of Manju Devi which provides numerous comic scenes to this series. Her personal and romantic relations do not hold significant screen time in the series. The character secures a crucial place in the storyline but shares limited screen time compared to male characters.

### **Disney+ Hotstar: Khuda Hafiz (2020): Shivaleeka Oberoi as Nargis Rajput Chaudhary**

Farukh Kabir directed Khuda Hafiz in 2020 which was released on Disney+ Hotstar. The film portrays Shivaleeka Oberoi as Nargis Rajput Chaudhary, a Lucknow-based HR professional and wife to software engineer Sameer Chaudhary (Vidyut Jammwal). The film begins with an arranged marriage proposal for Nargis and Sameer which becomes a foundation for their love story. The character holds a feminist personality who decently takes the side of working women and talks about their importance in the workplace and household to her would-be husband. She also shares a few on-screen romantic scenes with him. The storyline does not focus much on her social relationships, but her personal and romantic relationship grows stronger in the film. The director has not given her character a longer screen time, but he has set an example of rotating the story around her character even without presenting her much on-screen. In continuation of the scenes of their newly married life, they lose their job during the global recession and start applying for new jobs in foreign countries. The main story begins when she gets trafficked to the Arab country Noman while going to start her new job in that country. Her feminist personality doesn't make her bold and strong enough that she can help herself in running away from the clutches of the kidnappers. The film moves forward showing Sameer's search for Nargis, where he reaches Noman and tries all possible legal and illegal ways to find his wife. His efforts give him success after which both of them fly back to India. Her jolly nature since the beginning of the film fades out to the dull victim personality after she gets rescued.

### **Disney+ Hotstar: Karm Yuddh (2022): Paoli Dam as Indrani Roy**

Ravi Adhikari directed Karm Yuddh, which was released on Disney+ Hotstar in 2022. The web series portrays Paoli Dam in the character of Indrani Roy. The series is based on the landscape of Bengal, which allows her character to speak Bengali sometimes along with Hindi. She appears as a passionate businesswoman who desires to lead her family business named Roy Industries and is ready to do anything for the same. In this reflection, bold and strong-headed Indrani does many foul practices to safeguard her position in the family business. It becomes evident when her truth is revealed to audiences that she tried to kill her husband Vardhan Roy (Rajesh Khattar), who doesn't want her to be part of his family business. She bribes board members to vote in her favor. Despite her fair and unfair practices, her character faces numerous challenges to survive in their family business. This becomes evident when the male characters of the story who are not willing to accept the leadership of a woman make strategies against her. Later in the series, all of them become successful in

sending her behind bars for attempting to kill her husband. Besides this, she is also a stepmother to Abhimanyu (Ankit Bisht) but loves him like her own child but never receives the same in return. She gets physical with the boy younger than her in the weak and lonely moment. The series shows how men in professional spaces do not like a woman leading them. Her character is crucial for the storyline because she remains the centre of politics in the series.

### **Netflix: Pagglait (2021): Sanya Malhotra as Sandhya Giri**

Umesh Bisht directed the film Pagglait, which was released on the OTT platform Netflix in 2021. The film portrays Sanya Malhotra as Sandhya Giri, a widow of Aastik who had zero emotional connection with her and never had proper communication. The film portrays that she had to follow all post-cremation rituals for her husband without her desire. In this reflection, the story presents her as a woman who does not feel like crying after her husband's death which makes all the family members and relatives anxious. Instead, she feels like eating junk food and secretly goes out with her friend to have Gol-Gappe. The character feels disheartened and cheated after learning about the extramarital affair of her dead husband. She desires to meet his lover and office colleague Akanksha (Sayani Gupta). After meeting her, she wants to know more about her husband. The film beautifully portrays the mental and emotional tussle between these two women, as the one who is a wife desires that she would have been loved by her man. Contrary to this the one who is his lover feels disheartened for not being his wife. Sandhya feels attracted to Akanksha's personality as her husband used to love her but blames her for being a second woman in his life. Despite this, the family feels shocked that their late son has made Sandhya a nominee of their life insurance policy which benefits her with fifty lakh rupees. Later her in-laws ask her to marry her brother-in-law so that the money remains in the family, but she leaves the insurance money for her father-in-law and takes a life-changing step for herself. She runs away from home leaving a note for her family that she will find a new job, restart her life and will take care of her in-laws after her husband's demise. The film seems relatable to the women who deal with similar situations and are forced by in-laws to marry without their desire.

### **Netflix: Kota Factory – Season 2 (2021): Revathi Pillai as Vartika Ratawal**

Raghav Subbu directed the web series Kota Factory – Season 2 which was released on Netflix in 2021, like its first season in 2019. The series portrays Revathi Pillai as Vartika Ratawal, who is a senior secondary student and is preparing for the IIT-JEE exams in Kota, Rajasthan. As the story screens the student's life, she appears as a teenager who develops feelings for her classmate Vaibhav (Mayur More) while studying together for board exams. The character cannot be considered too significant for the storyline as it is only highlighted to show the teenager's love life and shares less screen time in comparison to other characters in the web series. The character portrays a girl who faces study pressure and decides to step back from giving routine preparatory exams. She stands more as Vaibhav's girlfriend and emotional support than as a student preparing for a competitive examination.

### **Sony LIV: Salute (2022): Diana Penty as Dia**

Rosshan Andrews directed the film Salute, released on Sony LIV in 2022. The film portrays Diana Penty as Dia, who appears as a law scholar based in Maharashtra. She is portrayed in a live-in relationship with sub-inspector Arvind Karunakaran (Dulquer Salman), the male lead character of the story. The film portrays her as a supporting character for the male lead

despite a lead female actor in the film. She motivates him to reunite with his family. She supports him in investigating a closed case in search of truth despite knowing about the punishment which will be announced after the final decision. The character does not hold a significant place in the storyline and comes on-screen only four to five times (for a few minutes) in the film. Thus her presence can be considered negligible and does not change any angle in the storyline.

### **Sony LIV: Gullak – Season 3 (2022): Geetanjali Kulkarni as Shanti Mishra**

Palash Vasvani directed the web series Gullak – Season 3, released on the OTT platform Sony LIV in 2022, in continuation to its previous two seasons in 2019 and 2021. The series portrays Geetanjali Kulkarni as a middle-class homemaker Shanti Mishra. Her life revolves around cooking food in the kitchen, saving money and worshipping God; to resolve their family issues. Her taunts at her boys showcase their mother-son bond which fills the scenes with humour and creates room for comedy in the web series. Her character portrays a middle-class woman struggling over things of daily needs, groceries and talking over serious life issues. Her feminine urge to be liked by someone comes out when she happily recalls her school-time crush in front of Furtili (Ketki Kulkarni). She also opposes her husband's decision and convinces him to reject the forced marriage proposal for Furtili. She is not portrayed in a romantic relationship with her husband but shares a strong understanding with him that she knows about his every single habit. In this context, she argues, challenges him, that he will not take the family on vacation like he did last time after receiving LTA from his office. Her love and care for him also become evident when he suffers from a heart attack. Her social relations with her neighbours are supportive, but one among those characters tries to interfere in every happy or sad moment of their life. But these social relations bring huge comic space to the story. The character holds a crucial place in the storyline as her realistic portrayal represents numerous middle-class homemakers and the lives of the other three male characters also revolve around her.

### **Conclusion**

The study has found that select women characters are placed into different social settings as per the requirement of the different storylines, such as a village in Uttar Pradesh and its politics, family business politics in Bengal, coaching centres in Rajasthan and study pressure on students, lawyer supporting her partner in Maharashtra etc. But the select OTT content shares their struggle for their acceptance and powers in their life and storyline. These select characters are presented in different positions, such as school students preparing for competitive exams, gram pradhan, young adults, businesswomen, homemakers, etc. Some of the stories prominently highlight their professions or positions in the storylines. The study has found that most of these women characters are doing well in their romantic relationships, but few of them struggle in their relationships with their partners. The select films and web series portray only a few women characters in their social relationships which on the one hand fulfil the comic requirements of the story, but on the other hand, turn up as a reason for the struggle of lead women characters. These select films and web series significantly highlight that the Hindi-language-based film industry is significantly making the stories of strong women and their struggles, but contrary to this there are several films and web series which present them as supporting characters and their presence on-screen as almost negligible or is not equivalent to other characters. Many of these characters hold strong positions in the storylines and seem relatable to the realistic situations in society.

## References

- Agarwal & Das (2022). Indian Web Series - Revolutionizing the Portrayal of Indian Women in Mainstream Media. IJCIRAS, ISSN (o) - 2581-5334 January 2022, Vol. 4 Issue 8.
- Medhi (2022). Representation of Indian Women on OTT Platforms in India: A New Bolder Narrative. "Digital is the New Mainstream": Media Conclave Conference.
- Rashmi & Sood (2021). Portrayal of Women in Indian Crime Web Series: A Narrative Analysis and Survey. Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry. 2021, Vol. 12 Issue 9, P2115-2124. 10p.
- S.Vidya (2023), A problem of plenty: Too many OTT players boggling Indian consumers, Business Today, Retrieved from, <https://www.businesstoday.in/technology/story/a-problem-of-plenty-too-many-ott-players-boggling-indian-consumers-367129-2023-01-23>
- Saha & Prasad (2021). Consumption Pattern of OTT Platforms in India. International Journal of Modern Agriculture, Volume 10, No.2, 2021 ISSN: 2305-7246.
- Scott, (2023), Critical Discourse Analysis: What Is It?, Retrieved from, [https://www.sesync.org/resources/critical-discourse-analysis-what-it#:~:text=Critical%20Discourse%20Analysis%20\(CDA\)%20describes,narratives%20that%20these%20connotations%20support](https://www.sesync.org/resources/critical-discourse-analysis-what-it#:~:text=Critical%20Discourse%20Analysis%20(CDA)%20describes,narratives%20that%20these%20connotations%20support)
- Sharma (2021). Emerging Gender Role and Hate Speech Representation in Indian Web Series OTT Media. JETIR. ISSN-2349-5162.
- Study Smarter, (n.d.), Norman Fairclough, Retrieved from, <https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english/key-concepts-in-language-and-linguistics/norman-fairclough/>
- 2023 Latest Movies India Box Office Collection, (2023), Retrieved from [https://www.sacnilk.com/entertainmenttopbar/Box\\_Office\\_Collection?hl=en](https://www.sacnilk.com/entertainmenttopbar/Box_Office_Collection?hl=en)
- Wimmer & Dominick, 2017, Mass Media Research: An Introduction, IX Edition.