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**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**

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**Abstract**

*This paper deals with the issue of distorted gender constructions of feminine identity that has assumed a state of centrality in the wake of unprecedented advancements in the field of digital media and the mad craze for OTT platforms in our country. Taking a few movies and OTT shows like “Bulbbul”, “Guilty”, “Masaba Masaba”, “Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives” and “Four More Shots Please” this paper will reiterate the fact that how the portrayal of women in mass media and cinema has undoubtedly rendered a liberal framework as evident by the way women are viewed publicly today but at the same time has concocted a fresh series of stereotypical labels that they must conform to. Such a commercially driven agenda has thus not only jeopardised the cinematic prospects of exploring women’s identity and aspirations unconstrained by gendered obfuscations and inherent patriarchal biases but has also paved way for receding ideals of women empowerment, majority of which are unrealistic and unattainable. It poses quintessential questions pertaining to the idea of ‘empowerment’ itself and seeks to probe whether empowerment is only limited to giving women equal opportunities in various spheres of life or does it hint at a much wider spectrum of possibilities that requires serious contemplation and prompt action.*

*It also emphasizes on the need to create a conducive environment of gender inclusivity for women where they get ample chances to sharpen their skills and cut across the boundaries of*

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*convention and customary precepts living life on their own terms. This paper thus endeavours to unravel the intersectional mediation of prevalent gender tropes and visual representations and advocates for cinematic fidelity when it comes to the depiction of women on the silver screen.*

**Keywords:** OTT platforms, stereotypical representations, patriarchy, gender tropes, convenient boxes, sexual innuendos, regressive ideals.

In the last few years, the soaring demand and popularity of OTT platforms has completely changed the screen presence in India and revolutionized the audience's consumption of the same. This paper will pay particular attention to whether there is stereotyping of female characters, with respect to their traits, behaviours and communication patterns. There will also be a focus on how such a representation is giving way to receding ideals of feminism, and how the identities of women are not being explored and expanded, rather just being put in different boxes. This analysis has been done based on the female characters of the following OTT movies and shows- "*Bulbbul*", "*Guilty*", "*Masaba Masaba*", "*Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*" and "*Four More Shots Please*".

The questions which further guide this study are as follows- Are the female characters in popular and highly publicised shows and movies stereotyped? Is such a narrative used deliberately to gain a wider audience reception? Is the polarised representation of women, diminishing the potential prospects of the common women's stories onscreen?

In so far as it mirrors, literature and cinema reflect the prevalent social attitude towards women, and since this attitude so often values men and masculine pursuits over women, women's real concerns seem devalued. (Wolf 1972) In "*A Room of One's Own*", Virginia Woolf describes this situation- "It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are important, the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes trivial. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in

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a battlefield is more important than in a shop- everywhere, and much more subtly the difference of value persists.”

India has undoubtedly come a long way since the cinematic representation of women as shy, diffident and mostly taking the backseat in both the personal and the professional domains, while the chivalrous hero played his normative role of showing explicit manliness, saving the world, doing the impossible tasks in a matter of seconds and eventually being hailed as the ultimate protector. The heroine didn't really have much participation other than rejoicing at his achievements, and happy to be associated with him as his lady love. That was all. There was no world beyond this for her. She was typically a mouthpiece to put forward the stereotypes associated with women back then. And obviously, there was no scope for dissent. Years later, though the stories of women revolting against oppressive and hegemonic power structures have become increasingly popular, they tend to suffer from the same age-old injunctions of patriarchal labels which despite their perennial efforts they have not been able to discard off.

One such label is the extraordinary jump from a victimised and suppressed woman to one who is dangerous, vicious and actively seeks justice through revenge. In *“Bulbbul”*, a Netflix original movie, we come across the same skewed appropriation of the gender binaries. In 1881, Bulbbul, a precocious and intelligent young girl with an interest in scary stories is married into a wealthy “zamindar” family. It is revealed that her husband isn't the boy Satya, with whom she's struck a quick friendship, but rather his sinister looking elder brother- Indranil. As the film jumps twenty years forward to future, Satya returns home only to find that Bulbbul is no longer the young, joyous girl he had left behind. Her rather surprising etiquettes as the new “thakurain of the house”, lounging on settees all day, being fed betel and sherbet exude not a glorious character development, and a sense of women empowerment. It shouts of an unsettling energy. The narrative which pushes Bulbbul from a careless, pretty and charming girl to the one who is dreaded and is on the hunt to kill men who bring destruction to women, seems more like a fairy tale. And indeed, it gives way to the problematic trope that in order to blossom, a woman must first be violently broken. The rape-revenge subgenre though outdated, recurs still in almost all of the women centric movies.

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Another Netflix original, “*Guilty*” is an introspective story for the “Me Too” campaign that garnered huge attention recently over social media. The story revolves around a “Me Too” accused boy who is a heartthrob of the college, and the entire band members are under inspection to find the truths. The climax of this movie comes across as a retroactive attempt to seamlessly blend the same requirements of a woman centric story. The character of Nanki comes to the forefront, who throughout the movie was depicted as an unreliable character with tattoo ink and torn T-Shirts. (Mark another stereotype here. Inked women are the disillusioned ones.) But towards the end, she reveals that all this while she had been hiding her traumas. She was sexually abused as a young girl and the horrifying memories of the same still continue to haunt her. Nanki comes off as an intimidating character, and again the roots of her alluring personality have been traced back to the harassment she suffered in her past. It’s rather ironical how everything about such women is traced back to a past which witnessed some unpleasant experiences. This sort of preoccupation with the necessity of creating a story with gruesome exploitation of a woman’s body might serve as eye catching and flattering on the screen, but in reality, it is creating a dark cave which reduces any further explorations with respect to women’s characters. It is also indirectly placing women on a larger-than-life heroic pedestal- where empowerment is only possible after she has witnessed the worst form of downfall- both physically and mentally. In an attempt to mend the similar pattern of heroic representation of male characters, we have somehow come to adapting to it, which is indeed dangerous. We have to just let women be what they wish to be and how they want the society to perceive them. A woman centric movie need not have a woman with astonishing and exceptional abilities. She need not be a hero as well. She just needs to be an ordinary woman, with her everyday stories.

Coming to another important aspect, one might also want to examine if such a representation is a deliberate attempt to attract the usual audiences. The director of “*Bulbbul*”- Anvita Dutt contemplates the exaggeration of abuse and its aftermath as the vital reason behind the rebellion of women, in an interview with Ankur Pathak. On being questioned about the prolonged scene of violence and subsequent rape, she mentions- “To write it was very difficult. And then to shoot it, with a clinical detachment, sit and do the shot

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breakdown even more so. Why was it written? Because I wanted to take my character through the extremes of male violence. There's the physical part of it. And then, there is the spirit which is destroyed." She further adds- "Your heart has to break and you must become one with her vulnerability." We can argue here again as a response to this that how far is it justified to have a woman's body be abused brutally, in order to incite horror, and then her further growth into a strong character. For the filmmakers, it is the aesthetic part, but the idea is for us to stay and process that violence, where every second feels elongated.

The prevailing patriarchal ideologies also have tremendous effects on women's characterisation. According to Parks, commonly the stereotypes that are given to women characters are those who lead decent, trusting men into dangerous situations or even to their deaths; or the victims who are violently and/or sexually assaulted and then murdered. (Parks 2018) Caroline Sims tries to analyse how most female characters portrayed within fiction still act according to the existing societal norms. She uses the strategy of two lead women characters who achieve professional success in a majorly male populated field. The rationale is that women still need to overtly challenge the idea of womanhood in order to reach the peak of their career. (Sims 2010, 45) Here, we can draw a parallel with the Netflix show "*Masaba Masaba*" which also interrogates the existing patterns of how women are cinematically perceived based on their sexually replete portrayals on the silver screen. The show revolves around a fictionalised account of a mother-daughter duo, Neena Gupta and Masaba Gupta, and it is heavily inspired by their own lives. The show delves deeper into the nuances of Masaba's life, a woman in her thirties, who is navigating her life after a divorce. Her mother, Neena is also choosing to stay away from her husband, in order to get a much-wanted comeback in the acting industry. She prioritises her falling career over her marital life, which is indeed an iconoclastic idea for many women of her age. Masaba is also shown making brave choices in a society, where typically women are pressured into following stereotypical moulds. It is an exemplary effort to showcase women who don't pretend to be in a happy marriage and who believe in accepting the truth, howsoever incisive it might be. However, the context and setting of the show becomes the deciding factor here, and also

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points out the problem of polarised characterisation of women which we have set out to delineate.

We realise that this is a possibility only for a woman who is living in a metropolitan city, one who is privileged and fortunate enough to make such important life decisions without any hassles. The reason for this is that she is financially self-dependent. It brings us to question if there is a pattern of oppositional design for women's characterisation on OTT platforms. Is there a prominent division between the city woman and the small-town woman on these platforms. The character of Beena Tripathi, in the Netflix original "*Mirzapur 2*" is the same vulnerable woman, who is oppressed and manipulated rigorously, as she tries to fit in a family of mafias and gangsters. While her relationship with her husband is not healthy, she also suffers sexual harassment by her father-in-law. Amidst all this, there is also a complex family power dynamic, where she has to play the role of an intermediary between her husband and son. Initially, her character represses all the bitterness and anger, and continues to be a silent observer. But in the end, events take a surprising turn and she emerges as the creator of a conspiracy theory to overthrow the dominance of men in her family, by aligning with those in opposition. This decision is not merely guided by her resentment, but also by the lust for power and authority; the two qualities which she has gradually imbibed living in a household of goons. This stands in stark contrast with the character of Masaba, who proves herself victorious by successfully coming out of a failed marriage. Henceforth, it becomes evident that while the filmmakers admire the healthy uprising of a woman living in a city, there is not much scope for the same, when telling the story of a small-town woman. She continues to be portrayed as the one involved in household chores, and simultaneously, plotting threads of secret retribution as commonly seen in the older pulp fiction. This disregard, if nothing, is blocking the way for elaborate experimentation.

So, what we witness here is a trend, which probably also contains the secret of these high grossing movies and shows. And this is usually done to cater to the cinematic tastes of the audiences. One can draw a well-defined line, along which the narratives are woven. It is either the representation of a woman, whose meandering life suddenly becomes enlightened

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by the outburst of a long-accumulated memory of trauma or abuse, and takes a turn to retaliate against everything which affected her in the past by seeking revenge. The use of memories of the violence inflicted, as a narrative technique is an overused motif. The overall construction of such a character stem out of the same escapades, like we see in the character of Bulbul in “*Bulbul*”. On the contrary, the other category focuses on a professionally successful and a well earning woman, enraged by the conformist ideas of the world, breaking free from the ties, which are considered unassailable. We see an example of this in the character of Masaba Gupta in “*Masaba Masaba*”. She does what is unthinkable and unutterable for the character of Beena Tripathi in “*Mirzapur 2*”. Beena doesn’t show the courage to move out of that problematic home. Home is her boundary, which she will never trespass in any situation. Although, she will stay there, turn her discontentment to clever plots, and shock everyone by striking back with devious schemes. While one may choose to ignore, this discord between the portraits of urban and rural women, and the reiterative practice of putting these respective characters in well-defined tight boxes; we have to concede that this activity leads to the consequence of total absence of common woman from mainstream cinema. We have fewer examples for this, like the character of Shashi in “*English Vinglish*” which released in 2012. It represented all the housewives who never bothered about adopting English, until they attended a party of their husbands working in MNC’s and many other such middle-class women. Although, just a language, English becomes the question of Shashi’s worth in her family, specifically with reference to her husband, and she accepts it as a challenge which she has to win. If we look closely, here the woman doesn’t have an unresolved past, her ambitions aren’t a result of vengeful emotions and she is not demonstrating her worth by actively protesting. Her weapon is the drive to learn the language, and simply feel self-reliant in the contemporary society. The race is not against people. It’s against her confining perception of herself. It’s simply the race to widen her vision.

Such stories have almost become absent since the advent of booming sector of OTT platforms. The struggle is also to slow down the extinction of the above-mentioned common woman, hailing from a middle-class family amidst the stereotype of rich women, with their

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frugal lifestyles as seen in the show- "*Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*" or the carefree and happy-go-lucky ones as seen in "*Four More Shots Please*". In this case, there is yet another recurring story of wealthy and affluent women, who have enough means to not think of anything else except getting drunk in bars, or touring new countries. Their well to do lives' narration is clearly in anticipation to cater to the needs and tastes of the people who come from the same strata of society. Obviously, this is yet another generic barrier in minimizing the dichotomization of boxed and categorical identities of women characters. The women characters of shows like "*Fabulous Lives Of Bollywood Wives*" and "*Four More Shots Please*" are bound to overawe the middle class woman- engrossed in her daily activities of packing the lunch box of her kids, administering the home help's works, and at the most, going for vegetable shopping in the evening with her friends. While such characters might also represent her fantasy life, which she dreams of; "her" depiction will always be limited to what we see in the character of Beena Tripathi in "*Mirzapur 2*". If we really look at the lavish expressions of the women in "*Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*", it has no real purpose beyond satisfying the aggrandizing needs and being a mere personification of an "ideal life" of a middle-class woman's dreams. Also problematic is the development in these characters too, which is too scarce and reserved to be chalked out. Zero attention is paid to their intrinsic personalities and they turn out to be frivolous caricatures and live mannequins playing the roles of typical rich wives with no significant existence beyond the next party they have to attend, the latest Gucci and Prada bags launched, the next trip to Venice, and at the most, the next beauty spa appointment. The four friends of "*Four More Shots Please*"- Siddhi, Umang, Anjana and Damini are also typecasted as the modern woman, who holds a cigarette in one hand, and a beer bottle in another. They might possess several other qualities, but their journey to self-discovery is incomplete without using foul language, rash driving and abusing people who come in their way. The loaded sexual innuendos gross us out and the dependency on sex to deal with every broken nail in the house is pure repetition of the clichéd references to a modern, light hearted woman. These are all attempts to fit women in generic personalities. One can't make out even one clear characteristic, which distinguishes the four friends from each other.



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It is indeed appreciable that we have ventured beyond the insulated and morally encoded stories about women. We have also skilfully crossed the rigid enclaves of sexual symbolism of woman being an object of the male gaze, and her role of playing the insignificant other of her male counterpart. The sustenance on the trope of the “Ice Queen” is also being disclosed, and women with cold hearts and frosty demeanour are being substituted by those who are able to be both- career focussed and family oriented. The image of the “Hooker with A Heart of Gold” has also been called out, for its deprecating treatment of sex workers.

But it seems that such depictions have been forgotten only to be remembered time and again, replaced only to be misplaced now in a variety of formats. In the process of rejection of these tropes, we have given birth to a whole new set of figures, which have the power to create hierarchies and divisions which are exhaustive to watch. What we need is an inventive effort to create women characters which are the closest to real life women. There must be an open territory to expand and elaborate these characters, beyond the mere sentimental fortresses of culturally conceived fabrications. This would ensure the successive decrease in the gap between the audience and the characters on the screen. In this process of transformation, the need is also to preserve the distinct identities of women. We have to stop treating them metaphorically, and let no specific tag capture their representation.

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