

Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Hindi OTT Series: An Examination

Ameena Kulsum Khan¹, Dr R. Hemalatha²

¹Research Scholar, ²Chairman & H.O.D of Mass Communication & Journalism department

^{1,2}Karnataka State Open University

Abstract:

The research investigates the evolving portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities in Hindi Over-The-Top (OTT) series. In India, historically, the LGBTQ+ communities have faced marginalized and stereotypical portrayals. Post the decriminalization of same sex relationships in 2018, it paved way for more nuanced and progressive representation. Due to fewer censorship restrictions, content creators can present complex narratives which was otherwise not possible with traditional media. The series analyzed include Made in Heaven (2019, 2023), His Storyy (2021), The Married Woman (2021), Four More Shots Please! (2019–2020), and Rainbow Rishta (2021). Textual analysis is employed to examine the narrative construction, character development, and thematic treatment of the LGBTQ+ community in these series.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ representation, Hindi OTT web series, queer narratives, Indian media, sexuality and gender identity.

1. Introduction:

Historically, the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in media has mirrored the preexisting attitudes of society towards gender and sexuality. The rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has enabled significant change in how lesbian, gay & bisexual individuals have been portrayed. The representations have moved from caricaturist and patriarchal to more authentic, nuanced, and progressive representations. The research delves into the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in Hindi series to understand the extent of representation difference from traditional media.

As per the lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender community center, the acronym LGBTQIA+ encompasses a diverse spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, asexual, and others, with the “plus” symbol acknowledging additional identities such as pansexual, genderqueer, and Two-Spirit. This inclusive framework recognizes the fluidity and spectrum of sexuality and gender, challenging binary societal norms.

India historically has a complex tapestry when it comes to its relationship with gender and sexuality. There has been evidence of acceptance of non-heteronormative desires in our ancient texts, like the Kamasutra and temple art from Khajuraho and Konark. The existence of hijra communities, outside the traditional male and female binary, has also been acknowledged in South Asian culture.

Under the British rule queer identities were criminalized for over 150 years by imposing Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1861. Post-independence era, the mainstream media largely ignored the LGBTQ+ community identities or portrayed them in a mocking or stereotypical form. Films like *Mast Kalander* (1991) and *Dostana* (2008) often resorted to depicting the queer community as flamboyant or comedically reinforcing prejudices of the society.

The decriminalization of same sex relationships by the Supreme Court in 2018 marked a pivotal moment for LGBTQ+ rights in India. This change fostered a new environment within media through dialogue, visibility, and artistic expression. New media platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, and ALTBalaji operate with great creative freedom due to the limited censorship restrictions, allowing them to explore more nuanced and complex narratives.

The protagonists in series like *Made in Heaven* (2019, 2023), *His Story* (2021), and *The Married Woman* (2021) navigate social, romantic challenges while dealing with their intricate emotions. These shows offer more authentic and nuanced portrayals of queer experiences. Unlike in the other parts of the world, sexuality in India is shaped by the confluence of cultural, personal, and socio-political aspects. Despite the legal development, the LGBTQ+ community continues to face familial rejections, societal pressures, and stigma. Rights to marriage and adoption are still excluded from the institutional framework for same sex couples. It is in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, and Delhi that we see a surge in activism, visibility and safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ communities. The content on OTT platforms is often tailored to an urban audience, overlooking other diverse realities across caste and socio-economic strata.

Although obstacles continue to exist for the LGBTQ+ community, their economic and political situations are gradually improving. The private sector has slowly started adopting inclusive workplace policies and pride initiatives. However, housing inequality, employment discrimination continues to persist for Transgender, Dalit and working queer individuals due to lack in comprehensive legal protection. Areas such as marriage, inheritance, and surrogacy also lack clear legal protection, limiting the community from being treated as an equal in the society.

The western OTT series like *Sex Education*, *Euphoria* & *Pose*, present a more diverse representation of LGBTQ+ communities, particularly transgenders, non-binary, and intersex individuals. In contrast, the Indian media underrepresents LGBTQ+ narratives, it can be observed that the male characters often receive more screen time. The stories of lesbians, bisexual, and asexual people comparatively remain inadequate. In India the queer experiences are also influenced by factors such as caste, religion and regional identities. However, many OTT platforms oversimplify the experiences and present them in a one-size-fits-all narratives that downplay the diverse factors of influence in shaping the identities of the LGBTQ+ communities.

Today, digital platforms enjoy greater creative freedom compared to TV and films. Unlike the traditional media, where the creators were constrained by censorship and commercial aids. This has enabled the content creators on TT platforms to explore richer themes like sexuality, gender identity and more. This study critically analyzes the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in Hindi series, examining the evolution from stereotypical portrayals to more complex narratives.

Review of literature:

The existing literature talks about the significance of OTT platforms in becoming the catalyst for the transformation of the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in comparison to traditional media.

Ghildiyal and Jayaswal (2024) talk about the lenience in censorship on OTT platforms that provide an opportunity to the creators to explore the depth of the characters and give them complex narratives, which is often not possible to attain in traditional media. This freedom allows the creator to go beyond the stereotypical portrayals and highlight the sensitive issue faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

OTT platforms allow for greater experimentation and creation of tailored content for the audience. This is made possible due to lower financial risk compared to traditional media. Allowing the creators from a marginalized community to tell their story in a unique format.

The OTT platforms comparatively engage more with the audience through reviews and comments, forming an interactive and direct relationship with the audience. Throwing light on the IMBD reviews of *Made in Heaven*, Dey (2024) says that today, the content creators are able to understand the audience perception, impact, and societal acceptance of the portrayals better.

On OTT Platforms, there has been a drastic transformation of the characters from caricature and stereotypical representation. Rayal and Padda (2023) in their study highlight how the current narratives move away from the stereotypical representation to complex characterization, bringing in authenticity to the stories, encompassing real-world and personal issues into the narratives. This makes the characters in the stories relatable to the audience.

Many studies emphasize the importance of having an intersectional representation of the LGBTQ+ community to showcase the community's diverse realities. While talking about *Made in Heaven*, Dey (2024) says that the characters illustrate how it is important for sexuality to be explored from the lens of other factors such as caste, class & gender. He further strengthens his point on intersectionality through the observation made in the series *Four More Shots Please!* that illustrates the fact that body image and mental health have a significant role to play in the exploration of sexuality.

Today, OTT platforms are able to provide a space for such an inclusive conceptualization of characters and portray the real-life struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ communities Mishra and Sharma, 2022. In the analysis done by Rayal and Padda (2023), they point out the fact that while some media platforms show progressive representation, there is a lack of representation in a few regions and platforms. Hence, they talk about the inclusive representation of LGBTQ+ stories in local languages and regional content.

There is also a need to look at the characterization through the cultural lens, as the audience feels that the current representation shows a 'Westernized' perspective of the LGBTQ+ community. This does not challenge the established traditional beliefs (Dey, 2024).

In the paper by Mehraj and Ajay (2020), they argue that the casting of these LGBTQ+ characters continues to be played by heterosexual actors. This questions the authenticity of Queer representation and the opportunities available for the queer actors to portray their own stories.

Overall, the literature shows that OTT platforms can help the audience better understand and empathize with the LGBTQ+ community as well as bring about social change. Mishra and Sharma (2022) highlight

the importance of authentic representation as it helps connect the dots between the legal amendments and the community's struggles. This can help break the stereotypes and encourage a more inclusive society.

2. Methodology:

This study employs textual analysis, a qualitative research method, to examine the representation of LGBTQIA+ identities in select Hindi Over-The-Top (OTT) series. The researcher evaluates elements like thematic paradigms, narrative patterns, character construction, dialogue, visual representation of the LGBTQ+ characters. This helps the researcher understand how these series construct, challenge, or reinforce the norms of gender and sexuality.

The study is grounded in Queer theory by as Judith Butler, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. It helps the researcher to understand how gender and sexuality are represented, whether they challenge, reshape or reinforce the preexisting notions. Intersectionality throws light on other aspects of influence, such as caste, class, mental health, and body image.

The combination of these helps better understand how the LGBTQ+ characters are represented by focusing on the role of power, context, and voice are considered important. The scenes and storytelling are looked at for analysis to understand the changing representations of the LGBTQ+ characters on Hindi OTT platforms. This points out the shift in narratives of LGBTQ+ characters from stereotypical to realistic, complex and emotionally evocative. This was often misrepresented in the traditional media.

Analysis and Discussion:

The selected episodes depict key plot and emotional turns that are central to the LGBTQIA+ identities in the narratives in powerful ways. Each episode portrays the formation, struggle, and resistance of queerness set against the backdrop of modern Indian society. It also showcases different ways in which queer identity is experienced across different genders, sexualities, and social class. These episodes were selected not only because they featured LGBTQIA+ characters, but rather because they captured critical instances where queer identities are expressed with depth, emotion, and self-determination.

The researcher looks at examples where the characters go beyond the simplistic depiction, evaluates instances where LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences are key to the plot, and character building, how they use visual aids to present the queer identities and how story is connected to cultural and emotional truths of LGBTQ+ community's existence in India. This helps the researcher to map the trajectory of how Hindi OTT content has shifted from marginalized to complex/ multi-dimensional representation.

Summary & Episodes selected:

Summary: 'Made in Heaven', Amazon Prime (2019, 2023): It is a series depicting the life of two wedding planners from Delhi- Tara & Karan. The characters navigate the world of high-society Indian weddings, uncovering the hidden societal truths. Themes like marriage, dowry, struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals within a patriarchal society are explored.

Episodes selected: season 1, Episode 5 & season 2, Episode 4

Season 1, Episode 5 ‘A Marriage of Convenience’: This sequence depicts Karan’s flashback where he was arrested for ‘Public indecency’ showcasing the criminalization and rejection of queer identities by the society.

Season 2, Episode 4 ‘Love Story’: The intimate moment between Karan and Nawab challenges the conventional, taboo depiction of queer love. It showcases the emotional vulnerability and resistance in their relationship.

Summary: ‘His Storyy’, Alt Balaji (2021): The series explores the life of a couple, Kunal and Sakshi, from South Bombay, married for 20 years. The story delves into the challenges they face as a couple when Sakshi finds out about his husband’s relationship with a man. Capturing the complexities and challenges that the non-heterosexual relationship faces from the family and society at large.

Episodes selected: Episode 1 & 6

Episode 1: ‘Marriage is a Racket’

The reveal of Kunal’s affair sets the stage for emotional chaos, the use of facial expressions and the silence of the characters showcase their feeling of confusion and betrayal.

Episode 6: ‘Pretence and Lies’

The confrontation between Kunal and his wife showcases the characters' emotions about identity, honesty, and society's expectations of masculinity.

Summary:

‘Married Woman’, Zee 5 (2021) The story between Astha and Peeplika shows their journey against restrictive gendered social roles and self-discovery. The series captures the tumultuous political environment around gender identities and religion.

Episodes selected: Episode 4 & 7

Episode 4: ‘Mulaqat khud se’

Peeplika arrives at Astha’s house to resolve Mudassar’s issue, brings out the emotional and intellectual connection between the two.

Episode 7: ‘Ishq aur mushq’

We see a deep personal loss that queer women face while seeking freedom and Authenticity, when Asha decides to leave her husband and children even though it is for a very short time.

Summary:

Four More Shots Please! (2019–2020): The series navigates through careers, love life, and the identities of modern-day women in Mumbai. It throws light on the challenges and struggles women face in a patriarchal society.

Episodes selected: Season 1, Episode 6 & Season 2, Episode 8

Season 1, Episode 6 (“F.U.B.A.R”):

Umang's female friends show strong support and acceptance when she comes out with her identity, highlighting the comfort that comes from a chosen family and the fear of rejection from her biological family.

Season 2, Episode 8 ("Hell Bent"):

The breakup with Samara (Celebrity partner) highlights the emotional pressure and vulnerability that Umang faces for being in the public eye after her gender identity is revealed.

Summary:

Rainbow Rishta (2021): The docuseries aims to break stereotypes and show the diverse experiences of the community. Their journey pans from them finding love, acceptance and celebrating their identities. From different parts of the country.

Episodes selected: Episode 2 & Episode 4

Episode 2 ("Dancing in the Dark"):

The natural lighting and editing techniques reflect the struggles of the queer couple who are in a long-distance relationship.

Episode 4 ("The Chef and the Closet"):

It explores the struggles of a gay man coming out with his identity to his conservative family. Cooking is used as a powerful metaphor for showing him as a nurturer and someone trying to bridge the emotional divides. The examination of scenes and narrative choices, the study explores the evolution of Hindi OTT series in the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters. These characters showcase complex, authentic, and emotionally charged characters. This reflects the existing societal attitudes and how they contribute towards shaping the identity of this community, which is usually marginalized by the mainstream media.

3. Discussion:

The story of Made in Heaven (2019 & 2023) revolves around Karan Mehra, a gay man who grapples with personal trauma and social stigma. Episode 5 from season 1 uses flashbacks and anxiety to showcase the societal rejection. On the other hand, episode 4 in season 2 throws light on the taboo around queer relationships over love.

The character of Kunal in His Story (2021) showcases a complex portrayal of how he navigates various aspects like his sexuality, class status, and social expectations. The researcher observes that Kunal's experiences are deeply shaped by past trauma, secrecy, and acts of resistance. This shows how the queer community in India is shaped by cultural and societal pressures. The use of creative techniques like flashbacks, personal conversations and visuals deepens the understanding of how society affects the queer community emotionally and mentally.

Poetic narration and powerful visuals are used in Married Woman (2021) to showcase the story of Peeplika and Astha in Married Woman. The story revolves around how the patriarchal norms dictate their relationship. Symbols like fire, books, and closed spaces are used to show how the characters find emotional freedom from being trapped. The researcher examines how the institution of marriage is used

as a tool to silence women's sexual desire. On the other hand, queerness liberates her and becomes a source to challenge societal expectations.

The queer experiences in *Four More Shots Please!* (2019-2022) often glamorizes and dramatizes Umang's queer identity. Resulting in lack of depth and authenticity, raising questions on how mainstream stories represent queer experiences. It is interesting to note that Umang's character explores her sexuality in a patriarchal setting. The researcher felt that *Rainbow Rishta* provides a platform for queer individuals to be represented in their authentic selves. The series attempts to move from a fictional narrative to authentic portrayals of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The intersectional identities highlight the importance of including the representation queer and disabled, queer and working-class, and queer and non-binary experience. Use of unscripted moments strengthens the authentic representation and resonates deeply with the audience. The use of interviews, candid representation, and everyday settings illustrates the challenges, emotional vulnerability faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in India.

Through the analysis of the above series, the researcher observes that there is a progression in the representation of the LGBTQIA+ characters. The characters that were once used for comical relief in storylines are now seen taking the central role. Themes like love, trauma, and resistance against societal norms highlight the challenges and complexities faced by the community. Making the representation of characters relatable and authentic to the audience.

On one hand, a few of the series reinforce the established patriarchal norms by glorifying urban lifestyles. On the other hand, a few of the series challenge the deeply ingrained ideas of gender roles, family honor, and public expression of love. The characters often mirror the real-life tensions between traditional and modern perspectives and ongoing struggles for legal rights and societal acceptance.

Overall, the series contributes to educating the audience about the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Encouraging conversations about the community feel normal and develop empathy towards them. By embedding and humanizing diverse experiences of the LGBTQ+ individuals within the existing family dynamics, personal ambition, and friendships, the storytelling promotes greater understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the community.

4. Conclusion:

The research has observed that the representation of LGBTQ+ identities in a select Hindi OTT series has shifted to more nuances and complex portrayals compared to the historical representation in the mainstream Indian media.

Through the analysis of the series *Made in Heaven*, *His Story*, *The Married Woman*, *Four More Shots Please!*, and *Rainbow Rishta* it can be said that there is a shift from stereotypical and tokenized characters to more realistic and emotionally rich stories of queer experiences.

The findings indicate that themes such as stigma, discrimination, self-acceptance and complexities of the LGBTQ+ individuals within the socio-cultural context is possible due to the freedom from traditional censorship and space for exploring diverse LGBTQ+ stories on OTT platforms.

While there is an evident increase in visibility and narrative centrality of the LGBTQ+ characters, the analysis nudges towards a need for further attention of more complex representation. This can be achieved through the inclusion of the representation of transgenders, non-binary and intersex individual. Can also look at intersectional representation by factoring in aspects like caste, class, religion, and regional identities.

Furthermore, some series challenge the norms while others reinforce certain societal norms. There is also an ongoing debate about whether it is fair for an authentic representation of the community by a straight cast, rather should consider cisgender actors in queer roles.

Hindi OTT series that there is growing awareness and willingness to engage with the LGBTQ+ experiences in more meaningful ways. By this change, there is a possibility of contributing to social change by understanding, challenging, and normalizing the conversation around sexualities and gender identities within the mainstream media. There is scope for exploring the audience perception of these portrayals as well as looking at regional content for a better understanding of the evolving landscape of LGBTQ+ representation on digital media.

References:

1. Arora, A. (2023). Just Like Everyone Else: queer representation in postmillennial bollywood. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2201398>
2. Arya, P (2023) Media Portrayal of Same-Sex Love: A Comparative Analysis between Cinema and OTT. *The Text*, Vol.5, No.2. (July 2023) ISSN: 2581-9526 102
3. Brennan, Joseph. *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans through Homoerotic Possibilities*. University of Iowa Press, 2019
4. Dasgupta, R. K. (2018). Online Romeos and Gay-dia: Exploring Queer Spaces in Digital India (pp. 183–200). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64623-7_10
5. Dey, A (2024) New gender representation on the Indian OTT platform: A study on web series “Made in Heaven”. *The Scientific Temper* (2024) Vol. 15 (1): 1901-1906
6. Dey, M., & Doley, J. (2024). Queering the Norms: From Taboo to Acceptance of Queer Themes in the Contemporary Hindi Cinema. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 4(3), 142–146. <https://doi.org/10.55544/ijrah.4.3.28>
7. Doe, J. (2023). Queering the Norms: From Taboo to Acceptance of Queer Themes in the Contemporary Hindi Cinema. *Journal of Queer Studies*, 12(3), 45-67.
8. Ghildiyal, A, & Jayaswal S (2024). Media Representation Of Women’s With Respect To Ott Platforms In India. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(4), 264–269.
9. Gopinath, G. (2000). Queering Bollywood: alternative sexualities in popular Indian cinema. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39, 283–297. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.1300/J082V39N03_13
10. Lee, J.-H. (2012). Representation of Homosexuality and Related Discourse in. *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, 12(12), 555–566. <https://doi.org/10.5392/JKCA.2012.12.12.555>
11. LGBTQIA Resource Center, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary%23:~:text=LGBTQIA+:%20Abbreviation%20for%20Lesbian,the%20community%20as%20a%20whole>.



12. Mehraj, M. M., & Ajay, A. (2020). Representing the LGBTQ+ Community: A Study of Indian and American Popular Culture in the Last Decade. 1(1), 75–93.
<https://doi.org/10.52253/VJTA.2020.V01I01.08>
13. Mishra. P & Sharma. K (2022). The Portrayal of LGBTQ Community in Indian Web Series: Thematic Analysis of the Married Woman & Four More Shots. Available at SSRN:
<https://ssrn.com/abstract=4071442> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4071442>
14. Rayal.M.S and Padda.P.K (2023) LGBTQ+ Representation in Entertainment Industry. International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology (IJARSCT) Volume 3, Issue 2, March 2023
15. Wani, A. A., & Khan, R. B. (2023). Exploring LGBTQ Representation and Identity in 'The Boyfriend' by R. Raj Rao: A Literary Analysis and Cultural Perspective. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR).