From Screen Queens to Meme Queens: Gender Satire and Performativity in the Age of OTT

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Abstract:

As the production and consumption of content have migrated to digital spaces, a new form of gendered representation has emerged. This new wave is characterized by its humour, irony, and criticism of society. Drawing on popular OTT shows and films, the research examines how gender satire subverts and affirms stereotypes and their repercussions on societal perceptions, especially among youth in urban areas. Through the examination of satire in Indian Over-The-Top (OTT) media, this article explores the evolving portrayal of gender with specific reference to women and gender nonconforming individuals. In this paper, the author analyses a series of over-the-top (OTT) productions that have become meme material or gone viral. The productions are Four More Shots Please, Masaba Masaba, Panchayat, and The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family. The analysis is grounded in content analysis, audience reception theory, and feminist media analysis, which the paper will focus on. In the internet era, gender satire is a double-edged sword, revealing both progressive potential and performative risk. The research sheds light on the dual character of this genre.

Keywords: Gender Representation, satire, OTT platforms, feminist media theory, Indian web shows, memes, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the launch of over-the-top (OTT) services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and ALTBalaji, India's broadcasting landscape has undergone a massive transformation during the last decade. In addition to altering entertainment availability and formats, these creators of digital content have greatly influenced the way social issues, most notably gender, are portrayed. OTT systems allow the kind of creative licence, niche storytelling, and unconventional narrative design that is impossible in traditional TV and films bound by mass-market appeal and censors. This has opened up new discursive spaces where the questioning and criticising of gender norms, identities, and stereotypes is possible.

One of the most encouraging trends we have seen in this ever more potent media landscape is that satire has emerged more and more as both a narrative and performance tool to question established gender norms. To expose the absurdity of patriarchal expectations, homonormative yardsticks, and gender binaries, parody is used by satirical OTT content so often to catastrophic effect. From glammed-up city women navigating social expectations in Four More Shots Please to the quiet role-reversals of power in local government in Panchayat, gender satire holds up a cracked mirror to India's ongoing grappling with equality, representation and identity in the era of the internet.

So as OTT narratives surface, meme culture dominates the digital space as the primary way of communicating. Far from a sweeter internet joke, memes — quick, shareable bits of material that are often funny, and lose meaning once you explain them — are powerful tools when it comes to social critique, identity-building and cultural negotiation. Especially when it comes to audience engagement with gender-related stories, memes have played an increasingly vital role in digital reception and interpretation of media messages in the past few years. This sort of user-generated content is especially important when it comes to shaping opinion about OTT shows since it amplifies specific discussions, images, or personas that generate wo/men cultural and convey the kind of emotions wafted all around us around!" mentality since cultural buzz.

Gender satire, memeification in OTT shows The cross-pollination of gender satire on OTT shows with its memeification raises several questions: What happens when a viewer - celebrating something as viral meme content - tries to understand feminist, LGBT, anti-patriarchal messages? Do memes help further feminist conversation, or do they take away from challenging stories by boiling them down to punch lines? This article explores these relationships, arguing that, while the canvas of the OTT platforms is relatively more progressive for gender meaning-making, the digitally afterlived content on social media tends to change its impact – by expanding meanings at times, or by undermining them at others.

In contrast to Western counterparts, Indian OTT platforms sustain in a socio-culture environment replete with patriarchy, religious orthodoxism and linguistic diversity. The plotlines and character growths in Indian web series usually hark back to the war between modernism and heritage. Whereas The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family takes on toxic masculinity and emotional repression within Indian households, in shows such as Masaba Masaba, satire and self-parody expose the gendered pressures of the fashion and celebrity industry. These are cultural artefacts that both reflect and affect the status of gender in contemporary India, not entertaining fluff pieces.

The genre is notable in part for its intersectionality. Indeed, many OTT stories today are about people who are hybrids, a mix of multiple and overlapping identities: urban AND rural, queer AND working-class, divorced AND ambitious, emotionally simplified AND complicated. Plotlines and character development all indicate this variety, thereby reversing the "ideal woman" stereotype that mainstream Bollywood has been so efficient in upholding. In these narratives, women are also depicted as change makers, professionals, decision makers, and even as flawed anti-heroes instead of just in the role of those who love or spouses that support.

Yet the rise of such progressive pictures also provokes criticism and examination. Another problem is the commodification of feminism, in which pretty, prepackaged empowerment for primarily elite consumers is supplied. Critics argue that while programs like Four More Shots Please further feminist causes, by depicting only affluent, English-speaking urbanite women, they risk excluding the average viewer. Meme culture replicates this expressivity of a select representation: only some talk or characters become viral — frequently with a vision of feminism that is palatable and fun.

One more challenge is the shift of the meaning of material through memes. Memes operate through mimicry and recirculation, according to Shifman (2014), allowing viewers to make their own considerations of source material that may even counter their original intent. When those musings are transformed into memes, feminist or LGBT discussions are typically stripped of context — making barbed criticism casual comedy. (E.g.: if a character were to say something uplifting about taking control of her destiny, it could become a mocking meme, nullifying the original story's striking elemental power.)

Yet for all these paradoxes, meme culture presents new opportunities for participation and activism too. FEMINIST RESISTANCE MEMES: HUMOR AND GENDER INFORMATICS Despite the fact that memes are an ideal tool for conquest and social domination, online memes can also be appropriated by minority groups (Selwyn, 2014). Groups leave the comfort of their digital communities to battle social issues they care about as well, usually challenging and even mocking hegemonic ideologies. Especially among younger viewers who are digital natives, these memes make the circuit across sites like Instagram, Reddit and Twitter, and bring feminist conversation to the masses in an accessible, relevant way. So, meme culture meets OTT facepalm-athon and the meeting point of these two overlapping circles is a fractious but ripe site of media activism and cultural critique.

Drawing on a qualitative approach, which integrates content analysis with case study methods, the study examines how gender satires in Indian OTT web series are produced, and how such satires are mediated by meme culture. It specifically analyses four popular series — Four More Shots Please, Masaba Masaba, Panchayat, and The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family — and views them about character portrayal, devices of satire, audience reaction, and meme-driven trends. The overall focus is to identify trends in how gender stereotypes are confronted or reinforced and assess these memes' generative or reductive potential in shaping cultural discourse on gender.

Positioning itself at the intersection of gender studies, digital media, and cultural studies, this study claims to offer observations on the changing media representation in India. It supplements ongoing academic discussions about media literacy, feminist storytelling, and the politics of digital consumption. And as India continues to produce content for a world-spanning but locally based audience, it becomes all the more essential to have an understanding of how satire and meme culture inform gender narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been various transitions in the way gender is portrayed in the current digital era; especially through emerging formats like web series and friendly memes on social media. And they are entertainment, of course, but they are also political statements and an act of identity, all in a digital format. Recent scholarly work has considered the extent to which these platforms subvert and uphold conventional gender norms, reflecting the complex, at times conflicting, evolution of gender depiction on digital platforms.

Streaming platforms like OTT media services have become powerful spaces in which to change the stories we tell about gender. With TV and films coming with restrictions of it's own, modern web series released on these OTT platforms have the creative freedom no other show can match. This malleability has provided the perfect backdrop to showcase more complex and multi-dimensional female figures. For example: if we consider Indian Hindi web series, they have already started to challenge certain deeply-rooted sex attitudes especially shown through female cops. They are powerful, assertive, independent and professionally adept characters introducing an innovative change in the stereotypical gender binary portrayals that Indian media has been representing for ages (Shukla & Deka, 2023). By people stocking women in what are traditionally considered male roles, e.g., as figures of physical authority or leadership, characters who make moral decisions, etc., these web series ask us to rethink the patriarchal scripts that have automatically cast women as creatures in the wings, creatures of passivity, emotion, or nurturing.

One such example is the portrayal of women cops in popular Hindi web-series such as Delhi Crime or She, where women lead narratives of crime investigation and justice. The Characters In addition to serving as vital components of a narrative that hinges on identity, these characters are shown wrestling with their

own complex identities—juggling their duties as professionals with the battles they face as women, searching to be respected in male spaces and making strides in spaces not generally welcoming to change. This kind of imagery marks a change in the cultural imaginary of gender relations by calling into question viewers' biases and expectations when it comes to gender and power.

Meanwhile, digital media has given birth to no less influential a cultural form: the internet meme. Memes — often funny, certainly fast-multiplying in the social media age — are now as pervasive as news, opinions and feelings in a digital era. The concept of "memeability"—how meme-able a subject is—has become an increasingly discussed topic, especially within celebrity culture. Mercer and Sarson (2020) note how the drag queens of the popular reality television program RuPaul's Drag Race have honed the art of memeability. Their cartoony, campy characters make for both appealing and widely shared content. Through clever catchphrases, extravagant fashions, and dramatic mugging, these queens produce a non-stop supply of memeable moments that help propel them to stardom online and awareness of their brand. Meanwhile, this meme-fueled infamy is not all about virality, though. It's an indication of a larger dynamic between performance, identity, and digital culture. Drag — as a medium — is inherently exaggerated, often crossing the lines of the gender binary and parodying those differences. When drag performers are memed, their personalities are participating in mainstream digital conversation and bringing new audiences to queer and alternative gender expressions. This, of course, opens up wider discussions of reflexivity, performativity, and the social constructedness of gender, etc.

Yet the same digital environments that make progressive and queer-positive representations possible can also serve as venues for regressive and misogynistic sensibilities. Internet memes, despite their comical packaging, are sometimes guilty of enshrining and striking down onto a brick of clay the patriarchy. Drakett et al. (2018) discuss how much of the media people consume in the form of memes purportedly for laughs secretly (or now not so secretly) upholds sexist' beliefs. These can be jokes that demean women's smarts, mock people who are emotional, or glorify what men should be tested on (emulsifying an engine). The viral spread of memes serves to further amplify and ritualize such stereotypes, particularly among younger, impressionable viewers.

These memes' humour is at the same time a rhetorical shield—how could you be offended if they're just jokes?—and an untenable position to critique, lest you be called humorless and oppressed. This rhetorical dodge makes violent sex-based rhetoric seem less horrible and easier to ignore, perpetuating a culture in which sexism is dismissed as harmless fun. Further, social media algorithms are programmed in a way that encourages engagement and shareability, which potentially end up valuing content that is provocative or sensationalist to the detriment of gender-harmful materials.

At the same time, digital media provide a rich terrain for feminist resistance and the reappropriation of the breast. Political memes, especially used by feminist collectives, are being increasingly utilized to counter patriarchal norms in one such example by the Women's Liberation Front. O'Meara (2018) investigates how feminist themes and messages from popular culture are appropriated within memes, particularly in the face of political upheavals like the current Trump administration. These have become viral hits critiquing sexism, speaking up for reproductive rights and advocating for gender equality, with catchphrases from female-centric TV shows or speeches by notable women leaders adapted for a new viral age.

It's a trend that speaks to the growing politicization of the digital every day. Memes with a feminist twist are no different – packed with punchy humour, they help put challenging topics into bite-sized context and are thus accessible to a wider audience. They provide a venue for micro-activism, enacting dissent,

spreading awareness, and solidarity to digital communities. Instead of traditional protests that need people's bodies and actions, protest memes enable participation in political discourse through a simple click, sharing, liking, or creating content that reflects their views.

What these studies share is their demonstration of the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of gender representation in digital culture. On the one hand, web series and meme cultures can offer spaces for making progressive, feminist, and queer identities, countering dominant discourses and broadening the cultural imaginary of gender. At the same time, they can propagate and validate backward stereotypes — humorously, or so they think. This dichotomy helps establish the value of critical media literacy in this digital world.

Also, one cannot discount the degree to which audience engagement contributes to the creation of digital gendered narratives. Readers and viewers are no longer simply receivers but active transmitters of content. Their decisions — what to watch, what to share, what to meme — shape the cultural meanings that develop online. That is why the changing digital image of gender isn't just about production but about consumption, and not only consumption, either, but interactivity.

In the end, the digital world is a middle space for the struggle between the old and the new gender norms. From the newly empowered women cops in Indian web series to the memeable identities of drag performers, and from sexists' jokes under the guise of humour to feminist memes that have turned viral as political tools—the portrayal of gender in digital media is a microcosm of the larger societial negotiations around identity, power and difference. As digital culture transforms, so will its representations of gender.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative by employing content analysis and the case study method about gender satire in selected Indian OTT series. The methodology involves:

Content Analysis: In-Depth Analysis of Characterisations, Storytelling Devices and Satire in Selected Web Series.

The reception of (Online) Audiences: Analysis of user comments, meme formats, and audience reactions on social media (e.g. on Instagram, Twitter, Reddit).

Thematic Coding: Searching for commonality of gender stereotypes and gender norm subversions in digital content.

Selection Criteria for Cases: Inclusion, popularity, and meme coverage were used as rationale for selection of the shows.

The primary data consists of episodes of the chosen OTT series which is the actual content while the secondary data has review articles and online articles and audience commentaries on digital media.

Case Studies (Elaborated)

This section focuses on select Indian OTT web series that are influential, popular, or meme-relevant. These cases provide examples of the manifold forms of gender satire within urban and rural settings, celebrity, and the family.

3.1. Four More Shots Please (Amazon Prime Video)

Four More Shots Please! trails the lives of four privileged city girls- Damini, Umang, Anjana, and Siddhi in their long and arduous journey through professional ambitions, romantic associations, and personal growth in the heart of Bombay. The series has frequently been positioned as India's answer to Sex and the City, replete with bold feminist subtext, discussions of and meditation on sexuality, workplace sexism, mental health and body image.

Satire and Gender:

Through sharp dialogue and stylized settings, the series is a critique of double standards placed on women. For instance, Damini fighting as a fearless journalist makes media misogyny; Anjana being a single parent brings out society's perception on motherhood and sex.

There's humor in the mix and irony in the mix, playing around with everyday sexism, including the ways that male wordly characters (for whom these women seem to be an increasingly uncomfortable challenge) respond when women are the aggressive party, or the acceptably aggressive party, and when female desire — to have a "good arrangement," let's say — can be trotted out as a fact in conversation.

Meme Culture and Reception:

The show is meme-ified most often for its dramatic one-liners ("Cheers to the mistakes we never learned from!") and fairy tale-style imagery, inciting fears that its feminist values are being blanched down to purely aesthetic consumption.

The response on social media is also divided: Some celebrate its boldness, while others criticize it for depicting empowerment as something only of a certain class.

Positive Change:

The normalization of conversations around bisexuality (Umang's character) and mental health (Siddhi's body-image struggle and her tryst with therapy) represent a significant stride in mainstream storytelling.

Attributing the central position, rather than secondary one, to female friendship is definitely a desirable avoidance of male model.

3.2. Masaba Masaba (Netflix)

Somewhere between fact and fiction, Masaba Masaba is based on the life of designer Masaba Gupta, providing a peek into her messy, high-maintenance life, complete with friends, parents, and lover. It mixes satire of celebrity with musings on gender roles and the fashion industry.

Satirical and Gender Factors:

The show also pokes fun at Bollywood's obsession with youth, beauty and legacy, particularly in the way Masaba grapples with image pressures and dealings with casting agents, reporters and clients.

It employs self deprecating humor and meta-narratives (think Masaba playing a fictionalized version of herself) to bring out gender-based pressures in creative fields.

Memes and cultural impact:

There are a plethora of memes out there stemming from Masaba's exasperated looks or witty retorts, as in, "Why is everyone suddenly an expert on my life?" And these memes serve as shorthand for millennial women trying to get by in a world of judgmental eyes.

This satire of wellness culture and performative feminism is also meme-able — commentary like "This is what healing looks like, in Fendi" critiques our commercialized conceptions of self-care.

Positive Change:

The show highlights women of color and mixed heritage, quietly tackling colorism and ethnic identity in Indian media.

Featuring a single, divorced and ambitious woman as its protagonist, Masaba Masaba shatters age-old gender binaries of success and domesticity.

3.3. Panchayat (Amazon Prime Video) This short but refreshing comedy follows an electronics graduate who unwillingly agrees to work in a small village amid difficult circumstances.

Based on a fictitious rural village Panchayat is the story of Abhishek, an unwilling city-bred man who settles for a job of a secretary in Panchayat office. Even as the engine for the main plot is his bureaucratic

battles, the women in the story, particularly Manju Devi (the official Pradhan's wife), command our attention through silent but strong acts of resistance.

(Another) Satire About the Sexes in the Countryside:

The show sends up male-dominated bureaucracies, doing its part to point out that real power more often resides with women like Manju Devi, even if their titles are, on paper, more nominal.

In one memorable sequence, when officials take her husband to be the real authority, Manju Devi gently puts them in their place, asserting her constitutional standing as the elected Pradhan.

Memes and Audience Response:

Memes based on Panchayat usually centre around its subtle humour, with its dry one-liners and expressions ("Ye toh extra hai, sir") becoming a part of pop culture memes.

It was not an overtly feminist novel, if that means that it's about a woman's place in the world, but Hemalatha's experience of gender roles in rural India clearly struck a chord.

Positive Change:

With no melodrama, this film is a genuinely respectful representation of the rural women – not as helpless or dependent but as quietly powerful agents.

The show disrupts urban assumptions about rural gender relations and indicates agency functioning in different ways in non-urban zones.

3.4. The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family (ALTBalaji) A man and his siblings suspect their parents of extramarital affairs and a murder.

This tale of family drama, set in the backdrop of a traditional joint household that's coming apart at the seams under the weight of toxic masculinity, stifled emotions and intergenerational trauma, revolves around the Ranauts. The show, through its heavily flawed male protagonists and strong-willed females, offers a commentary on the emotional repression perpetuated in Indian homes.

Mockery of Masculinity and Family:

The show satirizes society's patriarchal demands on men to be stoic, dominant figures. Such as: the tension between Vikram and Samar is implied as unresolved sibling rivalry and an inability to communicate vulnerability.

Women in such series, such as Geeta (the matriarch) and Sonali (Samar's wife) come across as emotionally intelligent, people able to face up to family dysfunction, compared to those emotionally stunted leading the male roles.

Meme Culture and Reception:

Less than meme-famous but compressed for reels and image macros sniping about Indian family politics ("Beta toh engineer ban gaya, par baap se baat nahi karta"), its emotionally intense scenes remain widely heard.

Positive Change:

The show's condemnation of toxic masculinity and its celebration of emotional transparency is a welcome turn away from the typical lionization of the strong, silent male protagonist.

It implies that embodiment and vulnerability are universal conditions, and that mental health stories can be heard and transmitted through the family.

32 4.4 Synthesizing Case Study Insights

The case studies show a diverse range of gender satire — from flamboyant and urban (Four More Shots Please, Masaba Masaba) to low-key and rural (Panchayat) and emotionally nuanced (The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family). Across the board:

Satirical Devices:H:umor, irony and self-awareness are employed to subvert gender norms, but their success is dependent on audience awareness.

The Effects of Memes: Memes are both bridges and barriers — a way of multiplying feminist moments while also sometimes robbing them of their depth, a way of turning protest into entertainment cliché.

Emerging Positives: More LGBTQ+ and the additive parts of female identity (divorced women, professional women, rural women), the normalizing of therapy and feelings, and the threats to patriarchal authority whether legal, familial, or professionally are glimmers of true narrative development.

Results

The selected Indian OTT web series—Four More Shots Please, Masaba Masaba, Panchayat, and The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family—were analysed qualitatively using content analysis, thematic coding and audience reception, and the following findings emerged: (a) Key Findings:

Satirical approaches differed in tone and context across series: Four More Shots Please and Masaba Masaba both used unambiguous, stylized and urban-centric satire; Panchayat and The Great Indian Dysfunctional Family featured more understated, context-specific critiques set in rural or traditional family environments.

Women are now looking beyond traditional binaries. Characters such as Umang (Four More Shots Please) and Masaba (Masaba Masaba) represent intersectional feminist identities which defy societal norms.

Audience reaction demonstrated that the meme culture serves a Janus-faced purpose: on the one hand, it lends wide visibility to feminist and queer content, on the other, it erases the nuances of these narratives, when spirited dialogues turn into memeable content in the absence of their context.

They have generally criticised themes of emotional repression, toxic masculinity and bureaucratic patriarchy. Interestingly, Panchayat used realism and dry humour to critique gender roles effectively and was also able to resonate well even with non-urban audiences.

Meme challenges were usually more about humor and relatability rather than the serious message behind the song. This could in some cases amount to the watering down or mere selling out of feminist and gender-progressive content.

Discussion

The results highlight the nuanced and layered dynamics of satire, gender representation, and digital culture in the Indian OTT context.

Satire as a feminist weapon : With satire, the creators have been able to take on the norm of patriarchy in a way that is easy to digest but it is still satire. For example, Masaba's experience as a woman in fashion is incredibly funny, and also has sharp truths about gendered labor, expectations and branding.

OTT for digital afterlife of satire: The idea of "memeability" (Mercer & Sarson, 2020) becomes very significant for creating the digital afterlife of OTT content. Though it allows more people to engage with media, it also supports selective consumption, potentially furthering the stereotypes it aims to overcome.

Intersectionality The chosen web series are made up of people with varied gendered experiences, from urban elite women to rural leaders. Yet, there is an urban slant to how feminism is created, particularly in Four More Shots Please, where empowerment is synonymous with wealth, free time and spending.

Audience agency: Audiences are not passive; as user comments and meme generation reveal that content can be interpreted, subverted, or even opposed. In "Panchayat," Manju Devi's character is being

celebrated as a stealthy feminist icon, but the show itself — though it doesn't market her as such — isn't marketing anyone as such.

Misreading satire: The research confirms O'Meara's (2018) contention that memes can weaponize and defuse political expression. A feminist exchange taken out of context can be presented as a joke, and it detaches those jokey fragments from a history of debate.

CONCLUSION

Gender satire in Indian OTT: A step forward in content that leads to broadening feminism, character agency and viewer participation, but meme culture's commodification of feminist stories takes on a double edge.

This medium empowers by making it possible to criticize traditional gender roles and to raise voices, but viralization of memes in the form of satire frequently flattens the complicated narratives into entertainment culture pieces. This requires a more media-savvy audience and content creation that is more thoughtful about its digital afterlife.

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