

REWRITING WOMANHOOD: FEMINIST NEGOTIATIONS OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI WEB SERIES

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The rapid expansion of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms has transformed India's visual media landscape, reshaping storytelling practices, viewing habits, and modes of cultural participation. Within this evolving terrain, web series have emerged as important sites for the reconfiguration of gendered identities and social relations. This study examines the representation and negotiation of female subjectivity in three Hindi web series: *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya*, which occupy a prominent position within India's contemporary OTT ecosystem. Adopting a qualitative feminist research framework, the study employs close textual and critical discourse analysis to explore how these narratives engage with questions of agency, desire, labour, morality, motherhood, and selfhood. The analysis is informed by significant interventions in cultural and feminist theory, including 1997 Stuart Hall's theorisation of representation; 1990 Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity; feminist visual culture viz., Mulvey, Gill, McRobbie, 1989 Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, and debates surrounding audience participation and meaning-making. By situating them within broader socio-cultural contexts, it investigates the ways in which gendered identities are produced, contested, and circulated through digital media. It further considers how platform economies, narrative flexibility, and audience engagement shape the articulation of women's experiences on screen and positions them as complex cultural spaces that actively reshapes contemporary discourses of femininity, power, and gender politics.

Keywords: Neoliberal post-feminism, female subjectivity, feminist media, OTT platforms, Hindi web series, Indian visual culture

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of Over-The-Top (OTT) streaming platforms in India has significantly reshaped the landscape of popular visual culture, enabling new narrative forms, audiences, and representational possibilities. Unlike mainstream Hindi cinema and television, which have historically operated within rigid moral, aesthetic, and regulatory frameworks, digital platforms have facilitated more experimental storytelling, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Contemporary Hindi web series increasingly centre women's interior lives, professional ambitions, sexual desires, and ethical dilemmas, marking a notable departure from the sacrificial, idealised, or morally polarised figures that have long dominated representations of Indian womanhood. This shift invites critical feminist inquiry into how female subjectivity is being reimagined, negotiated, and constrained within the political economy of digital media. Additionally, feminist media scholarship has consistently emphasised representation as a key site where gendered meanings are produced, circulated, and contested (Hall, 1997; Van Zoonen, 1994). Media texts do not merely reflect social realities; they actively participate in constructing norms around femininity, agency, and power. Within this framework, the increased visibility of women protagonists in Hindi web series appears to signal feminist progress. However, scholars caution against reading visibility as synonymous with liberation. Postfeminist and neoliberal media cultures often reframe empowerment through individual choice, self-fashioning, and consumption, displacing structural critiques of patriarchy, caste, and labour (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). As such, feminist representation in popular media is frequently marked by contradiction, simultaneously enabling new forms of agency while reproducing exclusions.

Theoretical interventions from feminist and intersectional thought are crucial to unpacking these contradictions. Butler's (1990) conception of gender as performative foregrounds femininity as an unstable and reiterated set of acts rather than a fixed identity, allowing for an analysis of how women characters negotiate normative expectations within serialised narratives. Similarly, Crenshaw's (1989) formulation of intersectionality highlights how gender is always lived through other axes of power, including class, sexuality, age, and labour. While contemporary

Hindi web series often gesture towards diversity through multiple female protagonists, questions remain regarding whose feminism is being represented and which forms of difference are marginalised or rendered invisible. Visual culture theory further complicates these debates by drawing attention to the politics of looking and desire. Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze remains foundational in understanding how women's bodies have been historically objectified within cinematic regimes. Although OTT platforms appear to disrupt these conventions by foregrounding female desire and subjective narration, feminist scholars argue that aestheticized sexuality can coexist with new forms of regulation and commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this context, feminist representation becomes entangled with market imperatives, branding strategies, and audience targeting, raising questions about the limits of resistance within platform-driven media environments.

Literature Review

Feminist Media Studies and the Politics of Representation

Feminist media studies have long interrogated how popular culture functions as a key site for the production and regulation of gendered meanings. Early feminist scholarship challenged the marginalisation, stereotyping, and moral containment of women in mass media, arguing that representation is inseparable from power (Van Zoonen, 1994). Stuart Hall's (1997) influential theory of representation further conceptualises media texts as discursive systems that actively construct meaning rather than neutrally reflecting social reality. Within this framework, representations of women are understood as ideological formations that normalise particular versions of femininity while excluding others.

Visual media, especially serialised narratives, play a significant role in shaping cultural understandings of womanhood by repeatedly staging gendered norms across time. Feminist scholars emphasise the importance of textual analysis in unpacking these ideological operations, particularly in popular genres that claim realism or progressiveness (Gill, 2007). While increased female visibility has often been celebrated as feminist advancement, scholars caution that representational change

does not necessarily translate into structural transformation. Instead, contemporary media frequently produce what McRobbie (2009) terms a “postfeminist masquerade”, in which feminist gains are simultaneously acknowledged and undone. This tension is particularly relevant in the context of OTT platforms, where claims of creative freedom coexist with commercial imperatives. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism has become increasingly entangled with branding, visibility, and marketability, raising critical questions about which feminist ideas circulate widely and which remain marginal.

Gender Performativity, Subjectivity, and Serial Narratives

Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a crucial lens for analysing female subjectivity in contemporary screen media. Butler challenges essentialist notions of gender by conceptualising it as a repeated set of acts shaped by social norms and regulatory frameworks. This understanding is particularly productive for analysing serialised storytelling, where characters evolve across episodes and seasons, allowing femininity to be continuously negotiated rather than fixed.

Feminist television scholarship has highlighted how long-form narratives offer space for complexity, contradiction, and moral ambiguity in women characters (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Rather than relying on idealised or exemplary figures, contemporary series increasingly foreground flawed, conflicted women navigating work, intimacy, and selfhood. However, scholars note that such complexity is often unevenly distributed, with middle- and upper-class women more likely to be granted narrative interiority and ethical depth (Gill & Scharff, 2011). In Indian visual culture, female subjectivity has historically been constrained by ideals of sacrifice, respectability, and familial duty (Chakravarti, 1993). While OTT platforms appear to disrupt these norms by centring women’s desires and ambitions, feminist critics argue that these shifts must be read within broader socio-economic structures that privilege urban, English-speaking, and elite experiences.

The Gaze, Desire, and Feminist Visual Politics

The representation of women’s bodies and desire has been a central concern of feminist film theory. Mulvey’s (1975) seminal critique

of the male gaze exposed how classical cinema positions women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed male spectator. Subsequent feminist scholars have expanded and revised this framework, examining how women can occupy positions of looking, desire, and narrative agency while still being subject to commodification. OTT platforms, less constrained by censorship regimes, have enabled more explicit representations of female sexuality in Indian screen culture. Scholars such as Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) note that mainstream Hindi cinema has historically oscillated between moral repression and punitive narratives surrounding female desire. Contemporary web series, by contrast, often frame sexuality as exploratory and self-affirming. Yet feminist media studies caution against equating sexual visibility with political subversion. As Gill (2007) argues, postfeminist media frequently repackage sexual agency within narrow norms of confidence, attractiveness, and self-regulation.

Recent scholarship on Indian digital media suggests that representations of sexual freedom are often aestheticized and depoliticised, aligning with elite sensibilities while remaining disconnected from broader struggles around sexual rights and gendered violence (Dutta, 2021). Thus, feminist visual politics in OTT spaces remain marked by ambivalence, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing dominant power structures.

Intersectionality and the Limits of Inclusion

Intersectionality has become a central analytic framework within feminist scholarship for understanding how multiple axes of identity shape lived experience. Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work emphasises that gender cannot be examined in isolation from race, class, sexuality, and other structures of power. Subsequent feminist scholars, particularly from the Global South, have extended this framework to critique the universalisation of Western, middle-class feminist subjects (Mohanty, 2003). In the Indian context, feminist media scholarship highlights the persistent marginalisation of caste, regional inequality, and informal labour in mainstream representations of womanhood (John, 2015). While contemporary Hindi web series often gesture towards diversity through ensemble casts and intergenerational narratives, class remains

the dominant axis of representation. Urban, professional women are positioned as the primary subjects of feminist storytelling, while rural, working-class, and Dalit women remain largely invisible.

This selective engagement with intersectionality reflects what Rao (2023) describes as the “metropolitan bias” of Indian digital culture, shaped by platform economics and aspirational audience targeting. Feminism, in this context, becomes a cultural resource that is unevenly accessible and unevenly represented.

Neoliberalism, Post-feminism, and Media Culture

A substantial body of feminist scholarship critiques the alignment between contemporary media feminism and neoliberal ideology. Postfeminist media culture, according to McRobbie (2009), displaces collective politics in favour of individual responsibility, self-improvement, and personal choice. Gill (2007) similarly identifies a “confidence culture” in which women are encouraged to manage insecurity and failure through self-work rather than structural critique. This framework is particularly relevant to OTT narratives, where empowerment is frequently articulated through professional success, emotional resilience, and consumer choice. While such narratives expand the range of female representation, they also risk depoliticising gender inequality by framing it as a personal rather than systemic problem. Feminist scholars therefore argue for a critical reading of popular media that attends to both what is made visible and what is structurally excluded.

Locating Hindi Web Series within Feminist Media Scholarship

Despite the growing cultural influence of Hindi web series, academic scholarship on Indian OTT content remains emergent. Existing studies primarily focus on censorship, platform economics, or audience reception, with limited sustained engagement with feminist theory. This study addresses this gap by bringing feminist media studies, intersectionality, and visual culture theory into dialogue with contemporary Hindi web series.

By analysing the select web series, this study situates Indian OTT narratives within broader feminist debates about representation, subjectivity, and neoliberalism. Rather than evaluating these series in

terms of feminist success or failure, the literature reviewed here supports an approach that understands popular media as contradictory cultural forms, where feminist possibilities coexist with market constraints and ideological limits.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist media theory and cultural studies, drawing on intersecting theoretical traditions that conceptualise representation, gender, and power as socially produced and politically contested. The framework brings together theories of representation, gender performativity, feminist visual culture, and intersectionality to analyse how contemporary Hindi web series construct and negotiate female subjectivity within the socio-economic conditions of OTT platforms. Rather than treating media texts as either emancipatory or oppressive, these theoretical perspectives enable an analysis attentive to contradiction, ambivalence, and negotiation.

Representation as Discursive Practice

Central to this study is Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which understands meaning as produced through discourse rather than passively reflected by media texts. Representation is not a neutral process but a site where cultural meanings are constructed, circulated, and struggled over. Within popular media, representations of women shape dominant understandings of femininity, agency, and morality by repeatedly normalising certain traits while marginalising others. This approach is particularly relevant to OTT narratives, where serialised storytelling allows gendered meanings to be reiterated, modified, and contested over time. Hall's framework also foregrounds the role of power in representation. Media texts operate within institutional and economic constraints that shape what can be said, shown, or imagined. In the context of Hindi web series, representation is shaped by platform economies, audience demographics, and globalised aesthetics. Feminist representation, therefore, must be read not simply in terms of content but in relation to the discursive and industrial conditions under which it is produced (Van Zoonen, 1994). This study adopts Hall's approach to examine how female subjectivity is articulated through dialogue, narrative arcs, and visual framing, as well as what forms of womanhood remain absent or marginalised.

Gender Performativity and Female Subjectivity

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a key conceptual tool for analysing female subjectivity in these series. Butler challenges essentialist notions of gender by arguing that femininity is constituted through repeated acts that are regulated by social norms. Gender, in this sense, is neither fixed nor fully autonomous but produced through ongoing negotiation with dominant expectations. This theoretical lens is especially productive for analysing serialised web narratives, where characters evolve across episodes and seasons. Female protagonists in contemporary Hindi web series often oscillate between conformity and resistance, performing femininity in ways that are unstable and situational. Butler's framework allows this study to move beyond binary readings of empowerment versus oppression, instead focusing on how agency emerges within constraint. Female subjectivity is thus understood as contingent, relational, and shaped by institutional forces such as family, work, and the law.

Importantly, performativity does not imply unlimited freedom. Butler (1990) emphasises that performances of gender are constrained by norms that define what is intelligible or acceptable. In Hindi web series, women's transgressions are often tolerated when they align with urban, elite norms of selfhood, revealing the classed limits of feminist possibility. This study uses performativity to examine how female agency is enabled, disciplined, and rendered intelligible within neoliberal media cultures.

Feminist Visual Culture and the Politics of the Gaze

Feminist film theory provides another crucial dimension to the theoretical framework, particularly in relation to the visual representation of women's bodies and desires. Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze exposed how classical cinema positions women as objects of visual pleasure within patriarchal structures of looking. Although OTT platforms appear to disrupt these conventions by foregrounding female desire and subjective narration, feminist scholars argue that the gaze remains a contested and unstable terrain. Subsequent feminist critiques have demonstrated that women can occupy positions of looking and

desire while still being subjected to commodification and aesthetic regulation (Gill, 2007). This study draws on these revisions to analyse how contemporary Hindi web series frame female sexuality, intimacy, and embodiment. The question is not simply whether women are visible or desiring, but how desire is visualised, aestheticized, and legitimised.

In this framework, visual pleasure is understood as politically charged. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that popular feminism often relies on visibility and affect to signal empowerment, even as it aligns with consumer culture. This study therefore examines whether representations of female desire in Hindi web series function as feminist interventions or as commodified spectacles designed for elite audiences. Feminist visual culture theory enables a critical engagement with the limits of sexual visibility as a form of resistance.

Intersectionality and Feminist Difference

Intersectionality forms a foundational component of the theoretical framework, addressing the limitations of gender-only analyses. Crenshaw's (1989) formulation of intersectionality highlights how gender is always experienced in conjunction with other axes of power, including class, sexuality, age, and labour. This approach challenges universalised representations of womanhood and foregrounds structural inequality.

In Indian feminist scholarship, intersectionality has been extended to critique the marginalisation of caste, regional identity, and informal labour within dominant feminist narratives (Mohanty, 2003; John, 2015). While contemporary Hindi web series often gesture towards diversity through ensemble casts and intergenerational storylines, class remains the primary axis through which female subjectivity is articulated. Intersectionality, in this study, is used both as an analytic tool and a critical lens to examine the limits of inclusion within OTT feminism.

Rather than measuring these texts against an ideal of intersectional representation, this framework treats absence and marginality as analytically significant. What is not represented is as revealing as what is made visible. This approach aligns with Hall's (1997) understanding

of representation as a site of struggle, where meaning is negotiated but never resolved.

Neoliberalism, Post-feminism, and Media Power

Finally, this framework situates feminist representation within critiques of neoliberal and postfeminist media culture. Scholars argue that contemporary media increasingly frame empowerment through individual choice, emotional resilience, and self-management, displacing collective politics and structural critique (McRobbie, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2011). This logic is particularly visible in OTT narratives, where female success is often measured through professional achievement and personal fulfilment. By integrating postfeminist critique into the framework, this study examines how feminist ideas are incorporated, diluted, or neutralised within market-driven media environments. Feminism is not rejected but rearticulated in ways that are compatible with consumer capitalism. This theoretical lens allows the study to read Hindi web series as ambivalent cultural texts, where feminist aspirations coexist with ideological containment.

Background and Objectives

Against these (above) backdrops, the present study examines *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya* as emblematic texts within contemporary Hindi OTT culture. Rather than treating these series as either unequivocally feminist or inherently regressive, the article approaches them as ambivalent cultural sites where feminist aspirations intersect with neoliberal logics and class privilege. By analysing how female subjectivity is articulated through desire, labour, motherhood, and moral ambiguity, this research contributes to ongoing debates in feminist media studies about representation, power, and the politics of visibility in the Global South. Ultimately, the article argues that these web series do not simply rewrite womanhood but expose the contested terrain on which contemporary feminist meanings are being negotiated in digital India.

The study explores the construction and negotiation of female subjectivity in select contemporary Hindi web series within India's evolving OTT landscape, focusing on the narrative articulation of agency, desire, and moral complexity. It critically examines how these

representations are shaped by neoliberal ideologies, class privilege, and intersectional dynamics, revealing the cultural frameworks that both enable and constrain women's portrayal in digital media. Situating these series as contradictory cultural texts rather than unequivocally progressive or regressive, the research contributes to feminist media scholarship by analysing the ambivalent politics of representation in which visibility and empowerment coexist with structural exclusion and market-driven logics, reflecting transitional forms of feminist engagement in twenty-first-century India.

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine how contemporary Hindi web series construct and negotiate female subjectivity.
2. To analyse the representation of women's agency, desire, and moral complexity within these narratives.
3. To investigate the influence of neoliberal ideologies and class structures on gender representation.
4. To explore how intersectional factors inform and shape portrayals of women in the Indian OTT media landscape.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative feminist methodological approach, combining textual analysis with critical discourse analysis to examine how female subjectivity is constructed, negotiated, and constrained in contemporary Hindi web series. Feminist media scholarship emphasises that close textual engagement is essential for uncovering the ideological operations embedded within popular culture (Van Zoonen, 1994; Gill, 2007). Given the serialised, character-driven nature of OTT narratives, textual analysis allows for sustained attention to dialogue, visual framing, character development, and narrative structure. Such an approach foregrounds the discursive and aesthetic strategies through which gendered meanings are produced, while remaining attentive to the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which these texts circulate.

Selection of Texts

The series selected for analysis, *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya* were chosen purposively rather than representatively. These texts are widely circulated, critically discussed, and explicitly centred on women protagonists, making them productive sites for examining feminist claims within Indian streaming culture. All three series are set primarily in urban, upper- or upper-middle-class milieus, enabling a comparative investigation of how class privilege intersects with gendered agency. The study does not claim to capture the entirety of Hindi web content; instead, these series function as case studies illustrative of broader trends in feminist representation and neoliberal postfeminist sensibilities in digital India.

Analytical Framework

The study's analytical framework draws on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which conceptualises meaning as discursively produced rather than passively reflected. Representation is treated as a site of ideological struggle, where competing social norms and power relations are negotiated. This perspective allows for an examination of how female subjectivity is framed in terms of agency, desire, morality, and relationality. Complementing Hall, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity is employed to interrogate how femininity is enacted, repeated, and constrained within normative structures. This framework facilitates a reading of women characters not as fixed or essentialised figures, but as agents whose identities are contingent, relational, and contextually shaped. The notion of performativity is particularly useful in serialised narratives, where characters evolve across episodes and seasons, negotiating social expectations in different contexts.

The analysis of visual representation is informed by feminist film theory, particularly Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze and its subsequent revisions. These theories provide tools to interrogate how women's bodies, desires, and sexualities are framed visually, and how the positioning of the spectator contributes to normative understandings of gender and power. While OTT platforms often foreground female desire and subjective perspectives, feminist critiques emphasise that visibility alone does not guarantee subversion, especially when

depoliticised or aestheticized (Dutta, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2018). The study also incorporates intersectionality as theorised by Crenshaw (1989) and extended in Global South feminist scholarship. Intersectionality is employed to examine how gender intersects with class, sexuality, age, labour, and motherhood, shaping the scope and limits of female agency. In practice, this framework allows for an analysis that considers both what is represented and what remains absent, recognising that power and marginalisation operate across multiple, overlapping axes.

Finally, the framework is attentive to neoliberal and postfeminist logics, following the work of Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009). These perspectives enable a critical reading of how contemporary Hindi web series articulate empowerment through individual choice, self-management, and emotional resilience, often within frameworks that privilege urban, economically secure, and cosmopolitan subjectivities. By integrating this lens, the study situates feminist representation within the political economy of OTT platforms, recognising the constraints imposed by audience targeting, market imperatives, and platform aesthetics.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three interrelated stages. First, textual and visual analysis is conducted to identify recurring patterns in dialogue, narrative structure, and framing of female characters. Second, these patterns are interpreted through the lenses of gender performativity, the gaze, and intersectionality to understand how subjectivity, desire, and agency are articulated. Third, critical discourse analysis contextualises these representations within broader social, cultural, and economic frameworks, particularly neoliberalism, urbanity, and class privilege. Together, these methods provide a comprehensive understanding of how female subjectivity is negotiated in contemporary Indian Hindi web series.

This approach does not treat the series as either wholly emancipatory or wholly regressive. Instead, they are approached as contradictory cultural texts, shaped simultaneously by feminist aspirations, neoliberal postfeminist logic, and platform-driven imperatives. Such ambivalence is central to understanding the politics of representation in OTT environments, where visibility, desire, and moral complexity coexist with structural exclusions and market constraints.

Discussion

Negotiating Female Subjectivity in Urban Spaces

A recurring feature of *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya* is the articulation of female subjectivity within urban, upper- and upper-middle-class milieus. The protagonists are positioned as active agents navigating professional ambitions, intimate relationships, and ethical dilemmas. In *Four More Shots Please!*, female desire, sexual, emotional, and aspirational, is foregrounded, signalling a shift from the desexualised or morally regulated women of earlier Hindi television and film (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Similarly, *Bombay Begums* presents a multi-generational ensemble negotiating corporate hierarchies, personal trauma, and relational labour, while *Aarya* situates agency within moral and legal transgression, blending domestic responsibility with strategic empowerment.

However, analysis reveals that these narratives are constrained by classed and neoliberal logics. Women's agency is frequently legible only within contexts of economic capital, urban mobility, and social privilege. Following Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009), these series exemplify the postfeminist framing of empowerment as a personal, self-managed project rather than a collective or structural struggle. The characters' struggles, workplace sexism, failed relationships, and emotional vulnerability, unfold in worlds largely insulated from caste-based marginalisation, rural precarity, or systemic labour exploitation. In this sense, the series reflect Banet-Weiser's (2018) notion of branded feminism: aspirational, consumable, and unevenly distributed.

Female Desire and the Reconfiguration of the Gaze

A salient aspect of contemporary Hindi web series is the visibility of female desire, which marks a significant departure from mainstream cinematic conventions. In *Four More Shots Please!*, women occupy the position of desiring subjects rather than passive objects, challenging the traditional male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Yet, as Dutta (2021) argues, visibility alone is insufficient for subversion; desire is often aestheticized and tailored to elite, urban audiences. *Bombay Begums* presents a more

ambivalent negotiation of desire, where vulnerability, shame, and relational power asymmetries coexist with sexual agency. Queer desire is also foregrounded, though constrained within cosmopolitan contexts.

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity illuminates these portrayals by framing sexuality and identity as contingent, enacted, and negotiated within social and institutional norms. The protagonists' sexual choices are significant, yet intelligible primarily when they align with urban, economically secure, and socially mobile subjectivities. Consequently, the series simultaneously expand the representational terrain of female desire while revealing the limits of normative disruption.

Motherhood, Moral Ambiguity, and Labour

Aarya represents a notable intervention in the depiction of motherhood and ethical agency. The protagonist's transformation from domestic figure to criminal matriarch challenges traditional moral binaries associated with Indian womanhood (Chakravarti, 1993). Motherhood emerges as both a source of motivation and constraint, complicating idealised narratives of self-sacrifice. Emotional and economic labour is foregrounded across all three series, reflecting Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour, wherein women manage both professional responsibilities and the affective needs of families and partners. These narratives foreground moral ambiguity, moving beyond "strong female characters" to ethically complex subjectivities (Tasker & Negra, 2007). However, the structural conditions that necessitate such compromises, patriarchal norms, neoliberal labour demands, or systemic inequality, are often underexplored, framing women's agency as contingent on personal resilience rather than collective struggle.

Intersectionality and the Limits of Representation

Although these web series gesture towards intersectionality, their engagement remains partial. Gender intersects visibly with class, age, and sexuality, but caste, regional identity, and rural experiences are largely absent. This urban, elite focus reflects what Rao (2023) terms the "metropolitan bias" of Indian digital media, where feminist narratives are articulated through English-inflected dialogue, cosmopolitan aesthetics, and aspirational lifestyles.

Intersectionality as an analytic tool highlight both presence and absence: while the visibility of conflicted, ambitious, and desiring women expands representational possibilities, the omission of structurally marginalised subjectivities underscores the limits of inclusivity. Representation is thus a site of ambivalence, revealing both the potential for feminist engagement and the constraints imposed by market logic and platform design.

Neoliberal Post-feminism and Cultural Contradiction

Across the three series, neoliberal and postfeminist logics shape the depiction of empowerment. Characters are encouraged to self-manage insecurity, pursue individual ambition, and cultivate emotional resilience, exemplifying Gill and Scharff's (2011) "confidence cult". Professional success, aspirational lifestyles, and consumable forms of feminism become markers of agency. While these narratives expand the visibility of women's interior lives and ethical complexity, they risk depoliticising structural inequality by framing gendered struggles as personal rather than systemic. OTT platforms also facilitate semiotic democracy (Fiske, 1989), enabling audiences to critique, interpret, and circulate meanings. Online debates surrounding elitism, Westernisation, and aspirational feminism indicate that representation is neither universally accepted nor uniformly decoded. In this sense, ambivalence is productive: it positions the series as transitional cultural texts that negotiate feminist aspirations within market-driven constraints.

Synthesis

Taken together, *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya* illustrate the ambivalent politics of contemporary Hindi web series. They foreground female subjectivity, desire, and ethical negotiation, expanding the representational field of womanhood in Indian popular media. Simultaneously, these narratives remain constrained by neoliberal postfeminist logics, urban and class privilege, and selective engagement with intersectional difference. The series neither fully dismantle patriarchy nor offer comprehensive feminist visions; instead, they reveal the contested and contradictory terrain on which feminist meaning is produced in digital India.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the construction and negotiation of female subjectivity in three contemporary Hindi web series, *Four More Shots Please!*, *Bombay Begums*, and *Aarya*, within the intersecting frameworks of feminism, neoliberalism, and digital media. Through a qualitative feminist methodology combining textual and discourse analysis, the research has explored how these narratives articulate ambition, desire, moral complexity, and labour while reflecting the social and economic hierarchies that shape women's lived experiences. The analysis underscores the ambivalent politics of representation in Indian OTT culture, revealing both the transformative potential of these narratives and their structural limitations.

A central finding is that these web series foreground complex female subjectivities, presenting women as active agents in their personal, professional, and relational spheres. In *Four More Shots Please!*, urban, professional women negotiate desire, emotional vulnerability, and self-realisation, while *Bombay Begums* illustrates multi-generational struggles for corporate success, autonomy, and ethical decision-making. *Aarya* complicates normative constructions of motherhood and morality by positioning its protagonist within morally ambiguous spaces, where agency is intertwined with survival and familial obligation. Across these narratives, women are represented as desiring and morally reflective subjects rather than passive objects, challenging conventional cinematic and televisual tropes that often confine female characters to roles of chastity, subordination, or moral didacticism (Mulvey, 1975; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). These portrayals expand the representational terrain of contemporary Indian media, offering audiences nuanced depictions of agency, emotional complexity, and ethical negotiation.

However, the study also highlights the limitations and exclusions inherent in these representations. The narratives predominantly depict urban, upper-class, English-speaking experiences, reflecting the metropolitan bias of Indian digital media (Rao, 2023). Intersectional axes such as caste, regional identity, and rurality are largely absent, leaving the experiences of marginalised and subaltern women underrepresented. While gender intersects with class, age, and sexuality, these series often

neglect the structural inequalities that shape women's lives beyond elite urban contexts. This selective representation illustrates how neoliberal postfeminist logics frame empowerment as an individualised, aspirational project, emphasising self-management, resilience, and consumption over collective action or structural critique (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In this sense, the visibility and agency offered by these narratives are mediated by economic privilege and social capital, raising questions about the inclusivity and political efficacy of such feminist representations.

The analysis further demonstrates that female desire and sexuality are increasingly central to these narratives, marking a departure from the moralised or desexualised portrayals of earlier Hindi cinema and television. By presenting women as desiring subjects, the series challenge the traditional male gaze and offer new frameworks for understanding female subjectivity (Mulvey, 1975; Butler, 1990). Yet this visibility is often aestheticized, commodified, and tailored to elite audiences, revealing the constraints imposed by market-driven media logics (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dutta, 2021). Similarly, the depiction of motherhood and labour is complex and morally ambiguous, illustrating the emotional, ethical, and economic negotiations women undertake. *Aarya*, in particular, disrupts idealised maternal tropes, presenting motherhood as both a source of agency and a burden shaped by patriarchal and capitalist pressures (Chakravarti, 1993; Hochschild, 1983).

These web series also illuminate the significance of OTT platforms as spaces of semiotic democracy (Fiske, 1989). The digital streaming environment allows audiences to actively interpret, critique, and circulate meanings, producing contested readings of empowerment, elitism, and representation. Debates around these series' aspirational aesthetics, metropolitan focus, and alignment with neoliberal ideals reveal that feminist representation in India's digital media is neither uniform nor uncontested. The interplay between visibility, audience engagement, and structural constraint underscores the ambivalence of contemporary feminist narratives: they expand the representational possibilities of womanhood while simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchies and economic privilege.

Taken together, these findings suggest that contemporary Hindi web series operate as hybrid cultural texts, where traditional gender ideologies intersect with emerging feminist possibilities. They do not entirely dismantle patriarchal structures, nor do they offer a fully inclusive feminist vision, but they destabilise normative understandings of morality, desire, and agency. These contradictions are not failures but reflections of transitional cultural conditions in which feminist discourse is increasingly mainstream yet simultaneously constrained by neoliberal market logics, urban-centric aesthetics, and selective inclusion.

This study contributes to feminist media scholarship by highlighting the complex, contested, and contextually mediated nature of female representation in Indian OTT content. It demonstrates that attention to intersectionality, class, urbanity, and digital media economics is essential for understanding the potential and limits of feminist narratives. Moreover, it underscores the importance of critically engaging with emerging media platforms as sites where audience interpretation, narrative experimentation, and ideological negotiation converge. Future research might extend these insights by examining regional-language web series, audience reception across diverse social strata, or the production processes that shape content creation. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how digital media mediates feminist representation, expanding beyond elite urban contexts to capture the full heterogeneity of women's experiences in contemporary India. Ultimately, the series analysed in this study exemplify the evolving contours of Indian visual culture: they foreground ethical, sexual, and professional agency, destabilise normative female subjectivities, and open space for ongoing feminist critique, while simultaneously reflecting the structural and ideological limits imposed by neoliberal, urban-centric, and market-driven frameworks.

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