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Queer Narratives and Digital Media: A Thematic Analysis of 'Rainbow Rishta' on OTT Platform

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Abstract:

The digital mediascape has proved to be a potential platform to capture the diverse voices and narratives that are vital for constructing queer selves. It has shifted the stereotypes related to the queer lives, where a 'perspective from below' has been taken into cognizance. It is against this backdrop; the research paper embarks on a comprehensive examination of the representation of LGBTQ identities in the acclaimed series '*Rainbow Rishta*' on Amazon Prime. The makers of '*Rainbow Rishta*' claim it to be India's first unscripted docu-series on the lives of LGBTQIA+ from different parts of India. '*Rainbow Rishta*' comprises of six stories of eight real-life queer protagonists finding, accepting, and celebrating love. The six episodes are titled as – *Vidroh* (Rebellion); *Badlaav* (Change); *Ummeed* (Hope); *Faasle* (Distance); *Hausla* (Courage); and, *Mohabbat Zindabad* (Love is the Revolution). These six episodes contribute to normalizing the queer love and challenging the heteronormative narrative that often dominates mainstream media. This study is guided by two research questions – How are queer selves constructed, negotiated, and maintained as portrayed in '*Rainbow Rishta*'? To what extent, queer selves provide an alternative to the heterosexual matrix through the narratives in '*Rainbow Rishta*'? A qualitative content analysis of the six episodes of *Rainbow Rishta* followed by narrative and thematic analysis of the interviews of the queer protagonists will be adopted to understand the complexities of formation of queer selves, their journey of self-discovery, love relationships, struggles, triumphs, and personal growth. One of the key focus of this study is to highlight the transformative potential of these queer narratives in creating a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Rainbow Rishta; Digital Media; Queer Selves; OTT Platform; LGBTQIA+; Heterosexual Matrix

Introduction: Queering the Indian Digital Media

The Indian digital mediascape has made queer visibility a grand possibility. Queer engagement with digital media platforms has witnessed the user's strategic use of dating apps for finding a partner, a relationship,

a sexual encounter, and intimacy. These platforms have also benefited from affective experiences like collaboration, activism, friendships, and moral support. Audience interaction with digital media has been widely recognised, be it in terms of dating apps, e-activism, liaisons, or trolling. However, the representation of queer people on Indian digital media remains under investigation. It is essential to study the mediated representations of queer people on digital media platforms, particularly on OTT web series, as it has the potential to shape public opinion and discourse. Though fictional stories on OTT platforms like *'Made in Heaven'*, *'Sacred Games'*, and many others have provided ample scope to study the representation of queer characters, less attention has been given to real-life queer people, whose lives have been documented and presented in the form of docu-series. One such 'unscripted docu-series', as claimed by the makers, is *'Rainbow Rishta'*, India's first unscripted docu-series on queer lives, available on Amazon Prime Video. It takes the audience through the journeys of people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community from different parts of India within six episodes, three hours, and thirty-two minutes. The six episodes are titled *Vidroh* (Rebellion), *Badlaav* (Change), *Ummeed* (Hope), *Faasle* (Distance), *Hausla* (Courage), and *Mohabbat Zindabad* (Love is the Revolution). These six episodes contribute to normalising queer love and challenging the heteronormative narrative that often dominates mainstream media. The nine protagonists in this docu-series recall their past experiences, the discrimination they faced, and how they try to overcome the difficulties in search of love and meaningful relationships. These narratives or their life-stories constitute one of the empowerment strategies of OTT platforms, which would otherwise be excluded or symbolically annihilated. The introductory part of the series mentions through a voice-over to the audience – “We have never heard about our love stories and that is why we have/are compelled to share our love stories, in our voices.” It is an invitation to the audience to know the other side of the story that the heteronormative lens has prevented us from knowing and understanding. These self-reflexive stories would help to neutralise the stigma associated with queer community and democratise the diverse sexual identities that exist in our society. However, the digital platform, Amazon Prime, in this case, also put a disclaimer that certain visuals/scenes might be 'triggering for certain audiences' and mentions that it does not endorse any content shown or the views expressed in the series, trying to distance itself from the queer identity and narrative.

This study is guided by two research questions: How are queer selves constructed, negotiated, and maintained as portrayed in *'Rainbow Rishta'*? To what extent do queer selves provide an alternative to the heterosexual matrix through the narratives in *'Rainbow Rishta'*? A qualitative content analysis of the six episodes of *Rainbow Rishta*, followed by narrative and thematic analysis of the interviews of the queer protagonists, will be adopted to understand the complexities of the formation of queer selves, their journey of self-discovery, love relationships, struggles, triumphs, and personal growth. One of the key focuses of this study is to highlight the transformative potential of these queer narratives in creating a more inclusive society.

Queer Narratives and Digital Media: Literature Review

Digital media has become one of the central infrastructures for the articulation and circulation of queer identities. The everyday usage of digital media by the queer community opens the possibilities for recognition of their existence, voices, struggles, safety, intimacy, and politics. By applying Erving Goffman's (1956) idea of presentation of self in everyday life, our presentation on digital media through posts, images, videos, and texts can be seen as 'performances' of our identities. The queer identities are performed on digital media platforms. Similarly, McLuhan talks about 'global theatre' in the context of the

advent of modern technological innovations in the field of telecommunications, wherein an individual gets involved in a constant performance with multiple actors.

Due to the availability of new media technologies, there have been digital expressions of one's emotional journeys through blog writing (Rak, 2005) and coming-out stories through YouTube videos (Ridder & Dhaenens, 2019). Dasgupta (2017), in his book '*Digital Queer Cultures in India*', traces the linkage between post-liberal media and the development of queer culture in digital media. The development of queer consciousness, he argues, can be dated to the pre-colonial era, which was criminalised under British law. The development of 'virtual intimacies' and community feeling in the digital media among queer people defies the heteronormative understanding of family, Kinship, and marriage. The involvement of queer people in digital media has led to their visibility and representational politics. Pullin & Cooper (2010) highlight the engagement of the LGBT population in digital media, which points out the human agency they exercise. They make use of Giddens' concept of 'transformation of intimacy' to understand the expression of queer self within the digital public sphere.

However, digital media are not to be seen as neutral channels; they are embedded with offline social identities like caste, class, religion, and region. It becomes pertinent to ask whose voices are being posted online due to the rampant digital divide that exists in the country. (Gopinath, 2009). Furthermore, the digital queer culture is not only about spaces of freedom of expression, desire, and celebration of difference, but, instead, a space for disciplining the queer bodies and pleasures (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2018; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the digital platforms' political economy structure and functioning. Users are subject to marketing and promotional algorithms determining whose post gets more visibility and which content gets shadow-banned (Paasonen, 2020). Apart from the corporate regulation, there are also state mechanisms of surveillance and regulation. Within such contradictions, the digital media acts as a networked public within limits. The moderation of digital content as per the algorithms is a matter of concern, as it is possible to take down certain content if it contradicts the status quo.

Studying the Digital Narratives: Methodology

This qualitative study on queer narratives on digital media made use of thematic analysis of the docu-series *Rainbow Rishta*. The data corpus for the study includes all six episodes of the series featuring nine non-binary gender identity individuals belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community: Aneez & Sanam (identified as lesbian couple), Trinetra (identified as transwoman), Ayushmaan (drag name: Lush Monsoon), Sadam (LGBTQIA+ rights Activist), Daniella (Intersex person) and Joel (Daniella's fiancée), Soham & Suresh (gay couple).

The thematic analysis of the docu-series followed the six phases Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested. The first phase included familiarisation with the six episodes by watching the episodes closely and transcribing the entire narrative into segments – settings/context, characters involved, and dialogues. This segmentation ensured that coding captured the meaningful narrative units rather than line-by-line fragmentation. The second phase consists of initial open coding from the dialogues or part of the dialogues by selecting the significant aspect of the dialogue by reading and re-reading the transcripts. The extracts from the narratives were verbatim, preserving the participants' voices. The codes were descriptive (capturing the key idea or action) and inductive (arising from the data). The third stage was identifying the overlapping codes and consolidating them into themes. In the next stage, the themes were reviewed across the episodes to identify the recurring themes for consistency and salience. The major themes identified include: Family, Kinship & Negotiation, Intimacy & Everyday Life, Visibility & Invisibility,

Intersectionality & Resilience, Trauma & Care, Platformed Aesthetics and Para-social bonds. Each theme was defined and articulated in the fifth stage. A short memo consisting of 2-3 sentences was written to interpret the significance of each coded segment. The final stage involved interpreting the themes in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, such as queer theory, intersectionality, sexual identity, and digital media.

Living through the Queer Narratives: Findings and Analysis

The episode-wise thematic analysis of the docu-series makes queer lives publicly visible through the everyday moments of their lives. The introductory part of the series establishes the protagonists' emotional, political, and representational stakes. It begins with the question: What does be in love mean to you? – posed to the protagonists by the makers of this docu-series. The answers to this question by different characters (Table 1) remind one that queer love is both ordinary and extraordinary, marked by longingness, resilience, and the need to reclaim the narrative space.

Table 1: Thematic Coding of the Introduction Part of Rainbow Rishta

Segment/Character	Extract (short quotation/description)	Initial Code	Theme	Analytical Memo
Sadam (LGBTQ Rights Activist)	<i>Love is like home. I have never found it, but it may be there.</i>	Home as a metaphor; Absence of love; desire for belonging	Intimacy & Everyday Life	Associates intimacy with home, highlighting longing and Absence.
Trinetra (transwoman)	<i>Love does not mean compromise.</i>	Equality in love	Gender & Power Relations	Critiques heteropatriarchal compromise in marriage/relationship
Ayushmaan (drag performer)	<i>I have struggled to see love. I want someone to make me feel I am desirable.</i>	Desire for validation; self-worth	Visibility & Self-Acceptance	Impact of being in a closet on self-worth and desirability.
Aneez & Sanam (lesbian couple)	<i>We are in love. We try to make space for each other.</i>	Intimacy; relationship negotiation	Queer Kinship & Negotiated Belonging	Highlights the importance of giving space/respecting differences in queer love.
Soham & Suresh (gay couple)	<i>We have been together for 6.5 years. Love is painful. We do not know what lies ahead?</i>	Enduring relationship; suffering; uncertainty	Temporal dimension of queer love	Situates queer love in endurance and uncertain futures.
Daniella (intersex person)	<i>How many LGBTQIA people can go to their</i>	Non-supporting families;	Family, Kinship & Negotiation	Raises familial acceptance and social

	<i>families and tell we are in love and get married?</i>	marriage exclusion		sanction/legitimacy of queer marriage.
Voice-over	<i>Love is a scary thought for most queer people. We have never heard about our love stories. We are compelled to share our love stories in our voices.</i>	Fear, Absence of representation, self-narration	Queer counter publics & storytelling	Love is not the same for everyone.

Each protagonist has their own interpretation of love based on their life experiences. They frame love as not a given category, but something elusive, and they must earn it. Love is Absent in some of the protagonists' lives due to non-approval by their families, and the fear of disclosing one's sexual identity to family members. Daniella, Aneez, and Sanam highlight how family and space are essential and contested sites of negotiation for queer love. Love, for queer people, is a contested site of experience shaped by multiple epistemologies of intimacy. For Saddam, the absence of love does not negate its possibility. He desires to find it in future. Trinetra reclaims human agency by rejecting compromise as a precondition of love. Ayushmaan's desire for recognition and desirability echoes Sedgwick's (1990) notion of the closet as both the defining structure of gay oppression and a formative space for identity. Aneez and Sanam refer to the space they are trying to make for each other, which also hints at the labour of maintaining a lesbian relationship within a heteronormative social order. Soham and Suresh problematise the stability of a relationship, being uncertain about the future, reflecting the lack of legality for same-sex marriage in India. The introductory part of the docu-series foregrounds a visual intimacy, that is, mediated forms of connections that produce affective publics across digital platforms. The multiple queer experiences of love set the analytical frame to understand *Rainbow Rishta* not merely as a documentary about queer relationships but as a cultural text foregrounding the politics of visibility, intimacy, and Kinship in contemporary India.

The overall themes that were found across the six episodes are discussed below:

- a) **Family, Kinship, & Negotiation:** Across all episodes, family has been the central locus of discussion in the formation and negotiation of queer identities. During her growing-up years, Trinetra had homophobic parents. As such, the environment was not conducive for her to express her feelings, though she felt uncomfortable with the idea of being called a 'man' (before her gender surgery). Her parents were not supportive, which affected her mentally. She mentions her father telling her about the queer people – “this is a mental illness; you people need therapy.” Similarly, coming out to his parents about his sexuality was difficult for Ayushmaan. In episode 3, he recalls an incident when his mother got a pamphlet from his bag with LGBT written on it and immediately called him over the phone and said, *"Do not do this to me. I have tolerated so much in my life; now you should not give me any more trouble."* It foregrounds the moral burden on the child in the family, as Ayushmaan says, *"...I have a guilt that my life, my existence should not become a wound for her."* For Aneez and Sanam, their sexual identity as a lesbian couple made it difficult for them to find a home for themselves. They could not stay longer in the latter's sister's house due to the fear of being asked why Aneez is not staying with her parents. In episode 3, Aneez shares her apprehension, *"I am scared that when my parents come to know about me and Sanam, they might*

even throw me out of the house". In episode 5, we come across the situation of Daniella's childhood, where the family becomes a site of hostility and violence: *"I never had a great equation with him (his father)...I was locked inside a room due to the fear that someone might label me as gud, chakka (slang for queer people)... I was around ten... my father sold me to the Hijra community, saying that we do not need this child. Please take him and raise him the way you want to"*. However, towards the end of this episode, we find a reconciliation between Daniella and her father, her strong bonding with her mother, which reassures us that biological kin are also sites of potential support. The broken familial ties can be restored and remade through love and forgiveness rather than abandonment. Across the episodes, family and Kinship evolve as a site of symbolic violence, exclusion, and meaningful negotiation.

b) Intimacy & Everyday Life: This docu-series reminds us that queer love is not extraordinary or a spectacle, but rather is enmeshed in daily ordeals in life, as an ordinary practice. In episode 1, Sanam and Aneez seek a rented accommodation like a normal couple, bargaining with the tenant/broker. Daniella and Joel are shown in a wedding card shop choosing the theme of the card, the gown to be worn on the wedding day, and the entire decoration of the wedding venue reminds us that queer love needs to be seen as a banal activity. Soham and Suresh exemplify ordinariness in episode 5 when they go with their family members for a bouldering activity. They have their conflicts, but share moments that are affectionate and resilient. These scenes counter the stereotypical representation of queer lives as transient. Even Saddam's coming to terms with his past and daring to date again shows the normalcy of queer dating. In episode 6, his conversations with Abhishek during a concert navigate the audience through awkwardness, joy, and risk as heterosexual couples undergo.

c) Trauma and Resilience: In every character's narrative, one could find an element of trauma, be it during childhood in the family, trauma of finding love, trauma of dealing with one's past, trauma of maintaining a relationship and regaining trust. Each narrative of trauma is consistently paired with resilience. In episode 4, Saddam recollects the violence that he underwent in a police station and hospital: *"I was in a cell, behind the bars and was tied to a bed with a rope. I remember my nose bleeding, mouth frothing and doctors were making fun of me... I do not want to be in that space of trauma."* However, his pain and trauma were channelised into activism, and he became an LGBTQIA+ activist in Manipur, fighting for the rights and justice of queer people. Trinetra has developed the trauma from her failed past relationships and confesses: *"I have separation anxiety... I feel men will leave/abandon me"*. However, with her achievements in life, being a doctor, actor, and influencer, she has overcome her trauma: *"I have spent so much of my life feeling so small especially at the hands of men... I want to be there (indicating to top with her hand) because they (men who left her) are here (pointing to her feet)"*. Soham and Suresh have their share of anxieties and trauma in maintaining a homosexual relationship in a heteronormative society, which Soham mentions: *"When you stay together, you share so much responsibilities, some of which you never know would come your way...there are moments of loneliness... nobody talks about the pain and suffering that goes behind making a relationship work"*. In the sixth episode, the makers of the docu-series ask Ayushmaan if he could muster the courage to speak to his parents about his sexual identity and performing as drag in parties. His reply convinces the audience of a 'living trauma' when he says, *"When you come out to people, you feel very alienated in that*

moment. You feel like everyone will move away from you...I cannot even fathom the thought that they (his parents) might say we do not want anything to do with you." He decides not to disclose his sexual identity to his parents for fear of losing them.

d) Identifying through Bodies: In the narratives, references were made to the relationship with one's body. In episode 5, Ayushmaan mentions: *"The issue I face with my body, for instance, going on a date or to a house party where everybody is waiting for me, it is very intimidating."* His mother would remind Ayushmaan that he should not turn out to be a girl by undergoing gender surgery. The journey was different for Daniella, who talked about transgender people selling their bodies for survival: *"... there comes a point when you have to sell your body. Doing so repeatedly, you eventually forget whether you truly have a right over your own body."* There has also been mention about bodily violence when Daniella shares her experience of being gang raped by eleven men. Trinetra was uncomfortable with her body and, as such, underwent gender surgery. However, it did not give the desired freedom as the body was subject to being labelled as a trans body and subject to violence in relationships: *"No matter what you achieve, or what you have done with your life, the fact that you are trans will follow you around everywhere...we ended up getting intimate, but when it happened, it was not what I imagined. It was disrespectful and disconnected, and parts of it did not involve my consent (hinting at sexual violence)."* The colour of the skin also matters when one talks about queer bodies. During their trip to Hampi in Karnataka, Suresh comes out with this issue that he had been concealing all his life: *"I do still have body issues in various forms, especially with colour, which I thought was not going to be an issue because I was very much loved at home. However, when I started going to school, that really came out... so all my life, I went through this dark phase, which was disturbing, not easy, not comforting, difficult."* Colourism is an inherent bias that people have in relation to the colour of the skin, and that becomes a fertile criterion for reinforcing certain stereotypes about dark-skinned people and facilitating discrimination.

e) Visibility and Self-acceptance: Though the characters narrate their ordeals related to their bodies, sexualities, and identity, they have shown exemplary resilience and have come a long way to accept themselves and be themselves. Daniella, being an intersex person, plans her wedding with Joel and exuberates confidence in finalising the wedding: *"It is a queer wedding and I want to make it out and loud... at one point I thought I would not be able to get married but today I am intersex and I am getting married."* In episode 2, Ayushmaan is introduced to the audience as a drag queen, Lush Monsoon, which gives him ample satisfaction in performing his gender. He says, *"When I perform drag, I do not fear anybody. I can be myself unapologetically in this drag costume. When I am in drag, I feel very desirable. I feel so beautiful. When people see me in drag, then they come to me and say – You look beautiful and I can see it in their eyes."* Drag as a performance of gender identity has made Ayushmaan accept himself when he wears make-up and a drag costume. The acceptance is through others' perception of his drag identity. In episode-1, Trinetra makes it clear that she feels acceptable and powerful whenever she makes an entrance: *"I like making an entrance because as a transperson and you are so used to walking into a room and people looking out of fear and disgust and it feels very, I don't know, cathartic & powerful to be able to walk into a room and have people look at you in awe. When I see that – yes, this is what I want."* She asserts her identity as a transwoman and claims that she deserves to have everything that a woman is

entitled to. Her journey is not for herself alone; instead, she wants to set an example for other trans people because heteronormative society will never let the success stories of trans persons be open to the public: *"If you could tell me as a child that if you see a transperson be an actor or a doctor, I would laugh. And so a lot of us have had to create these images for ourselves. But that said, I would like to see this as a stepping stone for more representation."*

- f) Platformed Intimacies:** Digital media has proved to be liberating as well as alienating in the lives of the queer protagonists. Ayushmaan's pre-date preparations involve video calls and messages with Sandeep Arora (the guy he would meet for a date). Trinetra chatting with her ^{second} date, Zain, and Sadam meeting online with Abhishek, sets an example of 'affective publics' (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 41). In these spaces, queer users make desires visible and build communities. Such mediated intimacies build a critical utopia where one imagines the future with hope for marriage equality. In episode 6, Suresh brings up the issue of hope: *"We have fought against all the odds, and are still fighting. I definitely have that hope, I don't know if others have that hope or not, but I definitely have that we will make it and we will thrive, there are no two ways about it."* In a similar vein, Daniella imagines a bright future for the queer people in the country when she mentions her idea of an ideal couple: *"Ten years later, we will definitely have two children. I will pray to God that if I ever adopt children, my children should turn out to be gay or lesbian. Ten years later, when people see us, they will say, "There goes the perfect couple. They raised their children the way they wanted to."* These moments suggest that queer imagine a future where they can claim their own space, the liberty to be themselves and develop a queer belongingness.

Visibility, Vulnerability and Systemic Exclusion: Concluding Remarks

In this concluding section, this study revisits the research question as to how queer identities are constructed, negotiated, and maintained in *Rainbow Rishta*. Across the six episodes, the queer selves are shaped through a continuous process of negotiation, mostly with oneself, one's family, and past relationships. We also witness how queer identities are performed in the form of drag, bodily acts, and conscious choices. This resonates with Butler's (1990) argument that gender identity is a reiterative performance that must be repeated to get visibly registered in people's minds and affirmed. Queer identities also negotiate within familial imaginaries, like Ayushmaan, who is unable to disclose his identity to maintain a lasting relationship with his parents. Trinetra and Daniella try to overcome the emotional burden of their respective family members at the beginning of their queer journey. The issue of resilience and care in maintaining queer identities cannot be neglected.

In relation to the second research question, to what extent do queer selves provide an alternative to the heterosexual matrix through the narratives in *'Rainbow Rishta'*? We find that the docu-series offers a sustained challenge to the heterosexual matrix by articulating love, marriage, and Kinship in ways that destabilize the compulsory alignment of sex, gender, and desire. The characters do not reject heteronormativity outright but rework the script by bringing a queer twist to it. For example, Daniella's wedding is emblematic of staging a public intersex-affirming wedding. It reclaims heteronormative ritual but populates it with queer presence, thereby changing the grammar of matrimony. It can be said, therefore, that the rebellious queer selves have challenged the heterosexual matrix but have not replaced it. The narratives call for a critical reimagining and renegotiation that allows for plural intimacies.

Limitations & Future Research: Rainbow Rishta offers us a layered archive of queer experiences normalising same-sex love, trans-intimacy, and intersexual belongingness. One of the limitations of the docu-series is its selective representativeness. The narratives privilege queer subjects who are urban, educated, and have access to digital media visibility. A more inclusive trajectory was needed where the rural, caste-subaltern, and economically marginalized voices should have aligned with intersectional queer praxis. The role of caste/class power structure has been sidelined, which could have provided potential avenues for extended critical analysis. Future research might compare audience reception from different geographical regions and can also make a comparison of *Rainbow Rishta* with other fictional queer narratives to assess its impact. In sum, *Rainbow Rishta* affirms queer identities through intimate storytelling and contributes to queer media scholarship through its affective resonance and situated representation of marginalized relationships in contemporary India.

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