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A Study on the Representation and Evolving Portrayals of Women in Bengali OTT Platforms

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in the media strongly impacts the social perceptions of gender roles and inspires the viewers through varied narratives. OTT platforms have witnessed an outstanding change and showcased diverse content, and identified the requirement authentic depiction. The most noteworthy change in this arena is the growth of women-oriented content focusing on the aspects of women coming from various backgrounds (Ghosh, 2023). This study emphasizes Bengali OTT platforms that are producing challenging narratives and defying the traditional representation of women, creating multi-faceted women-oriented characters and echoing current social authenticities.

The study employs a qualitative research method based on Bengali OTT web series and originals released between 2017 and 2024 from prominent Bengali OTT platforms, including *Hoichoi* and *Addatimes*. Content analysis method will be implemented to highlight the social representation, character development, relationship dynamics, and empowerment themes. The study implements a theoretical framework from feminist media studies and applies gender performativity theory as conveyed by Judith Butler, which theorizes that gender is not innate but is shaped and constructed by society (Butler, 1988).

The research objective includes (1) exploring the social and cultural settings that shape how women characters are depicted in Bengali OTT platforms, (2) recognizing the variety and intricacy of women's roles, defying the conventional stereotypes, and (3) evaluating the descriptive importance of the story and the degree of control given to women characters. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge on the role of digital media in representing gender and providing an understanding of the role of Bengali OTT platforms in providing spaces for discussions about gender. By identifying the significance of Bengali OTT content in shaping cultural mindsets, this study aims to examine the evolving representations of female characters in OTT content, highlighting shifts from stereotypical depictions to more nuanced identities.

Keywords: *#Bengali OTT platforms #Women representation #Gender performativity #Feminist media studies #Gender discourse*

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid expansion of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms has revolutionized the Indian entertainment landscape, transforming both content production and audience consumption patterns. Unlike traditional television and cinema, which adhere to strict censorship guidelines, OTT platforms such as *Hoichoi* and *Addatimes* are more creative in their depiction, enabling narratives that are more diverse, experimental, and socially relevant. A key area where this shift is most visible is in the representation of women. Historically, Indian media portrayed women through narrow, patriarchal stereotypes, devoted wives, sacrificial mothers, or peripheral romantic figures, rarely granting them autonomy, intervention, or narrative depth. Bengali cultural discourse further rooted this duality, celebrating women as empowered in theory yet frequently representing them as disruptive or antagonistic figures on screen. The emergence of OTT platforms has significantly dislocated this trend, offering stories where women occupy central roles, embody psychological complexity, and challenge traditional gender norms.

This study focuses on Bengali OTT platforms between 2017 and 2024, examining how women are represented across genres and narratives, and how these portrayals negotiate the tension between traditional stereotypes and contemporary transformations. By employing a qualitative content analysis of selected web series and films, the research aims to explore the social and cultural settings, shape female characters, recognize the variety and intricacy of their roles, and evaluate the extent to which these portrayals confront patriarchal conventions. Guided by feminist media studies and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study situates women's representation in Bengali OTT content as a site where gender is enacted, repeated, resisted, and reimagined. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how regional digital platforms are redefining femininity and shaping cultural perceptions in Bengal. It highlights the development from stereotypical depictions to multi-layered portrayals, emphasizing the potential of OTT media to foster more inclusive and authentic gender narratives.

Literature Review

Fast advancements in information and communication technology over the last decade have led to the development of OTT (Over-the-Top) platforms, reshaping the way Indian audiences consume entertainment content. Digital streaming platforms have emerged as powerful alternatives to conventional broadcasting, offering audiences unparalleled control over their viewing experiences and content creation opportunities. This technological shift has intensified the rivalry between traditional television networks and digital streaming services, prompting established broadcasters to take up innovative digital strategies and maintain audience engagement. Rather than viewing streaming platforms as competitors, many conventional media companies have purposefully combined these services into their business models as essential survival mechanisms. A particularly noteworthy development has been the enhanced visibility and representation of women across digital streaming content. These platforms have become catalysts for female-centric storytelling, producing compelling narratives that resonate strongly with diverse audiences. This phenomenon mirrors international patterns where women are increasingly taking active roles both as consumers and creators of specialized streaming content designed to address female perspectives and experiences (Ghildiyal & Jayaswal, 2024).

The Indian media entertainment landscape has historically been depicting women in narrow and stereotypical representations, showing them chiefly as dedicated wives, self-sacrificing maternal figures,

or scorned romantic interests. However, the emergence of OTT platforms has catalysed an outstanding transformation in this narrative pattern. Women protagonists now play central roles instead of representing marginal positions, fronting compelling storylines and backing progressive transformations that would have been unthinkable within the outmoded entertainment frameworks. This progression incorporates both the roles of production and performance, as women are increasingly receiving acknowledgement and prospects that OTT platforms eagerly embrace through their preparedness to question age-old customs and break age-old preconceptions. The advent of streaming platforms has instated a ground-breaking method to content creation, founding multi-faceted, women characters who surpass the boundaries of supporting protagonists and exemplify authentic, multi-layered characters (Shukla, 2025)

Streaming services extending from international ones like YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, to pan-Indian platforms like ALT Balaji, ZEE5, and regional Bengali platforms like *Hoichoi* have highlighted content featuring female protagonists. These platforms have produced and backed more female-centred storylines in a single year than conventional media have over the last half-decade. Unlike traditional broadcasting, OTT platforms stream without any prejudiced limitations, empowering women-featured content that surpasses archetypal domestic dramas and predictable mother-in-law and daughter-in-law storylines (Roy, 2019). **OTT platforms are significantly creating content that addresses issues like gender disparities and unrelenting social issues that are not highlighted accordingly or misconstrued by traditional entertainment media. The conventional entertainment domains primarily focus on commercial feasibility over practicality. On the other hand, OTT platforms have reformed the representation of women by depicting them as empowered figures.** The contemporary Bengali OTT landscape, particularly on the *Hoichoi* platform, establishes a significant development in the portrayal of women characters, moving beyond traditional standards to grip complex, multi-dimensional depictions. This conversion is represented through several noteworthy series and films that place women as central figures, depicting narratives forward through intervention, empowerment, and psychological complexity (Ganguly, 2023)

Chakraborty (2023) mentions that within the Bengali cultural discourse, the conceptualization of “Bengali womanhood” has pointedly induced both cultural insights and cinematic representations. Chakraborty further mentions that this outline has conventionally personified a contradicting dichotomy, i.e., presenting women as intelligent, empowered, and autonomous while at the same time, entrapping them within the stereotypical representation of disruptor, relationship wrecker, or the nasty figure. These portrayals serve dual objectives, firstly continuing the depiction of backward-looking stereotypes while simultaneously presenting Bengali culture as a striking display for wider Indian viewership, particularly via Bollywood films and pan-Indian OTT streaming platforms (Chakraborty, 2023)

Stuti Ramachandra, who serves as Director & Head of Production and Post for International Originals at Prime Video India, opines that OTT platforms have transformed storytelling accounts. OTTs have empowered and amplified creative exploration in constructing narratives, resulting in women protagonists who hold independent, multi-faceted character development. Instead of just being depicted as subordinates to male protagonists, these characters regulate their own descriptions, chase personal ambitions and goals, and struggle against the outwardly forced descriptions of femininity. The impact of OTT platforms extends beyond on-screen content to include changes across the entertainment industry, with a rise in the number of women working in leadership positions in content production. More than

three-quarters of its original content programming under development in Amazon Prime Video features women in significant executive roles, while roughly 60 percent include women's representation in the content writing teams. Such comprehensive involvement directly outlines and impacts the nature of content being produced (Shukla, 2025). The psychological thriller *Hello! on Hoichoi* explores the complex dynamics of betrayal and manipulation through the experiences of Nandita, played by Raima Sen alongside Priyanka Sarkar. The series examines how a woman navigates the discovery of her husband's extramarital affair with Nina through a series of passionate MMS, while simultaneously uncovering a web of psychological manipulation that may be specifically targeting her. This narrative approach positions women not merely as victims of betrayal but as active investigators of their own circumstances, capable of unraveling complex emotional and psychological mysteries (Ganguly, 2023)

Historically, the portrayal of women in media has been created through masculine standpoints and controlled by conventional cultural standpoints and social biases, resulting in the creation of content that ineffectively echoes the authentic understandings and hindrances women face in their everyday lives (Ansari & Verma, 2025). The impact of contemporary social issues on women's lives is given poignant treatment in *Tasher Ghawr*, a 2020 short film on Hoichoi, starring Swastika Mukherjee in a solo performance. The film addresses domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown, focusing on a woman trapped in an unhappy marriage who ultimately decides to take control of her life. Shot entirely within the confines of a house, the film's claustrophobic setting mirrors the protagonist's emotional and physical entrapment, while her journey toward self-empowerment becomes the central narrative arc (Ganguly, 2023)

OTT platforms have enabled creators to produce content that presents women in empowered selves, appealing to both local and international viewers. Since the majority of the platforms run on subscription-based models instead of advertisement-dependent models, these platforms hold the financial flexibility to create innovative content. Content producers have gradually employed these digital platforms to intensify storylines that were earlier believed to be antagonistic or commercially unyielding. Female-oriented narratives explore complex themes including multi-layered challenges, prejudice, gender bias, family violence, women's objectification, harassment at the workplace, psychological well-being, and additional present-day problems (Ansari & Verma, 2025). The narratives of revenge find powerful expression in *Paap*, a murder thriller mystery series featuring Puja Banerjee, as the depiction of a mythological goddess turning into a vengeful protagonist named *Parboni*. The series confronts the harsh realities of domestic abuse by centering its narrative around a woman who returns to the Chowdhury household after years of absence, carrying with her a mission of vengeance against those who subjected her to physical and sexual abuse. This transformation in Banerjee's screen persona represents a broader shift in Bengali OTT content, where actresses previously confined to conventional roles are being repositioned as agents of justice and retribution, directly addressing systemic issues of gender-based violence (Ganguly, 2023)

The frameworks of patriarchy have widely influenced media content for a long period of time, shaping the methods of storytelling while confining the development of the female characters. Several film and television contents have conventionally presented women as secondary, submissive figures downgraded to supporting male protagonists. Female characters were stereotypically categorized within conventional, homely backgrounds as maternal figures and faithful wives. When women infrequently appeared in lead positions representing intervention, their depiction remained faultless and restricted to simple moral

categories, either righteous or insolent. Such depiction strengthened hierarchical gender constructions and accustomed viewers to accept restricted, inaccurate notions of female representation (Ansari & Verma, 2025). Bringing fresh perspectives to the detective genre, *Indu* introduces one of the first female detective protagonists in Bengali content, a significant departure from the traditionally male-dominated world of Bengali fictional detectives like *Byomkesh Bakshi*, *Feluda*, and *Eken Babu*. Ishaa Saha's portrayal of the titular character demonstrates how Bengali OTT platforms are challenging gender stereotypes by positioning women as investigators and problem-solvers. Set against the atmospheric backdrop of a traditional old mansion, the series allows its female protagonist to navigate through complex family secrets, scandals, and murders, establishing women as intellectually capable and professionally competent in roles traditionally reserved for men (Ganguly, 2023).

OTT platforms are actively challenging and analysing these recognised outlines by highlighting female-oriented narratives. With compact commercial restraints and censorship restrictions, these services enable the alteration of patriarchal viewpoints concerning women. Female characters today are shown in more complex and multifaceted ways. They pursue personal goals, face psychological struggles, explore their own needs, and deal with conflicts in their lives. This progressively portrays women, without moral judgment, highlighting them as individuals with their own worth. They are depicted as women who can make mistakes while handling both inner struggles and social pressures, which makes them appear more real and relatable to the audience (Ansari & Verma, 2025). For instance, *Mohomaya*, a psychological crime thriller series on *Hoichoi*, presents a compelling study of maternal figures through the performances of Swastika Mukherjee and Ananya Chatterjee. The series explores the intricate subtleties of motherhood by featuring two contrasting maternal characters, one deceased and another who develops a mother-like bond with her son's classmate. The series demonstrates how Bengali OTT content has moved beyond simplistic portrayals of mothers to examine the psychological depths and complexities inherent in maternal relationships. The intense performances by both actresses showcase women not merely as nurturing figures but as psychologically complex individuals navigating trauma, loss, and unconventional relationships.

According to actor Raima Sen, OTT platforms are powerful catalysts for redesigning the way women are portrayed in entertainment. She highlights that streaming content has broken long-standing stereotypes and has moved beyond the conventional depiction that limited female roles in the industry. OTT platforms are incorporating narratives that capture the lives of women across varied ethnicities, sexualities, and socio-economic classes. Sen further mentions that OTT contents possess the ability to openly discuss sensitive social themes through women-centric narratives. Topics like gender inequality, sexual violence, mental well-being, and body acceptance are addressed in ways that both engage and educate, motivating viewers to reflect and take action beyond the screen. Sen views this transformation as a step toward building a more inclusive entertainment landscape, one that reflects the diversity of women's lives and celebrates their evolving roles.

Indubala Bhaater Hotel narrates the life of Indubala, a woman displaced from her ancestral home in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), first through marriage and later by the Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War. Relocating to Kolkata, she endures widowhood alongside familial and societal constraints. Despite these challenges, she eventually establishes a modest rice hotel which gradually attains recognition for its

authentic Bengali cuisine. The series intricately interlaces motifs of food, memory, nostalgia, and the evolving identity of a migrant woman (Chowdhury, 2023).

The narrative foregrounds the complex realities faced by Bengali women, particularly those shaped by experiences of displacement and migration. Indubala is portrayed as both resilient and resourceful; her journey reflects the intersections of loss, survival, and female agency. The text highlights her entrepreneurial initiative and solidarity with other women—exemplified in her bond with *Lachhmi*, a fish vendor in the local market. Food emerges as a powerful symbol: a means of sustenance, a coping strategy, and a conduit for cultural continuity, allowing Indubala to preserve her heritage whilst asserting her independence in the face of patriarchal structures and political instability (Arefin et al., 2025). At a broader level, the series interrogates the notion of ‘belonging’, revealing how refugee women from East Bengal often remain marginalised and rootless, with their sense of home sustained not through social inclusion but through collective memory, culinary traditions, and communal networks. Indubala’s trajectory resonates with the lived experiences of countless Bengali women whose lives were irreversibly shaped by historical disruptions, yet who demonstrated resilience and the capacity to adapt, forging their identities in the midst of displacement and loss (Ray, 2023).

The Bengali web series *Nandini*, streamed on the platform *Addatimes*, directed by Mir Falaq and based on Sayantani Putatunda’s novel of the same name, foregrounds the sensitive social issue of female infanticide. The narrative follows Snigdha, played by Ritabhari Chakraborty in her OTT debut, a pregnant woman who faces pressure from her mother-in-law to undergo an abortion on the pretext of medical complications. On the eve of the procedure, a mysterious phone call reveals that both mother and child are healthy, leading Snigdha to the disturbing discovery that her family is conspiring to terminate her pregnancy because she is carrying a girl child. The series combines elements of mystery and family drama to shed light on the persistence of gender-based discrimination in contemporary society. *Nandini* contributes to ongoing cultural conversations around gender inequality, reproductive rights, and the representation of women’s struggles in Bengali OTT content (Ghosh, 2023)

These Bengali OTT productions collectively demonstrate a significant paradigm shift in women's representation, moving from passive recipients of circumstance to active agents of change, justice, and self-determination. The diversity of genres, from psychological thrillers to detective stories to social dramas, indicates that Bengali OTT platforms are providing women characters with narrative space across multiple storytelling frameworks. This evolution reflects broader cultural conversations about women's roles in society while simultaneously contributing to the redefinition of these roles through compelling visual storytelling that reaches audiences both domestically and internationally

Theoretical Framework

The study establishes its foundation within the domain of feminist media studies, drawing particularly upon Judith Butler's theoretical framework of gender performativity. This theoretical approach provides an analytical view for examining the construction, repetition, and potential disruption of women's representations within Bengali over-the-top streaming platforms.

Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies constitute a critical academic discipline that systematically examines the complex relationships between media content and gender dynamics within society (Jenkins & Finneman, 2017). This field of inquiry investigates how various forms of media, including films, television programs, web series, and streaming platforms, actively participate in shaping, reflecting, and occasionally challenging established gender norms and existing power structures. The analytical scope of feminist media studies incorporates several interconnected areas of investigation. Scholars within this discipline examine the manner in which women are portrayed in media content, determining whether female characters are presented through reductive stereotypes or as complex, multifaceted individuals possessing genuine agency and narrative depth. The distribution of narrative authority represents another crucial area of focus, as researchers investigate who maintains control over storytelling processes and decision-making frameworks, considering the perspectives of content creators, the autonomy granted to characters within narratives, and the interpretive role assumed by audiences.

The dynamic relationship between media texts and broader societal expectations regarding gender constitutes a fundamental concern within feminist media analysis. This investigation involves examining how media content either reinforces or challenges conventional understandings of femininity, including cultural expectations surrounding domestic responsibilities, sexual expression, and appropriate social behaviour. Additionally, the field adopts an intersectional analytical approach that recognizes how gender identity intersects with other social categories, including economic class, caste hierarchies, religious affiliations, and regional identities, thereby creating complex layers of meaning and lived experience.

The emergence of over-the-top platforms within the Bengali media landscape presents particularly compelling opportunities for feminist media scholarship. These digital streaming services represent a relatively recent innovation in media distribution, yet they have achieved remarkable penetration and consumption rates among diverse audiences. This combination of technological novelty and widespread cultural adoption creates an optimal environment for examining whether contemporary media production successfully implements feminist principles in practical application, or whether it continues to perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes and established power imbalances.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity offers essential theoretical tools for understanding the specific mechanisms through which gender identities are constructed and maintained via media representation (Butler, 1990, 1993). Butler's theoretical framework provides analytical depth for examining not merely the content of gender representations in media, but the processes through which these representations actively participate in the ongoing social construction of gender categories

Key Theoretical Concepts

Judith Butler's theoretical contribution highlights the distinction between gender as performance and gender as performativity. While performance refers to conscious, theatrical displays of gender traits, performativity emphasises the ongoing, repeated social actions that create the illusion of stable gender identities. From this perspective, gender identity is not innate but emerges through sustained participation in culturally prescribed behaviours shaped by social norms. Institutions and cultural systems reinforce

these norms by rewarding conformity and discouraging deviation, making certain gendered behaviours appear natural rather than socially constructed. However, Butler also underscores the possibility of resistance, noting that since gender norms rely on repetition, they can be disrupted or reimagined through parodic acts, non-conformity, or creative reinterpretations that expose the contingent nature of gender categories (Butler, 2004)

Butler further argues that identity, including categories such as “woman,” should be seen as emergent rather than fixed, formed through ongoing social practices, discourses, and relationships rather than pre-existing essences. This framework positions gender identity as fluid and socially constructed rather than biologically determined. When applied to media, Butler’s ideas enable researchers to analyse how representational choices, narratives, and character development contribute to either reinforcing or challenging gender norms. Combining feminist media studies with Butler’s theory of performativity provides a lens to examine how portrayals of women on Bengali OTT platforms such as Hoichoi and Addatimes have evolved between 2017 and 2024, not merely in terms of content but in shaping broader cultural understandings of gender.

Research Gap

Although existing scholarship has extensively discussed the transformative role of OTT platforms in promoting female-centric narratives at the national and global levels, systematic research on regional platforms such as Bengali OTTs remains sparse. Most studies highlight how women have moved from marginal to central roles, yet they focus largely on pan-Indian services or international platforms, overlooking the cultural specificities of Bengal, where ideas of womanhood are shaped by unique historical and socio-political contexts.

Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal analysis that traces the evolution of women’s representation in Bengali OTT content across time (2017–2024). Current literature acknowledges the rise of empowered female protagonists but often leaves unanswered whether these portrayals genuinely disrupt patriarchal structures or merely reproduce stereotypes in new guises. Importantly, while feminist media studies and gender theories have been applied in fragmented ways, very few studies bring together feminist media scholarship and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to examine how gender is enacted, repeated, or subverted in Bengali OTT narratives. Finally, the implications for audiences, the extent to which such portrayals reinforce traditional norms or enable shifts in perception, remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a theoretically grounded, region-specific, and temporally mapped analysis of women’s representation in Bengali OTT platforms, thereby contributing new insights into how digital media reshapes cultural understandings of gender in contemporary Bengal.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the representation and evolving portrayals of women in Bengali OTT platforms between 2017 and 2024. A qualitative approach is particularly suited to this inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth examination of narratives, character portrayals, and cultural meanings embedded in digital media texts.

Research Approach and Method

The study employs content analysis as the primary method to systematically examine Bengali OTT originals and web series. Content analysis, when applied qualitatively, enables the researcher to identify recurring themes, symbolic patterns, and gendered discourses within media texts. The focus is not only on what is represented but also on how representations are constructed and what they signify in broader cultural and social contexts.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling frame consists of original Bengali OTT productions released between 2017 and 2024 on prominent platforms such as Hoichoi and Addatimes. These platforms have been selected because they represent the most influential and widely consumed Bengali-language OTT services, shaping popular cultural discourses in the digital space. Purposive sampling has been employed to select series and films that feature women in central or significant roles, with attention given to diversity in genre (psychological thriller, social drama, detective narrative, historical storytelling, etc.) and thematic orientation (domesticity, empowerment, sexuality, resistance, displacement).

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis include:

1. **Character Development:** how female characters perform gender through gestures, behaviours, dialogue, relationships, and occupations.
2. **Narrative Structure:** whether storylines reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms, and how they enable moments of resistance, disruption, or transformation.
3. **Power Relations:** how authority, control, and agency are distributed between male and female characters within the narrative.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by Feminist Media Studies and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. These frameworks enable the researcher to identify stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations, examine how gender identities are enacted and sustained through repetition, and locate instances of resistance and subversion. This theoretically informed lens ensures that the study moves beyond descriptive cataloguing of characters to interpret the deeper cultural and ideological implications of their portrayals.

Data Interpretation

Findings are organized thematically to highlight:

- Shifts in the representation of women on OTT platforms
- Points of continuity where stereotypes persist.
- Emergence of alternative or resistant portrayals that challenge patriarchal norms.

Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Bengali OTT platforms function as sites of negotiation between tradition and transformation in the representation of women.

Analysis of Objective (1): Exploring the social and cultural settings that shape how women characters are depicted in Bengali OTT platforms

The representation of women in Bengali OTT platforms cannot be understood in isolation but is deeply influenced by the social and cultural settings of Bengal. Historically, Bengali media, like much of Indian entertainment, has often depicted women within limited roles such as dutiful wives, sacrificial mothers, or romantic interests shaped through a patriarchal lens. However, the rise of OTT platforms has disrupted this trend, providing new spaces where narratives can reflect both traditional values and contemporary challenges faced by women.

As Chakraborty (2023) opines, the cultural discourse of “Bengali womanhood” embodies a duality: women are celebrated as intelligent, empowered, and autonomous, yet simultaneously stereotyped as disruptors, relationship-breakers, or antagonists. This contradiction reflects Bengal’s historical and social realities, where women steer layered expectations of modernity, tradition, and familial duty. OTT content such as *Hello!* and *Tasher Ghawr* demonstrates how these settings influence narratives, female protagonists are portrayed grappling with betrayal, domestic violence, and societal constraints, yet also exercising resilience and autonomy.

The social contexts of contemporary Bengal, including gender-based violence, displacement, and the pressures of domesticity, find representation in series like *Paap* or *Indubala Bhater Hotel*. These stories anchor women’s struggles within broader historical and socio-political realities such as partition trauma, migration, or patriarchal oppression, making them culturally resonant. At the same time, the relative creative freedom of OTTs allows creators to highlight themes of resistance and empowerment in ways mainstream television could not.

Analysis of Objective (2): Recognizing the variety and intricacy of women's roles, defying the conventional stereotypes

One of the defining contributions of Bengali OTT platforms is the multiplicity and complexity of women’s roles, moving beyond one-dimensional stereotypes such as the submissive wife, sacrificial mother, or passive love interest. OTT narratives provide women with agency, psychological depth, and moral ambiguity, thereby defying conventional portrayals shaped by patriarchal norms.

1. Breaking the “Ideal Wife/Mother” Trope

Traditionally, women in Bengali media were confined to domestic spaces, defined primarily by their relationships with husbands or children. However, series such as *Mohomaya* (Hoichoi) complicate this trope. The maternal figures, played by Swastika Mukherjee and Ananya Chatterjee, are depicted as layered individuals grappling with trauma, unconventional attachments, and psychological depth. This disrupts the idealized image of the faultless, nurturing mother by presenting women as complex and flawed.

2. Professionals and Problem-Solvers

OTT content has positioned women as investigators, professionals, and intellectuals. In *Indu* (Hoichoi) and *Damayanti* (Hoichoi) protagonists play the role of female detectives in Bengali OTT. This not only diversifies female roles but also asserts women's intellectual and professional capabilities in cultural spaces where they were previously excluded.

3. Agents of Resistance and Justice

In *Paap* (Hoichoi), Puja Banerjee's Parboni defies the stereotype of the docile, victimized woman by transforming into an avenger who confronts her abusers. The narrative elevates her from a position of silence to one of authority and justice. This complexity embodies women not just as survivors but as agents of systemic challenge.

Psychological and Emotional Complexity

Hello! (Hoichoi) and *Tasher Ghawr* (Hoichoi) exemplify the portrayal of women as emotionally complex individuals. Nandita (*Hello!*) resists the stereotype of the betrayed wife by actively investigating her husband's infidelity. Similarly, the protagonist in *Tasher Ghawr* navigates entrapment and violence during lockdown, eventually reclaiming her independence. Both characters embody resilience, agency, and moral ambiguity, making them relatable and layered.

Socio-Historical Roles and Resilience

Indubala Bhaier Hotel presents a woman navigating widowhood, displacement, and survival. Indubala's role as an entrepreneur and custodian of cultural memory (through food and community) defies the stereotype of the helpless widow, instead depicting her as resilient, resourceful, and socially significant. Bengali OTT platforms thus diversify women's roles across genres, from avengers and detectives to entrepreneurs and psychologically complex figures, challenging older depictions that limited women to domestic or sacrificial archetypes. These characters reveal women as agents of justice, professionals, survivors, and cultural custodians, demonstrating intricacy and contradiction rather than moral simplicity. In doing so, they defy conventional stereotypes by portraying women not as passive recipients of fate but as multifaceted subjects negotiating power, identity, and autonomy. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity emphasizes that gender is not innate but is constructed through repeated acts, behaviours, and discourses. This lens helps explain how Bengali OTT content both reproduces and disrupts traditional gender norms by presenting women in roles that go beyond domestic or submissive archetypes. Through the lens of gender performativity, the variety and intricacy of women's roles on Bengali OTT platforms reveal how gender is continually enacted, contested, and reimagined. By placing women as detectives, avengers, entrepreneurs, and psychologically complex figures, these narratives show that femininity is not a fixed essence but a set of performative acts open to variation and resistance. Feminist media studies further highlight how such portrayals challenge dominant cultural scripts, offering audiences alternative models of womanhood that defy conventional stereotypes and open space for more inclusive gender imaginaries.

Objective (3): Evaluating the descriptive importance of the story and the degree of control given to women characters

This objective focuses on how narrative authority and control are distributed in Bengali OTT platforms, and whether women characters occupy central, active positions in storytelling rather than being peripheral figures. Historically, women in Indian and Bengali media were often depicted as passive, secondary, or defined by their relationships to men. However, the OTT shift has opened spaces for women to emerge as drivers of the narrative, shaping events, influencing outcomes, and making autonomous choices. Evaluating this objective through feminist media studies and gender performativity, it becomes clear that women on Bengali OTT are not simply “represented” but are increasingly positioned as narrative anchors whose gestures, speech, and decisions perform and sometimes subvert gender norms. Their control over the storyline challenges patriarchal traditions of storytelling where men historically monopolized agency.

Conclusion

Bengali OTT platforms such as *Hoichoi* and *Addatimes* have significantly transformed the representation of women, moving beyond reductive stereotypes to portray women as resilient, complex, and autonomous. Guided by feminist media studies and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, this study shows how female characters enact and resist gender norms through their roles, dialogues, and relational dynamics. While traces of conventional tropes remain, the increasing presence of multifaceted protagonists, from detectives and entrepreneurs to survivors and avengers, signals a cultural shift in how femininity is imagined and performed. These evolving portrayals not only reshape media narratives but also hold the potential to influence audience perceptions and contribute to broader gender discourses in Bengal.

Further Scope of the Research

While this study has examined the representation and evolving portrayals of women in Bengali OTT platforms from 2017 to 2024, several avenues remain open for future exploration.

First, this research has primarily adopted a textual analysis of narratives. Future studies could incorporate audience reception analysis to investigate how viewers interpret these portrayals and whether such content actively shapes cultural perceptions of gender roles. Understanding the impact on diverse audiences—urban vs. rural, youth vs. older generations, male vs. female viewers—would deepen insights into the societal influence of OTT narratives.

Second, there is scope to broaden the comparative dimension of this work by studying women’s representation across different regional OTT platforms, such as Tamil, Malayalam, or Marathi, and comparing them with Bengali portrayals. Such cross-regional analysis would highlight whether the feminist shifts identified here are part of a wider pan-Indian transformation or uniquely rooted in Bengal’s socio-cultural context.

Third, this study has focused on on-screen representation. Further research could examine the role of women in content creation as directors, writers, and producers on Bengali OTT platforms, assessing how women’s participation behind the camera influences the nature of storytelling. Inclusion of such studies will further enrich the understanding of how Bengali OTT platforms continue to shape and challenge discourses of gender in India’s evolving digital media landscape.

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