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Representation of Women in Web Series: A Study on Bengali OTT Platform Hoichoi

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in media has always influenced how society sees them, either by reinforcing old stereotypes or challenging them with modern perspectives. With the penetration of the internet and the rise of OTT platforms, regional web series have become a powerful space for storytelling, reflecting real-life experiences while shaping public opinion. Bengali web series explore different aspects of women's lives, showing them as strong and independent. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards more meaningful and realistic portrayals of women. Many web series now highlight women as independent individuals with ambitions, struggles, and successes. Unlike old narratives that often limited female characters to household roles, modern series are increasingly giving them central roles in the story. Women are now shown making their own choices, standing up against injustice, and challenging outdated societal norms. Despite this progress, certain stereotypes persist. This study examines how women are represented in the Bengali web series, concentrating on themes, character development, and storytelling patterns to understand how Hoichoi is shaping conversations around gender and equality.

Keywords: *Stereotype, Women, Media, OTT, Hoichoi*

Introduction

The mass media acts as the mirror of society. It has long played a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions, influencing how gender roles and identities are constructed and reinforced. The history of women's stereotypical representation in media is long and complex. It can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century and continues till date. Some feminist and social movements during the 1960s, '70s, '80s, and '90s made very little progress in media representation promoting equality and inclusivity.

Since the mass media is a reflection of society, it is the media's responsibility to promote neutrality and balance in the portrayal of gender on screen. Women are portrayed as ultimate caregivers, while men are depicted as figures of supreme power, often shown as the family's sole earner or the final decision maker. Multiple platforms like cinema, soaps, advertisements, works of literature, and web series have limited women to mere objects of beauty by objectifying them rather than focusing on their true potential. Majorly, the media industry is dominated by men, which is reflected in the way women are portrayed in the media. They are often shown as weak, emotional, and dependent individuals who

are incapable of making important life decisions **(Ziyan, 2023)**.

According to a report by the European Institute for Gender Equality, the media is a powerful tool for entertainment, education, and information, and has the potential to reflect, reinforce, and reshape societal norms and stereotypes. However, gender inequalities and stereotypes remain pervasive across various media sectors, including advertising, films, and video games. Studies show that women continue to be underrepresented and are often depicted in stereotypical roles. In advertising, gender imbalances persist, with stereotypes remaining unchanged. Similarly, in films, male characters have consistently outnumbered female characters over the years, with little progress in eliminating the gender gap. The video game industry, despite having a diverse player base, still features female characters often reduced to secondary or sexualized roles **(EIGE, 2020)**.

As societies advance through education, economic development, and social activism, the representation of women in media is also transforming. An increasing number of media portrayals emphasize shared responsibilities, professional achievements, and a variety of identities, mirroring the contemporary world. Although some traditional representations persist, the movement towards more inclusive and gender-aware representations marks a significant improvement. Recent studies reveal that the worldwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid increase in the number of subscribers of OTT platforms, which consisted of a large number of women audiences. With the increase in female audience, producers and directors, there has been a fundamental shift in the portrayal of women in movies and series on OTT platforms. Production of more women-focused shows has

successfully led to the breaking of gender stereotypes **(Ghildiyal& Jayaswal, 2024)**.

According to a report by The Times of India, gone are the days when women were shown as messy, flawed, emotional, or weak. OTT has created space for full-fledged female characters. It presents women as independent, rational, powerful, and imperfectly perfect **(Vyavahare, 2022)**.

While several studies have examined the portrayal of women in mainstream Hindi OTT content, comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to regional OTT platforms such as Hoichoi that focus on Bengali-language storytelling. According to an article by Mehta**(2025)**, “Hoichoi (launched 2017) has become the premier Bengali OTT service, boasting approximately 13 million subscribers across 100+ countries”, making it the largest Bengali OTT platform. Studying this platform is significant because regional narratives often reflect culturally specific gender norms, family structures, and social expectations. Therefore, examining women’s representation in Hoichoi web series helps to understand how contemporary Bengali digital media engages with issues of gender, identity, and social change.

Literature Review

Book Review

Issues of stereotypical media representation have been critically examined by scholars like Julia T. Wood, who identified three key themes: the underrepresentation of women, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the depiction of traditional gender roles in the book chapter “Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender”. Women are consistently underrepresented in the media. The stereotypical

representation affects how women perceive their worth and societal contributions. When women appear, they are often portrayed in limited roles—young, attractive, passive, and focused on relationships. Media depictions frequently divide women into two extremes: the "good woman" who is submissive and family-oriented and the "bad woman" who is independent and career-driven. The societal impact of these portrayals is significant. The normalization of male dominance and female subservience in advertisements, films, and television leads to harmful consequences, including workplace discrimination, limited opportunities for women, and gender-based violence. The glorification of unrealistic beauty standards contributes to body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues among women (T. Wood, 2025).

According to the book chapter "Women's Portrayal and Role in Media," the portrayal of women in mass media reflects deep-rooted gender stereotypes, often reinforcing traditional roles rather than challenging them. Indian media, across print, electronic, and digital platforms, tends to depict women in binary opposites, either as nurturing figures upholding societal values or as subjects of objectification and victimization. News coverage frequently sensationalizes crimes against women rather than addressing systemic issues of gender inequality. Films and television perpetuate stereotypes, portraying women as either caregivers or seductive objects, while men are shown as dominant decision-makers. Advertisements and magazines prioritize beauty standards over empowerment, focusing on fashion and appearance rather than professional achievements. Despite some progressive efforts, mainstream media continues to shape public perception in ways that limit women's agency. However, alternative media, feminist cinema, and social platforms are gradually challenging these narratives, highlighting women's struggles, successes, and aspirations.

Stereotypical media portrayals persist on a global scale. The book "A Study of the Portrayal of Women by the Media and their Presence in Media Organizations in Some Countries of the Mediterranean" presents how women are depicted across various media platforms and highlights persistent gender biases. It also highlights that women's presence in the news media remains significantly lower than men's, both in representation and in the frequency with which their voices are heard on important issues (Karam, 2010).

The book "Heroines of Film and Television: Portrayals in Popular Culture", edited by Norma Jones, Maja Bajac-Carter, and Bob Batchelor, examines the portrayal of women in media, highlighting how female characters oscillate between traditional stereotypes and progressive representations. The book discusses how media representations of women in workplace settings often reinforce gender norms while also providing space for resistance, as seen in characters like Joan Harris from *Mad Men*, who navigate power dynamics and professional identity within a patriarchal system. Similarly, it explores anti-heroines like Nancy Botwin from *Weeds*, who subvert traditional notions of femininity while embracing morally ambiguous choices. The book also delves into the portrayal of women in films such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Kill Bill*, and *Sin City*, analysing how these characters challenge gendered expectations (D'Enbeau & M. Buzzanell, 2014).

Krijnen (2017), in the book chapter "Feminist Theory and the Media," discussed how different feminist theories like feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism offer distinct perspectives on media portrayals of women. Feminist empiricism highlights how media representations of women are skewed due to

male-centred biases in knowledge production. It uses quantitative research to show that women are often underrepresented in leadership roles and are frequently depicted in domestic or sexualized roles. Social role theory, part of feminist empiricism, explains how the media reinforces traditional gender norms by linking women with caregiving roles. Feminist standpoint theory, on the other hand, argues that marginalized voices provide a clear understanding of the media's impact. Since most media is created by men, it often reflects male perspectives, reducing women to objects of desire and reinforcing stereotypes. Standpoint theorists call for more female-centred stories and diverse representations that challenge these perspectives. Feminist postmodernism, influenced by thinkers like Judith Butler, rejects fixed gender identities and emphasizes how media constructs ideas of femininity and masculinity through cultural and historical contexts.

Thesis Review

The portrayal of women in horror literature is stuck to stereotypical portrayals (S., 2013). The thesis “Gendered Ghosts: The Representation of the Female in Ghost Stories” highlighted that male-authored ghost narratives depict women as passive, emotional, and irrational figures, reinforcing stereotypes. Most of the time, female ghosts are stereotyped by showing them as the revengeful spirit, the tragic victim, or the seductive enchantress. However, women writers have used ghost stories as a form of resistance. By using supernatural elements, they critique marriage, domesticity, and patriarchal oppression, offering alternative narratives and challenging conventional gender roles. The study also explores cinematic and popular cultural representations, where female ghosts symbolize societal fears about female sexuality and independence.

According to Salima Jan’s thesis, the portrayal of women in Bollywood cinema has evolved over the decades, reflecting both traditional and modern representations. Historically, women were often depicted in stereotypical roles, such as the chaste, self-sacrificing mother, the devoted wife, or the Westernized “bad girl”. Bollywood films have reinforced patriarchal ideologies, objectifying women through visual spectacle. However, with the advent of feminist narratives and socially conscious filmmaking, there has been a gradual shift toward showcasing women as independent, career-oriented, and capable individuals. Films like *Mother India* (1957), *Chandni Bar* (2001), and *Kahaani* (2012) have challenged traditional stereotypes, presenting female protagonists as strong and resilient. While contemporary Bollywood has made strides in addressing gender issues and dismantling stereotypes, mainstream cinema still struggles with the persistent male gaze, reinforcing the idea of women as objects of desire rather than autonomous beings (Jan, 2022).

The representation of women in Bhojpuri cinema has evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader societal changes. Before the 1990s, women were largely portrayed within a patriarchal framework, confined to roles such as the ideal mother, wife, or sister, often depicted as embodiments of virtue, loyalty, and obedience, influenced by religious and mythological narratives. Bhojpuri films reinforced traditional gender norms, emphasizing women's submissiveness and their duty to uphold family honour. However, after the 1990s, a shift occurred with films like *Hunterwali* and *Durga*, where women were portrayed as strong-willed avengers, challenging gender stereotypes. The impact of globalization and economic reforms led to the increased commodification of women in cinema, but it also contributed to their portrayal as bold and

self-reliant individuals, reflecting growing female empowerment in Indian society. Despite this progress, women-centric films remain a minority in Bhojpuri cinema(Singh R. P., 2018).

The thesis by **Sekhar Sil(2012)** explores the complex representation of middle-class Bengali women in cinema, highlighting how their identity has been shaped by societal expectations and traditional gender roles. The study finds that Bengali films, influenced by middle-class discourse, largely confine women to roles of motherhood, wifehood, and others. Even when female characters step into the public sphere, their participation is often portrayed as an extension of their familial duties. The research also reveals that while some films depict women striving for independence, they often remain bound by patriarchal structures that limit their autonomy. Characters such as Parama (Parama), Arati (Mahanagar), and Aditi (Hemant Pakhi) reflect the tension between traditional expectations and the desire for self-discovery. However, even when women challenge societal norms, their identities are often defined in relation to male characters. The thesis further critiques how Bengali cinema fails to provide radical alternatives for women's liberation, often portraying those who seek independence as exceptions. Moreover, the study finds that Bengali films reinforce male dominance in the public sphere, portraying it as a space where women must adopt masculine traits to gain acceptance.

Kanwar(2022), in her thesis on the portrayal of women in soap operas, particularly through the analysis of *Balika Vadhu*, reveals the persistence of patriarchal structures and the simultaneous efforts to challenge them. The study highlights key themes such as child marriage, widow remarriage, divorce, domestic violence, girl-child education, and female employment,

demonstrating how soap operas reflect and shape societal attitudes toward women.

Shital Jimmy Tamakuwala, in her thesis “Gender stereotypes in media: a study of the impact of television serials and advertisements on college students,” pointed out that the portrayal of women in media has been a subject of critical scrutiny, reflecting both progress and persistent stereotypes that reinforce traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideologies. Mass media often depict women as passive, submissive, and confined to domestic responsibilities, while men are portrayed as dominant decision-makers in both family and professional settings. Even when women are represented in professional roles, their portrayal is frequently overshadowed by an emphasis on appearance. Advertisements further exploit these stereotypes by targeting women as consumers of household products and portraying them as commodities, contributing to consumerism and unrealistic lifestyle expectations. The media's reinforcement of patriarchal values obstructs gender equality efforts. Although there has been a shift towards more empowering representations, the underlying structures of media continue to cater to dominant social norms. Addressing these issues requires critical media literacy, diverse and authentic representation, and policy interventions that challenge deeply ingrained biases (**Tamakuwala, 2010**).

Journal Article and Conference Paper Review

Feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, along with Indian critics like Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, have criticized the media for failing to address women's issues adequately. However, the media also has the power to promote gender equality by providing women a platform to voice their opinions,

challenging stereotypes, and encouraging active participation in all political, economic, and social domains. Despite this potential, challenges such as underrepresentation, sensational coverage of gender-based violence, and the objectification of women persist. Addressing these issues requires increasing female participation in media, promoting media literacy, and enforcing content regulations to ensure responsible representation (**Bano et al., 2021**).

According to the Social Responsibility Theory, media must ensure fair and accurate representation, countering gender biases and fostering positive change. However, the objectification of women in media remains a significant issue, often reinforcing patriarchal norms and reducing women to mere commodities. Legal frameworks at both international and national levels aim to address these disparities. Internationally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urges states to eliminate gender stereotyping in media, while the Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes the need for fair representation of women. In India, legal measures such as the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986 and the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act of 1995 seek to curb indecent portrayals of women. Despite these regulations, the enforcement remains weak, highlighting the need for stricter implementation and reforms to combat gender biases in media effectively (**Saha & Dasgupta, 2022**).

From a feminist perspective, the Male Gaze Theory continues to shape media narratives. **Song (2022)** critically examined this phenomenon in mass media, highlighting its impact on the portrayal of women. The study emphasized that women are framed as passive subjects in male-dominated media. This phenomenon is

particularly evident in news coverage, where women are frequently associated with entertainment sections, while their presence in politics, science, and other fields remains limited. It also points out how female figures in power are often scrutinized through gendered stereotypes, such as being linked to scandals or personal relationships. Furthermore, media reporting tends to sensationalize women's roles, focusing on their appearance rather than their achievements, which perpetuates a culture where women are seen through a limited and objectified lens. The study advocates for more balanced gender representation and media structures that allow women to have a stronger voice in storytelling and discourse formation.

Rodríguez & Lopez-Figueroa (2024) explored the portrayal of women in media, particularly the shift in representation since the early 2000s. It highlights how traditional femininity has been vilified, leading young girls to distance themselves from feminine traits due to internalized misogyny, as seen in films like *A Cinderella Story* and *Ten Things I Hate About You*. The research employs a qualitative documentary analysis and descriptive content analysis methodology, examining media sources to understand cultural impacts. Key findings include the "Not Like Other Girls" phenomenon, the persistence of the "Madwoman" trope in vilifying strong female characters, and the lack of authentic representation of marginalized women, including queer women, transgender women, and women of colour. The study also discusses how female characters are disproportionately hated in fandom culture compared to male antagonists.

Santonico et al (2023) conducted a comprehensive study analysing gender portrayals across various media formats, including television, news, social media, advertisements, and video games. Using data

from scientific databases such as APA PsycArticles, Scopus, and Web of Science, they conducted a thematic analysis of 87 selected studies. Their findings indicate that despite evolving societal perspectives on gender, media representations remain deeply rooted in stereotypes. The study highlights that men are disproportionately represented in news coverage and expert roles, whereas women are often confined to traditional portrayals. Their research underscores the persistent objectification and sexualization of women, particularly in advertising and entertainment media, where they are frequently depicted as decorative objects or subjected to the male gaze. The study also links such representations to adverse psychological and social outcomes. Their findings suggest that the perpetual sexualized portrayals in digital and social media have increased mental health concerns by promoting unrealistic appearance ideals.

There are many instances in the media where gender is portrayed stereotypically. However, the portrayal of women in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare was significantly ahead of its time. Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of women in his literary works reflects his progressive and reformist vision. As highlighted in the study by Rupali Saxena and Sharmila Saxena, Tagore depicted women beyond traditional stereotypes, presenting them as strong, independent, and capable of challenging societal norms. His female characters, such as Binodini in *Chokher Bali*, Mrinmoyee in *Samapti*, and Mrinal in *Streer Patra*, navigate social constraints with resilience and assertiveness. Tagore addressed critical issues such as marital oppression, widowhood, education, and self-identity, advocating for women's empowerment through his narratives. His works highlight the struggle of women against societal injustice while emphasizing their right to education, self-

expression, and personal fulfilment. Through his literature, Tagore championed the idea that women should not remain passive but instead take control of their destinies, making his writings a significant contribution to gender discourse in Indian literature (Saxena & Saxena, 2019).

Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare wrote in different cultural and historical contexts, but both portrayed women as complex, multifaceted individuals who challenged societal norms. Shakespeare's heroines, including Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, exhibit intelligence, resilience, and defiance against societal constraints. While Tagore's women evolve within the backdrop of colonial Bengal, grappling with issues of widowhood, marriage, and self-identity, Shakespeare's women, bound by Elizabethan norms, use wit, disguise, and emotional strength to assert their independence. Both authors create female characters who are not mere stereotypes but active participants in shaping their destinies, making their works timeless reflections on gender and society (Nagar, 2024).

With time, the portrayal of women is showing gradual improvement in representation in different media like advertisements, cinema, soaps, and print media.

The article "The Portrayal of Women in Advertising" by Pallavi Soni examines how women are depicted in media advertisements, emphasizing themes of unrealistic body standards, sexual objectification, and traditional gender roles. The study highlights how advertisements reinforce societal expectations, pressuring women to conform to specific beauty norms while also shaping male perceptions of female appearance. Using a survey of 313 respondents, the research finds that unrealistic

portrayals negatively affect women's self-esteem, leading to body dissatisfaction and, in some cases, eating disorders. Furthermore, many advertisements continue to depict women in submissive or decorative roles rather than as independent, career-oriented individuals. The findings suggest that audiences prefer realistic portrayals of women, indicating a demand for more authentic advertising(**Soni, 2020**).

The article "Critical Analysis of the Representation of Women in Indian Cinema" by Dr. Ruchika Chaudhary examines the portrayal of women in Indian films, tracing its evolution from the early years of cinema to the present day. The study highlights how Indian cinema has historically reflected both progressive and regressive gender narratives. While some films have empowered female characters by addressing issues such as widow remarriage, gender inequality, and female independence, others have reinforced patriarchal norms by objectifying women through sexualized and stereotypical roles. The article acknowledges the significant role cinema plays in shaping public perception and societal attitudes towards women. It discusses how early Indian films primarily depicted women in mythological, religious, and traditional roles, reinforcing conservative gender expectations. However, over time, films such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Guide* (1965) introduced stronger female protagonists who defied societal constraints. The study also critiques the commodification of women in Bollywood through item numbers, obscene portrayals, and hypersexualized imagery, which contribute to a distorted perception of femininity. The paper also discusses the underrepresentation of women in key roles behind the camera, noting that scriptwriting, directing, and producing remain largely male-dominated. The study cites reports indicating that only a small percentage of Indian films are directed or written by women, affecting

how female characters are represented on screen. The author urges filmmakers, the audience, and the censor board to take responsibility for promoting healthier and more respectful portrayals of women in Indian cinema(**Chaudhary, 2023**).

The article "Portrayal of Women in Bollywood Item Songs" by Chandrakant Kamble and Santosh Kumar Biswal critically examines the objectification of women in Bollywood through the lens of the male gaze theory and historical performance traditions. It draws parallels between modern item songs and the historical institution of *kotha*, where female performers entertained male patrons, arguing that item numbers reinforce patriarchal norms, voyeuristic pleasure, and gender stereotypes. The study highlights how women in these songs are positioned as passive objects of male desire, commercialized for mass entertainment without agency. It also connects this portrayal to real-world gender biases, citing crime statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2018)(**Kamble & Biswal, 2022**).

The paper by **Banerjee(2017)** examined the portrayal of women in Indian print media, highlighting how the media reinforces patriarchal norms and commodifies women. Women are often depicted as passive, submissive, and sexualized objects, with their representation in newspapers and magazines shaped by traditional gender stereotypes. While print media has the potential to influence societal perceptions, it predominantly focuses on violence against women, entertainment, and sensational news, neglecting issues related to women's empowerment and political participation. The findings reveal that feminism is often misrepresented or ignored, and women's movements receive inadequate coverage. Success stories of women are largely confined to beauty, sports, and entertainment, while

independent, assertive women are portrayed negatively. The study identifies a significant gap between women's real-life struggles and their media representation, emphasizing that print media often reflects and sustains societal biases rather than challenging them.

OTT (Over-the-Top) platforms have transformed media consumption by providing on-demand video content through the Internet, bypassing traditional cable and satellite television. Services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar offer flexible viewing options through subscription-based (SVOD), transactional (TVOD), and ad-supported (AVOD) models. The rise of OTT is fuelled by increasing internet penetration, affordable smart devices, and technological advancements like 5G, which enhance streaming quality and user experience. Millennials, who prefer instant and personalized content, are the primary consumers of OTT, often choosing it over traditional television. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, making OTT platforms the dominant source of entertainment. Additionally, the industry has created new revenue streams through targeted advertising and exclusive content production, reshaping the global entertainment landscape. As digital infrastructure continues to evolve, OTT platforms are expected to redefine audience engagement, providing greater accessibility and convenience than ever before (Singh S.).

The portrayal of women in Indian web series on OTT platforms has undergone a significant transformation, breaking away from traditional stereotypes often reinforced by television and cinema. Digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and regional streaming services like Hoichoi have enabled a more diverse representation of women, focusing on their struggles, aspirations, and identities beyond the conventional roles of obedient daughters, wives,

or mothers. The shift towards female-centric narratives is evident in series such as *Aarya*, *Four More Shots Please*, and *Delhi Crime*, which explore themes of gender identity, female agency, and social taboos often ignored by mainstream media. OTT platforms have produced more women-led content in the past few years than traditional media did over decades, allowing for nuanced storytelling that challenges patriarchal norms. However, many scholars critique the accessibility and relatability of such content, arguing that many women-centric web series cater primarily to urban, privileged audiences, leaving behind the narratives of women from smaller towns and rural areas. Despite this, the growing popularity of these web series demonstrates an increasing demand for content that portrays women as independent, ambitious, and complex individuals rather than one-dimensional characters (Sharma, 2021).

The increasing involvement of female directors, producers, and writers has contributed to this shift, as noted by Monika Shergill, Vice President of Programming for Netflix India, who highlighted that more than half of Netflix's Indian releases in 2019 had a female producer or director. The success of characters like Damini Rizvi Roy in *Four More Shots Please!*, Vartika Chaturvedi in *Delhi Crime*, and Dr. Mira Anand in *Hostages* illustrates the growing appeal of strong, layered female protagonists who navigate personal and professional challenges. Additionally, regional platforms such as Sony Liv, ZEE5, and Alt Balaji have actively created content centred around female leads, further diversifying women's representation (Ghildiyal & Jayaswal, 2024).

The paper "Portrayal of Female Identity in Digital Media: An Investigation Based on Selected Indian Web Series" by Vaishnav V. S. explores the depiction of women in Indian web

series on OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar. The study highlights that web series have moved beyond traditional TV stereotypes, portraying women as independent, ambitious, and complex individuals. Shows like *Made in Heaven*, *Lust Stories*, *Four More Shots Please!*, and *Mirzapur* challenge societal norms by presenting women who embrace their desires, careers, and personal agency. Many series also tackle taboo topics like premarital relationships, gender roles, and women's sexuality, offering more nuanced and realistic female characters (V.S., 2021).

The increasing focus on rural narratives in OTT content highlights the socio-cultural realities of Indian women, particularly those from marginalized communities. Films like *Jai Bhim* present women in their strongest form, depicting them as resilient figures who navigate systemic oppression and personal hardships while upholding deep-rooted ethical and cultural values. Sengani, the protagonist of *Jai Bhim*, exemplifies the strength of rural women, demonstrating unwavering determination in her fight for justice against an oppressive system. The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in studying such portrayals reveals how language, visual elements, and socio-political contexts shape the representation of women (Pandey et al., 2023).

The paper "Portrayal of Women on OTT: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Content Released From 2017-2022" by Aastha Tiwari examines the representation of women in Hindi films and web series on OTT platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Netflix, and Sony LIV. Through critical discourse analysis, the study evaluates how women characters are positioned in different social and cultural settings, their roles in storylines, and their relationships within select content from 2017 to 2022. The paper highlights both progressive and

regressive portrayals of women on OTT platforms. It finds that while some female characters are shown in strong, independent roles, many remain in stereotypical supporting roles with minimal screen presence. Women in leadership positions often face resistance from their male counterparts, reflecting real-world gender struggles. Additionally, while some narratives explore themes of female empowerment and individuality, others still reinforce traditional gender norms, particularly in romantic relationships and family structures. The study acknowledges the evolving nature of OTT content, which allows for diverse and nuanced storytelling. However, it also critiques the persistence of certain gender biases, such as the objectification of women, limited agency in decision-making, and a lack of substantial female-centric narratives. The paper emphasizes the need for a more balanced and meaningful representation of women in digital media, reflecting their evolving societal roles and contributions (Tiwari, 2023).

Pal and Sharma(2022)analysed the shifting representation of women in Indian web series. The study highlights that online streaming platforms have provided opportunities to break traditional stereotypes, portraying women as independent, ambitious, and multifaceted individuals. Unlike television soap operas that often depict women in domestic roles, web series such as *Sacred Games*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Made in Heaven* present women as career-oriented, assertive, and in control of their lives. The findings indicate that 91% of surveyed viewers recognize a positive change in women's portrayal, welcoming the shift as a step towards gender equality.

The portrayal of women in web series on OTT platforms has been a subject of increasing academic scrutiny, particularly regarding gender sensitivity and audience perceptions. Research

indicates that while OTT platforms have introduced diverse and independent female characters, many web series continue to objectify women, often depicting them as sex objects or overly focused on relationships. A study by **Prasad and Amin(2021)** found that 52% of female and 61% of male respondents believe that web series reinforce such portrayals, raising concerns about the persistence of gender stereotypes in digital entertainment. Additionally, the research highlights a divide in audience opinions on the necessity of censoring explicit content, with female viewers expressing stronger concerns. While OTT platforms have created opportunities for female-led narratives that challenge traditional television stereotypes, the study suggests that a new form of stereotyping has emerged, where women are either hyper-sexualized or presented through unrealistic, glamorized images. Despite these challenges, the growing representation of female protagonists in OTT content signifies a shift towards more complex and layered storytelling, although there remains a need for responsible narratives that avoid reinforcing gender biases and instead offer more nuanced, authentic depictions of women.

Aims And Objectives

The aims and objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse how Bengali web series on Hoichoi portray female characters in terms of agency, roles, and stereotypes.
2. To examine whether these portrayals challenge traditional gender norms or reinforce existing societal expectations.

Methodology

The study uses qualitative content analysis to understand how women are portrayed in the Bengali web series on the Hoichoi platform.

Four series were selected for analysis—Lajja, Indu, Sampurna, and Noshto Neer. The series were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on web series that feature prominent female characters and address gender related themes such as domestic violence, agency, identity, and power relations. The analysis examined key aspects of female representation including character roles, agency in decision-making, portrayal of stereotypes, relationships with other characters, and the depiction of social issues affecting women. Episodes from each series were closely viewed and relevant scenes were identified and interpreted through qualitative content analysis. The process involved identifying recurring themes, narrative patterns, and character portrayals related to women's experiences within family and societal contexts. This approach enabled the study to interpret how female characters are constructed within the narrative and whether these portrayals challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms.

Analysis And Interpretation

Sampurna

Sampurna (Season 1) follows the life of Sampurnain a traditional Bengali household. When her sister-in-law, Nandini, marries Raktim, she faces physical and sexual abuse. Sampurna uncovers the truth and fights for Nandini's justice despite resistance from their patriarchal family, especially her mother-in-law, Aloka. The season highlights the trauma of marital rape, domestic abuse, and the power of female solidarity.

Season 2 continues the legal battle, but the system proves challenging. Sampurna's uncle, who is a popular lawyer, arrives to support her, triggering her childhood trauma of abuse—the narrative shifts to her hidden wounds and the societal suppression of such crimes. As

Sampurna goes against her uncle to expose him, she faces legal scrutiny, public backlash, and imprisonment. The season ends with a message on believing and supporting survivors, emphasizing resilience and women's strength against oppression.

Content Analysis:

Sampurna is a thought-provoking series that explores gender-based violence and societal oppression, offering a nuanced portrayal of women. The series presents women with agency, resilience, and the ability to seek justice. It centres on Sampurna and Nandini, who face injustice within a patriarchal household. Nandini, a young bride, is subjected to marital abuse, struggling to find her voice in a society that normalizes such oppression. Sampurna becomes the driving force behind Nandini's pursuit of justice, refusing to conform to societal expectations of silence and submission. Despite opposition from her own family, Sampurna asserts her identity, proving women are capable of independent thought and action. The series highlights the importance of female solidarity through characters like Sampurna's friend from an NGO and a competent, determined female police officer. These characters challenge traditional stereotypes and reinforce the idea that women can hold authority and play decisive roles in law enforcement.

Sampurna also takes a conscious step towards inclusivity in its visual portrayal of women. Unlike traditional soap operas that glorify fair skin, this series presents female characters with varying complexions, using nude makeup that maintains their original skin tones. This choice promotes diversity and challenges the bias in media that equates beauty with fairness. The women predominantly wear sarees, not as a sign of oppression but as an assertion of cultural

identity, dispelling the notion that empowerment is tied to Westernized aesthetics.

A crucial turning point in the narrative is Sampurna's battle against her uncle, a powerful pedophile who abused her as a child. When he misbehaves with another young girl in the family, Sampurna takes a stand despite the risks. The climax, where she exposes him on an open stage during his felicitation, sends a powerful message about breaking the silence around abuse and ensuring justice.

Sampurna presents a deeply impactful portrayal of women, rejecting stereotypes, promoting inclusivity, and highlighting female solidarity. It reinforces the idea that respect and identity should not be conditional upon societal expectations but should be inherent rights for every woman.

Lajja

Lajja is a gripping social drama that explores the harrowing realities of domestic verbal abuse, gaslighting, and psychological torment. The series revolves around Jaya, a meek and non-worldly woman who enters into an arranged marriage with Partha and finds herself trapped in a toxic and oppressive relationship. From the beginning, Jaya is subjected to relentless verbal abuse, both in private and in public, by Partha, whose dominating and manipulative nature erodes her self-confidence. Over time, her mental state deteriorates due to the constant humiliation, fear, and anxiety inflicted by her husband. The narrative meticulously depicts the everyday horrors of emotional abuse, gradually painting a picture of Jaya's helplessness and internal struggles.

Despite the psychological turmoil, Jaya slowly begins to realize the extent of the abuse she is enduring. With the support of her colleague and

sister-in-law, she gains the courage to confront her situation. The story follows her transformation from a fearful, broken woman to someone determined to seek justice against her abuser. As Jaya seeks legal recourse, the series culminates in a courtroom battle. However, rather than providing a definitive conclusion, Lajja leaves several loose ends, hinting at possible developments in future seasons. The open-ended finale suggests that Jaya's journey is far from over, paving the way for further exploration of her fight for justice and healing.

Content Analysis:

The web series Lajja presents a compelling and layered portrayal of women, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and journey towards self-respect. At the heart of the narrative is Jaya, a woman trapped in a toxic marriage where she endures constant verbal abuse and gaslighting from her husband, Partha. Initially, she tries to hold onto her marriage, hoping for change, but the situation worsens when even her daughter sides against her, choosing to stay with her father. This emotional betrayal becomes a turning point for Jaya, pushing her to reclaim her dignity and fight back against years of emotional torment. Her transformation from a helpless and submissive wife to a woman determined to stand up for herself serves as the central theme of the series.

Beyond Jaya's journey, Lajja introduces several strong female characters who challenge patriarchal attitudes in different ways. Partha's friends' wives refuse to ignore his toxic behaviour and openly question his mistreatment, reinforcing the idea that abuse should not be tolerated in any form. In Jaya's professional life, her female colleagues are depicted as independent and confident. One of her close colleagues, who becomes her confidante, sets an example by standing up for herself when she

faces workplace harassment, showing that women must assert their dignity in all aspects of life. Another significant character is Jaya's sister-in-law, a working woman who supports Jaya while dealing with her own struggles. Despite her professional success, she faces societal pressure and gossip for not having a child, highlighting how women are often subjected to rigid expectations regarding marriage and motherhood.

Through these diverse female characters, Lajja raises important conversations about emotional abuse, societal expectations, and women's agency. The series effectively portrays how verbal abuse and gaslighting can break a person's confidence, making it clear that such mistreatment should never be accepted as normal. It serves as a wake-up call for both male and female audiences, emphasizing that it is not only wrong to inflict verbal abuse but also wrong to silently endure it. By showcasing women who support one another and challenge oppression in various ways, Lajja goes beyond the typical victim narrative and instead presents women as agents of change. Jaya's ultimate decision to fight for her self-respect, even at great personal cost, delivers a powerful message about the importance of recognizing one's worth and refusing to be diminished by others.

Indu

Indu follows the journey of a newlywed woman, Indrani (Indu), who moves into her husband's home and soon discovers that the family harbours dark secrets. As she notices strange behaviours and cryptic conversations, Indu becomes determined to uncover the truth. The psychological thriller unfolds through suspense, family drama, and shocking revelations, leading to a gripping climax.

Indu Season 2 picks up after the shocking events of Season 1, with the mysterious death of Laboni, followed by the sudden demise of Indu's husband, Sougato. Convinced they were murdered, Indu embarks on a relentless quest for justice, facing obstacles from her brother-in-law, Sujato, and uncovering sinister secrets hidden within the Dasgupta family. As cryptic clues emerge, new suspects come into focus, but the season ends on another cliffhanger with more unanswered questions and a new murder, setting the stage for a potential Season 3.

Content Analysis:

The web series Indu presents a compelling portrayal of women, showcasing their strength, resilience, and struggles within a patriarchal household. At the heart of the story is Indu, played by Isha Saha, who begins as a newlywed bride stepping into a mysterious and secretive family. While she initially appears as a traditional wife trying to adjust to her new life, she soon evolves into a determined and courageous woman, unwilling to accept the restrictions imposed on her. Despite attempts by her mother-in-law and husband to limit her role and keep her away from family affairs, Indu defies these constraints, asserting her agency and actively seeking the truth. The series also sheds light on the emotional and mental turmoil caused by patriarchal oppression, particularly the damaging effects of doubting a woman's loyalty. Indu faces immense emotional fatigue due to the suspicions and hidden agendas surrounding her, reflecting how women are often unfairly scrutinized in family settings. This theme extends to other female characters in the series, such as Kushi, whose turbulent past reveals the deep scars in her life. Laboni, another significant female character, serves as a reminder of the tragic consequences of living within a rigid and secretive family. Her death becomes the catalyst for Indu's journey, reinforcing how silence and

submission can lead to devastating outcomes. Meanwhile, Kushi's fiery personality contrasts with Indu's quiet strength, showing different ways women navigate oppressive circumstances. Her outbursts provide crucial insights into the Dasgupta family's dark secrets, proving that women in the series are not merely victims but key agents in driving the story forward.

Indu portrays the varied roles of women within the family—some as silent enablers of patriarchal traditions, while others, like Indu, resist and challenge them. The show highlights how societal pressures, especially the constant questioning of a woman's loyalty, can lead to severe emotional and psychological distress. Through its suspenseful narrative, Indu not only unravels a gripping mystery but also delivers a strong message about women's autonomy, resilience, and the dangers of unchecked patriarchal control.

NoshtoNeer

Noshto Neer follows the unravelling of a seemingly perfect family after a well-respected professor, Rishabh Gangopadhyay, is accused of sexual harassment by a former student, Godhuli Basak. Godhuli, who claims to be pregnant with his child, reveals that their relationship, initially consensual, turned toxic when Rishabh suddenly abandoned her. Seeking dignity and support, she met with rejection, leading her to a tragic end. As the accusations come to light, Rishabh's wife, Aparna, initially stands by him but gradually discovers his manipulative and power-hungry nature. Her journey from a devoted spouse to a determined seeker of truth forms the series' emotional core. As she navigates societal backlash, personal betrayal, and her responsibilities as a mother, Aparna transitions into a crusader for justice. The series explores the complexities of power, consent, and coercion, showing how men in positions of

authority exploit their influence while maintaining a facade of respectability. With nuanced performances and a gripping narrative, *Noshto Neer* delves into the impact of #MeToo revelations, challenging moral perceptions and highlighting the strength of women who refuse to remain silent.

Content Analysis:

In *Noshto Neer*, Aparna starts as a devoted wife and mother who believes in her husband's integrity. However, as the truth about Rishabh's misconduct unfolds, she transitions into a determined woman who seeks justice, breaking free from societal expectations. Her journey highlights the burden of multitasking that women carry—managing a household, facing social scrutiny, and making difficult moral choices. Godhuli challenges the stereotypes often associated with women who call out abuse. She is not depicted as a vengeful opportunist or a helpless victim but as someone who demands

dignity and acknowledgment. Despite being in a consensual relationship with Rishabh, she recognizes the power imbalance and emotional manipulation at play. Her tragic fate underscores how society systematically silences women and protects powerful men. The backlash from the allegations falls more on Aparna than Rishabh, reflecting how patriarchy forces women to bear the consequences of men's transgressions.

The series does not reduce women to mere symbols of suffering but instead portrays them as complex individuals fighting to reclaim their narratives. Aparna and Godhuli stand at opposite ends of the spectrum—one seeking justice within the system, the other crushed by it. Yet together, they embody the larger struggle against systemic misogyny, showing that while some women may succeed in challenging injustice, others are still denied the space to have their voices heard. *Noshto Neer* avoids sensationalism and instead presents a powerful and layered commentary on gender, power, and consent.

Table 1: Analytical Categories Used in the Study

Web Series	Central Female Character(s)	Key Gender Issues Addressed	Representation of Women	Challenge to Gender Norms
Sampurna	Sampurna, Nandini	Marital rape, domestic violence, childhood abuse	Women shown as resilient and justice-seeking	Strong challenge to patriarchal silence
Lajja	Jaya	Emotional abuse, gaslighting, marital oppression	Transformation from submissive wife to self-assertive woman	Challenges normalization of verbal abuse
Indu	Indu, Kushi, Laboni	Patriarchal family control, suspicion of women	Women portrayed as investigators and truth seekers	Challenges patriarchal authority within family
Noshto Neer	Aparna, Godhuli	Sexual harassment, abuse of power	Women shown as morally complex and justice-oriented	Exposes power imbalance and systemic misogyny

Conclusion

Instances of the stereotypical portrayal of women in media are nothing new. It can be traced back to the invention of various forms of media. Since the media industry has been predominantly owned by men, the presentation of women has also been shaped from a male perspective. In cinemas, TV serials, reality shows, advertisements, news coverage, and literary works such as novels, dramas, and poems, women have often been confined to stereotypical roles. They are typically portrayed as homemakers or as mere supporters of their families, with their primary purpose being to take care of the household. Beyond these assigned roles, women are often depicted as soft, caring, weak, emotional, and dependent individuals. Many advertisements, particularly those promoting body sprays or perfumes, objectify women by presenting them as objects of desire, reinforcing the male gaze theory through unnecessary nudity. Such portrayals have harmful social, mental, and emotional consequences. However, with time and the progress of society, economy, and education, people have become increasingly aware of the negative impacts of such gender stereotypes. There is now a growing demand for more gender-neutral representations in media. Various social and feminist movements have played a crucial role in this shift, advocating for greater inclusivity and accurate portrayals of women.

The rise in internet penetration and the widespread availability of affordable smart devices have led to a surge in OTT platform adoption. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, acted as a catalyst for the OTT industry, leading to a rapid increase in subscribers, including a significant number of female viewers. The growing female audience, along with the rise of female filmmakers and

content creators, has contributed to a shift in the portrayal of women in web series.

While earlier research has explored the evolving depiction of women across multiple OTT platforms, this study specifically focuses on Bengali web series available on Hoichoi. The content on Hoichoi is well-crafted, featuring strong storylines and impressive cinematography. Many of these series aim to raise awareness about the struggles and injustices faced by women, highlighting societal evils while portraying women as strong individuals who can stand up for themselves. Unlike conventional TV serials that often equate modernity with Western attire, Hoichoi's shows embrace cultural identity by depicting female characters in sarees, salwars, and Kurtis—traditional attire commonly worn in West Bengal.

Furthermore, these series challenge the conventional notion that fair skin defines beauty. By featuring characters of diverse skin tones and using minimal, natural makeup, they promote inclusivity and individuality. Most Hoichoi web series emphasize the idea that respect is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of gender. Although some series still adhere to traditional stereotypes, continuous efforts are being made to advance the portrayal of women in media.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are based on a limited sample of selected Hoichoi web series and are intended to provide illustrative insights rather than broad generalizations about all Bengali OTT content. Future research may expand the scope by examining a larger number of series across multiple regional platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of women's representation in digital media.

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