

Platformised Intimacies Shaping Gender Sexuality and Queer Subjectivities in Indian OTT Narratives

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Abstract

The emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms has transformed the Indian media landscape, enabling forms of storytelling that often extend beyond the industrial, regulatory, and cultural constraints of broadcast television. While existing scholarship has examined platformisation and industrial change, comparatively little attention has been paid to how Indian streaming narratives reconfigure representations of gender and sexuality. Drawing upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, this study examines the representation of masculinity, femininity, and queer subjectivities in three Hindi series, *Made in Heaven*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Kohhra*. Through a qualitative textual analysis, we posit that these series depart significantly from the stable gender archetypes historically associated with mainstream broadcast television in India. Masculinity is represented as a contested and fragile social performance shaped by vulnerability, trauma, and changing expectations. Femininity is articulated through characters whose identities are informed by ambition, class mobility, caste, and agency rather than domesticity alone. Queer subjectivities are explored through their intersections with class, family, masculinity, religion, and social respectability, moving beyond questions of visibility and inclusion. By exploring complex and socially situated identities, these narratives expand the representational possibilities available within Indian screen cultures. We conclude that OTT platforms have facilitated a representational shift that enables more nuanced explorations of gender and sexuality while reflecting the complexities of contemporary Indian society.

Introduction

The behavioural pattern around the habit of consuming long-form stories or shows has undergone a metamorphosis since the arrival of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms. This transformation had multiple factors contributing to it. The wider availability of internet-enabled smart TVs, the newfound ubiquity of 5G internet, the universal adoption of smartphones, affordable pricing schemes, multiple-device accessibility [45], and advanced personalisation — these are but a few of the reasons that led to the rise in the popularity of OTT platforms. However, the most pertinent reason for the same, from a behavioural standpoint, is the OTT platforms' ability to cater their content towards individuals as opposed to families.

A Brief History of Indian Television

Historically, television has been a niche medium in India. In the initial years, very few households owned television sets and television broadcasting was limited to only a few major cities. Regular daily transmission began only in 1965, whereas in the United Kingdom it started in 1936, and in the United States of America in 1939. Initially, daily transmission in India was part of All India Radio, the nationwide radio broadcasting network. Additionally, it was limited only to the capital, New Delhi [1, 2]. It was extended to a second city, Mumbai, in 1972. By 1975, television broadcasts were available in seven

major cities, including places like Chennai and Kolkata [1, 2]. Until the early 1990s, Doordarshan was the only network that was permitted to broadcast television domestically [1]. Doordarshan is run by Prasar Bharati, an autonomous public service broadcaster established by an Act of Parliament that is funded and overseen by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, Government of India [1, 3–5].

With privatisation in the 1990s and India's economic liberalisation in 1991, television began to occupy a newer space in the collective psyche of its audience [6, 7]. With channels like Star TV, Zee TV, and Sony, Indian television witnessed an expansion and diversification of entertainment programming, further increasing the popularity of this medium [6–8]. This, coupled with the availability of cable TV, ensured more television set ownership across the board. Rural TV ownership doubled from 13% of households in 1993 to 26% in 2002, while urban ownership rose from 49% to 66% over the same period [9]. However, this shift had additional dimensions that also affected how TV was consumed in Indian households. Although advertising had become an important source of revenue for television broadcasting by the 1980s, with the rise of private television channels, it became the dominant source of funding for much of the industry [6, 8].

The Shift To Ad-funded Television

Consequently, audience measurement using television rating points (TRP) became crucial for the continuous success of a show [6, 10]. Viewers became a commodity ready for sale to brands and advertisers [10, 11]. Programmes were prioritised based on their entertainment quotient as opposed to their educational quotient [6, 8]. The urban middle-class audience was the primary target consumer for the brands, due to their high amount of disposable income [7, 8]. Gradually, long-form soap operas came to dominate many prime-time slots, often targeting a middle-class audience through narratives centered on family, romance, and culturally normative values and traditions [7, 12].

In the 2010s, the audience behaviour around long-form stories transformed again, this time with the advent of OTT streaming shows [13, 14]. While liberalisation changed television into a commercially driven medium, the emergence of OTT platforms evolved how audio-visual content was consumed [13–15]. Unlike broadcast communication, which was viewed on a TV that belonged to the family, OTT platforms became accessible through personal devices such as smartphones, televisions, and laptops [14, 15]. This removed the need for collective viewing and enabled audiences to consume their content individually, at times and locations of their choosing [14–16]. As viewing shifted from the family room television to personal screens, the household began to decline as the primary viewing unit [14, 16]. Instead, the platforms catered to the consumers as individuals, with distinct tastes and preferences. Personalised interfaces, personalised profiles for viewing, and the availability of content not being bound to time or place increased the popularity of OTT platforms [15–17].

The Digital Era

The arrival of OTT platforms and the subsequent transition from the broadcast logic to a new platform logic centered around user choice, personalisation, preference, and algorithmic recommendation [13, 14, 17]. Under the broadcast model, audiences were required to engage in ‘appointment viewing’ wherein programmes could only be consumed at fixed times determined by the broadcasters [13, 14, 20]. This model sought to attract a mass audience through content that appeals to a diverse demographic group within a household [13, 14]. This made television viewing a family event, and the content of the programmes was designed not to alienate any segment of the audience [13, 18]. In contrast, OTT platforms popularised on-demand viewing, enabling users to access content at a time, place, and pace of their choosing [13, 17]. This shift contributed to the fragmentation of audiences into smaller and more specialised segments defined by individual preferences as opposed to household membership [17, 19]. This transition from mass audiences to fragmented audiences and appointment viewing to on-demand viewing altered the economics and aesthetics of screen entertainment. Platforms could now profitably serve highly specific audience interests that would have been difficult to sustain within the traditional broadcasting model [13, 14, 17–20].

While broadcast programming focused on family-oriented stories to attract large heterogeneous audiences, OTT platforms could cater to niche audience segments [13, 15, 21]. The content on OTT platforms had the freedom to diversify and experiment with genres, themes, language, subject matter, and representation – something that would not have been possible within the constraints of family viewing [13, 21]. This diversification was further enabled by the regulatory ambiguity that marked the early phase of OTT streaming in India [22, 23]. Broadcast television had always been subject to heavy regulatory oversight, but streaming shows were not burdened by such restrictions [22, 23]. They did not have any censor board to monitor their activities [44]. This afforded the creators of OTT shows a greater latitude in their treatment of profanity in language, depiction of gory visuals and violence, sexuality and intimacy, political critique, and queer themes [21–23]. This manifested in the emergence of narratives that challenged the conventions of mainstream family-oriented television [21, 23].

New Stories, Nuanced Stories

Mainstream broadcast programming has historically represented gender through relatively conventional frameworks [12, 25]. Gender deconstruction is the process of questioning and breaking down traditional ideas about gender. It involves looking at the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape the understanding of gender [43]. Masculinity was almost always associated with authority, economic responsibilities, physical strength, and emotional restraint. Femininity was often articulated through caregiving, sacrifice, domesticity, and familial responsibility [24, 25]. Although these representations evolved, particularly with the emergence of urban and professional female protagonists, they generally remained anchored within the heteronormative, family-centric narrative structures [12, 26]. Nuanced portrayals that deconstructed gender roles, or attempted to look at them through a new lens, were largely uncommon [12, 25, 26].

Queer representation was all but absent from mainstream television for much of its history, unless it was used for derogatory humour, which also extended to male characters donning women's clothing or dressing in drag [27, 28]. Queer figures were also represented as tragic supporting characters and largely invisible as the protagonists [27, 28]. Notable exceptions can be found in programmes such as *Tara* (1993–1997), *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin* (2003–2006), and *Maryada: Lekin Kab Tak?* (2010–2012), which engaged with questions of gender and sexuality in complex ways [12, 27]. However, they were few and never the norm in broadcast television [12, 27, 28].

OTT platforms created new opportunities to explore identities that had previously received limited representation within mainstream television [21–23]. This paper examines the portrayal of masculinity, femininity, and queer identities in the three Hindi language series, Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti's *Made In Heaven* (2019-present), alongside Sudeep Sharma's *Paatal Lok* (2020-present) and *Kohrra* (2023-present). These programmes have been selected for this study because they move beyond conventional gender archetypes and present a range of characters whose identities are shaped by class, caste, sexuality, profession, family, economic realities, and social expectations. Through an analysis of these texts, this article investigates how contemporary Indian streaming narratives reconfigure established understandings of masculinity, femininity, and lived experiences of members of queer communities, compared to those historically available in mainstream broadcast television [21–23, 29, 30].

An Examination of Existing Scholarship

On Indian Television, Gender and Family Viewing

Scholarship on Indian television has consistently highlighted the importance of 'family', both as a narrative institution and a viewing unit [7, 12]. Early studies on Indian broadcasting posit that television programming, particularly after liberalisation and the expansion of private channels, increasingly depended on family-oriented melodrama as the dominant narrative form [7, 24]. Scholars such as Nalin Mehta have demonstrated how the growth of satellite television transformed the small screen into a commercially driven medium that depended on audience ratings and advertising revenue as determinants of programming decisions [7]. As broadcasters competed for viewership, content increasingly sought to appeal to large and heterogeneous audiences, resulting in narratives that highlighted and even celebrated broadly recognisable social values and familial relationships [7, 12].

Within such a framework, gender representation became closely aligned with the ideological requirements of family-oriented storytelling [12, 24]. Shoma Munshi's work on Indian television highlights how women were frequently represented through roles associated with caregiving, sacrifice, marriage, and domestic responsibility [12]. Although the emergence of urban settings and professional female protagonists introduced greater diversity into broadcast narratives, these representations remained embedded within heteronormative and family-centric frameworks [12, 24]. The scholarship argues that television narratives often reconciled women's professional aspirations with conventional familial obligations rather than rejecting traditional femininity [12]. While exceptions to the rule always existed,

scholars have broadly identified continuity rather than transformation in the gendered assumptions underpinned by broadcast television [7, 12, 24].

On Platformisation and Audience Fragmentation

The shift from broadcast television to OTT platforms has been observed worldwide to varying degrees and within different national and industrial contexts [13, 14, 17]. As such, scholars are concerned with the transformation of media industries, audience behaviour, and cultural production. Central to this discussion is the discourse around platformisation, developed by van Dijck and Poell, which describes the growing influence of digital platforms in organising cultural, economic, and social interactions [19]. Unlike broadcast television, which relied on scheduled programming and mass audiences, platform-based media systems operate through data-driven algorithmic recommendation systems, personalised interfaces, and continuous user engagement [13, 19, 21].

Scholars also argue that these technological and economic shifts have altered the relationship between audiences and media content [13, 14]. Subscription-based business models reduce dependence on advertising-supported mass audiences and enable platforms to profitably cater to smaller, more niche audiences [13, 17]. This has led to audience fragmentation, wherein viewers increasingly consume content based on individual preferences rather than shared household practices [14, 17, 19]. The transition from appointment viewing to on-demand viewing has further weakened the centrality of family television as the primary site of media consumption [13, 14]. The content is increasingly accessed through personal devices and customised user profiles [15, 19, 21].

The implications of platformisation extend beyond consumption patterns to the nature of media production and cultural representation through narrative storytelling [13, 17, 19]. By targeting niche public groups, OTT platforms have created opportunities for stories that address subjects, identities, and experiences that were often marginalised by mainstream broadcasting [13, 17]. Consequently, scholars have noted the emergence of greater diversity in genre, language, narrative structure, and representational politics within streaming content [13, 14, 17]. However, while platform studies have extensively examined questions of industry transformation, audience fragmentation, and digital infrastructures, relatively less attention has been given to how these developments reshape the representation of gender and sexuality within Indian streaming narratives [19, 21].

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

This paper draws upon three influential theoretical frameworks from gender and sexuality studies: Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity [30], which posits that gender is not an innate or natural characteristic but something that is continually produced through repeated performances; Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity [31], which explains how certain forms of masculinity become socially dominant and culturally privileged over others; and Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality [28], which examines how multiple dimensions of identity like race, gender, class and sexuality intersect to produce compounding systems of discrimination, marginalization and privilege.

Judith Butler's theory challenges the notion of gender as natural and questions its characteristics as something essential. Butler argues that gender is continuously produced through repeated acts, behaviours, and performances that acquire a state of stability over time [30]. Viewed through this lens, both masculinity and femininity are not fixed identities but socially constructed practices that are continually reinforced, contested, and transformed [30]. Butler's framework is particularly useful for analysing characters whose actions challenge conventional gender expectations, whether through Hathiram Chaudhary's failure to consistently embody dominant ideals of masculinity, authority, and success as the 'hero cop' in the thriller *Paatal Lok*, or the rejection of gendered expectations of care and familial values by Tara, the female protagonist in *Made in Heaven*. Butler's framework exposes the performative nature of gender itself, as exemplified by these narratives [30].

Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a complementary framework for examining power relations among different forms of masculinity [31]. Connell argues that societies typically privilege particular masculine ideas that become culturally dominant, while subordinating alternative masculinities and marginalising those who fail to conform to normative expectations [31]. Connell's framework enables an examination of how contemporary Indian streaming narratives represent male characters who embody, resist, negotiate, or fail to achieve dominant masculine ideals. For example, in *Paatal Lok*, Hathiram Chaudhury, a police officer, looks down upon his brother-in-law, Pawan Singh, a.k.a Jitu. Jitu is portrayed as a businessman with questionable ethics, but he is financially more stable than Hathiram. Yet, Hathiram's position of dominance is a consequence of a greater masculine authority that Indian society associates with the role of a policeman, despite Jitu's superior financial position [32].

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights how identities are shaped through the interaction of multiple social categories such as gender, class, caste, sexuality, and ethnicity [28]. In *Made in Heaven*, the male protagonist is Karan Mehra, an upper-caste North Indian businessman, hailing from a respectable upper-middle-class family. His homosexuality is not entirely closeted. Yet, through the course of Season 1, we see how the knowledge of his sexuality is only something that is shared with his closest allies, such as Tara. The show reveals how the secrecy stems from not just the anticipated reaction from his parents, but also the prejudice in the broader Indian society. The story of *Made in Heaven* Season 1 is set before 2018, at a time when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised same-sex relations as being "against the order of nature" [33]. We see this in effect when Karan is arrested by the police when his landlord outs him as a homosexual. With the help of Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, we understand how Karan, despite hailing from a privileged section of society, experiences some forms of exclusion and discrimination by dint of his homosexuality and the legal framework around same-sex relationships during the period when the narrative is set [28, 33].

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining how contemporary streaming narratives represent gendered and queer identities not as fixed categories but as dynamic social formations shaped by power, performance, and intersecting structures of inequality.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Indian television has examined broadcast-era melodrama, family viewing, advertising-driven programming, and gender representation [7, 12, 24, 29], while studies of OTT platforms have primarily focused on platformisation, audience behaviour, and industrial transformation [13, 14, 17, 19, 21]. At the same time, gender and sexuality studies have developed sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding identity, performance, power, and inequality [28, 30, 31]. However, relatively little research has brought these strands together to examine how contemporary Indian streaming narratives reconfigure masculinity, femininity, and queer subjectivities within the specific context of platformised media environments. Though research studies have documented the representation of women or LGBTQIA+ identities, fewer studies have examined how platform-specific storytelling enables new depictions of negotiations of femininity, masculinity, and queer subjectivities simultaneously. This study addresses the gap through a textual analysis of the three Hindi series, *Made in Heaven*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Kohhra*.

Masculinities In Transition

Masculinity has been historically represented by mainstream broadcast television through relatively stable and recognisable archetypes [12, 24, 29]. Male protagonists were frequently associated with authority, economic responsibility, physical and moral strength, reverence for tradition, rationality, and emotional restraint [12, 24]. While individual programmes occasionally departed from these conventions, masculinity was generally represented as a desirable and achievable social ideal [12, 24, 29]. The streaming narratives examined in this study depart from this tradition. Rather than presenting masculinity as stable, coherent, and uncontested, *Made in Heaven*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Kohhra* depict male characters whose identities are marked by vulnerability, insecurity, contradiction, and negotiation. Their struggles are not merely personal but emerge from their attempts to perform society's idea of 'being a man' and reconcile these social expectations with their lived realities. Viewed through the frameworks of gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity [30, 31], these narratives reveal masculinity not as an inherent characteristic but as a social role that must be continually performed, validated and defended. In doing so, they expose the fragility of masculine ideals and foreground the tensions that arise when individuals fail, refuse, or are unable to conform to dominant expectations of manhood [30, 31].

Paatal Lok

The clearest example of this deconstruction of masculinity can be found in Hathiram Chaudhary, the protagonist of *Paatal Lok*. As a police officer, husband, father, and mid-level senior in the police force, Hathiram's entire identity is built around several social roles conventionally associated with masculine authority and respectability [31, 32, 34]. Yet the series repeatedly presents him as a man who struggles to embody the expectations that come with these roles. His wife is unhappy with him, even though she loves him. His son is bullied in school, but does not address his grievances to him, as he does not seem to respect his father. Within his household, he is not the patriarch that society tells him he should be.

Professionally, he is overlooked by his superiors and denied the recognition he believes his experience deserves. Even his own self-perception is marked by a persistent sense of inadequacy and failure. Rather than depicting masculinity as a stable achievement, *Paatal Lok* portrays it as a continual process of negotiation in which Hathiram attempts to secure validation from institutions, colleagues, and family members who do not offer it willingly [30, 31]. The series thus challenges the conventional image of the heroic policeman by depicting the emotional vulnerabilities, insecurities, and frustrations that accompany Hathiram's pursuit of masculine legitimacy [30, 31, 32].

However, the narrative does not leave Hathiram trapped in a state of perpetual inadequacy. Creator Sudip Sharma brings nuance to his portrayal of the hard-boiled investigator in this new-generation neo-noir social thriller. By the end of Season 1, Hathiram gradually acquires the validation and self-respect that had eluded him for years before the story began. The nuance of the narrative necessitates that validation is not achieved through conventional markers of masculine success, such as physical dominance, institutional power, or professional prestige [31, 32]. Instead, it emerges through qualities that are often marginalised within traditional masculine ideals: empathy for the perceived 'criminal element' of the eponymous '*paatal lok*' (a euphemism for the lowest strata of society), moral conviction, and an unwillingness to abandon the pursuit of truth despite repeated humiliation and setbacks [30, 31].

Hathiram succeeds not because he becomes a more powerful policeman, or even a more powerful man, but because he opens his mind to the lived realities of the subjects of the investigation, a quality he lacked at the beginning of the season. In this sense, *Paatal Lok* reconfigures the basis of masculine legitimacy. The series suggests, through Hathiram's arc, that integrity and emotional resilience may be more meaningful measures of manhood than the authority, aggression, and control that have traditionally defined masculine success in popular narratives [30–32]. However, this portrayal of success is not presented in a didactic way. *Paatal Lok* does not simply reject conventional masculinity. Instead, it places older and newer masculine ideals in conversation with each other [31, 32]. This is evident in the first moment when Hathiram earns someone's validation in the narrative. Freshly suspended from the police force and frustrated at the hindrances imposed by his department, Hathiram tracks down a local gangster whose acquaintance had been harassing his son. He proceeds to threaten the gangster in his own home after single-handedly beating down the gangster's private security team. This is the first time we see his son look up at him in awe, full of respect. This scene demonstrates that traditional masculine authority still carries social power even within a narrative that critiques it [31, 32, 34].

The deconstruction of masculinity in *Paatal Lok* is not limited to Hathiram alone. The series presents a range of male characters who embody different and often competing masculine ideals [31]. Sanjeev Mehra, the celebrated television journalist whose assassination attempt becomes the central mystery of Season 1, appears at first glance to embody a contemporary urban masculine ideal. He is affluent, articulate, professionally successful, and enjoys significant public visibility. Yet beneath this outward image lies the insecurity that accompanies a successful socialite. Despite his fame and influence, once he becomes aware of the conspiracy to assassinate him, he leans more heavily towards political patronage and corporate interests, something he had heretofore resisted. In this regard, his arc is almost

the opposite of Hathiram's, where Sanjeev, once an honest and parrhesiastic journalist, slowly devolves into subservience to the system. Yet, he does so not with regret, but with a sense of pride. This also affects his personal relationships with his wife and his young lover, Sara Matthews. Sara begins an affair with him right after the news of the assassination attempt comes to the surface. But as Sanjeev's character slowly changes, she severs ties with the senior journalist. The series complicates the image of the urban male by revealing the precarity beneath the public persona, even for one who has constructed his public identity based on dissent. Masculine authority, even when accompanied by wealth and status, is shown to require constant validation and maintenance rather than existing as a stable condition [30, 31].

A more extreme challenge to conventional understandings of masculinity can be found in Vishal Tyagi, the antagonistic lead of Season 1 in *Paatal Lok*. On the surface, Tyagi appears to embody many of the attributes associated with masculine power: physical strength, fearlessness, violence, and an intimidating presence [31]. However, the narrative gradually reveals these traits to be products of a deeply traumatic upbringing characterized by abuse, humiliation, and emotional deprivation. The series presents his criminal trajectory as deeply rooted in the caste oppression and discrimination he faces [28]. As a teenager, he murdered three boys who assaulted his sister. The boys belonged to a higher caste, and as such, Tyagi had to go into hiding. Rather than presenting Tyagi's vengeful violence as evidence of glorious masculine strength [31], *Paatal Lok* portrays it as the consequence of old suffering (oppression) and the cause for new suffering (exile).

We see the same treatment towards violence with the character of Tope Singh, whose violence towards his caste oppressors begets more violence, the brunt of which his family has to bear. Violence is thus presented as not something to glorify, but a consequence of unresolved suffering. For both Tyagi and Tope Singh, their violence is deeply rooted in the oppression they face. Here, the intersectionality of caste and masculinity becomes clearly visible [28, 31]. Tyagi's, Tope's, Sanjeev's and Hathiram's experiences demonstrate how masculine identity cannot be understood independently of other social structures, particularly caste and class. In this regard, *Paatal Lok* exemplifies the capacity of OTT narrative to examine social complexity on screen, something that has received limited attention within mainstream broadcast television.

In contrast, Imran Ansari, Hathiram's young junior, represents yet another masculine possibility. Educated, empathetic, ambitious, yet morally reflective, Ansari does not seek authority through aggression or domination. His commitment to procedure, ethical conduct, and compassion distinguishes him from many of the other male characters in the series. The series does not portray these qualities as signs of weakness. Rather, Ansari's ambition and compassion allow him to occupy a position of strength without relying on the aggressive performances of masculinity that characterize many of the other men in the narrative. Taken together, these figures demonstrate that masculinity in *Paatal Lok* is neither singular nor fixed. It exists across many dimensions that are shaped by class, profession, trauma, religion, and personal experience, thereby challenging the notion of a single dominant model of manhood [28, 30, 31].

Kohhra

Kohhra is also created by Sudip Sharma, the creator of *Paatal Lok*. Unlike *Paatal Lok*, where the crime and narrative tension emerge from a network of systemic hierarchies, *Kohhra* gradually narrows its focus from external suspects and conspiracies to the intimate failures that shape its characters' lives. *Kohhra* keeps the origins of the crime hidden within a metaphorical fog (*kohhra*), only to reveal at the end that the tragedy is rooted in fractured relationships, emotional repression, and multiple forms of masculine failure.

Unlike Hathiram in *Paatal Lok*, whose insecurities stem largely from a lack of social and professional validation, Balbir Singh's struggles emerge from the consequences of authority itself. He occupies a position of respect within the police force and is a capable investigator. His personal life is marked by estrangement, guilt, and emotional isolation. His relationship with his daughter Nimrat is particularly revealing. Balbir continues to view himself as her protector and guardian, but Nimrat perceives him as one of the factors responsible for her mother's unhappiness and eventual suicide. Throughout the series, Balbir repeatedly attempts to exert control over the people he loves, whether through surveillance, intimidation, or violence. Yet, these actions only deepen the emotional distance between him and his family. *Kohhra* presents masculinity not as a source of stability but as a burden that can undermine the very relationships it seeks to protect. By the end of the narrative, Balbir's growth is not marked by professional triumph, but by a gradual willingness to relinquish control. His admission of guilt towards his love interest Indira, about his role in the death of her husband, a truth he had concealed for years, and his acceptance of his daughter's freedom are a testament to this growth. In doing so, the series redefines masculine maturity as the capacity for self-reflection and emotional accountability rather than dominance and authority [30, 31].

Amarpal Jasjit Garundi embodies a younger, more adaptive masculine identity. Garundi is portrayed as ambitious, competent, and confident, yet these qualities are not expressed through aggression or domination. His inner conflict stems from his frustration at home. He lives with his brother Jung and his sister-in-law Rajji, with whom he is initially shown to be having an affair. However, as the story progresses, we learn that this affair was orchestrated by Jung as a ploy to prevent him from getting married and dividing their ancestral land. Garundi struggles with the shame of his lived reality and is conflicted because he genuinely cares about both Rajji and Jung. Yet, he never treats them with aggression. Unlike Balbir or Hathiram, Garundi's response to conflict is not control, violence, or domination. Through Garundi, we get an exploration of masculinity that departs significantly from the archetype of the emotionally distant or domineering 'hero cop', the same archetype Balbir attempts to embody. Garundi's character demonstrates that strength, competence, and authority can coexist with emotional vulnerability, affection, and moral uncertainty, thereby expanding the range of masculine identities available within contemporary Indian narratives [30, 31].

A destructive model of masculinity emerges through Satwinder "Steve" Dhillon, who possesses many of the classical traits associated with patriarchal authority and hegemonic masculinity. Steve is

economically successful, socially respected, a patriarch, physically intimidating, and accustomed to being revered by those around him. However, the series gradually reveals the harrowing consequences of these attributes. Flashbacks show his violent treatment of his son, Paul (whose murder is the central mystery of *Kohhra* Season 1), while the investigation itself uncovers the atmosphere of fear and silence that shaped Paul's relationship with his father and Liam, his friend and secret lover. Steve's authority is almost entirely dependent on coercion, discipline, and the expectation of obedience. The revelation of Paul and Liam's romantic relationship reframes much of the narrative. Paul's inability to openly acknowledge his sexuality is not presented as an individual choice but as a response to the social and familial pressures embodied by Steve. *Kohhra* critiques a form of masculinity that equates itself with authority, control, strength, and emotional hardness. By the end of the story, Steve no longer holds on to power or respect, but is left with grief. His final image is one of mourning, holding Paul's wedding attire, and it serves as a powerful indictment of a masculinity that chose toughness only to end up broken, privileging control over understanding and authority over emotional intimacy [30, 31].

Femininity Reimagined

Mainstream Indian broadcast television has been representing femininity through a relatively stable set of ideals centred on caregiving, sacrifice, domestic responsibility, religion or cultural tradition, emotional labour, and commitment to family. While later programmes introduced professionally successful or even ambitious women in urban settings, even these characters were often shown to reconcile personal ambitions with conventional expectations of marriage, motherhood, and respectability. This reconciliation was not portrayed as a loss, but rather as a growth for the women characters. Femininity was thus portrayed as a social role that was inherently tied to gender roles in family life. *Made in Heaven* departs significantly from this tradition.

A story about a wedding-planning agency, the series constantly interrogates the institution of marriage through the lens of the women whose lives it changes. Rather than presenting these women as embodiments of idealised femininity, the series depicts them as people whose identities are shaped by ambition, desire, class mobility, moral ambiguity, and personal autonomy. Through these characters, femininity is showcased not only as a fixed social ideal but as something fluid, negotiated and often contested. Examined through Butler's concept of gender performativity and Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, the series reveals how women constantly navigate, resist, and reconfigure the gender roles expected of them by their family, class, caste, society, and broader social norms [30, 32].

The most apparent example of this reimagining of femininity in *Made in Heaven* is Tara Khanna, the series's female protagonist. Unlike the female protagonists of many broadcast-era narratives, Tara is neither defined by self-sacrifice nor by moral purity. While most young female protagonists are introduced as unmarried women seeking an ideal partner, Tara is already married at the beginning of the narrative. Coming from a modest middle-class background, she consciously uses marriage as a means of upward social mobility. She uses the resources of her affluent in-laws to launch her wedding-planning agency and enters Delhi's elite social circles through her marriage. The stark difference in her voice and

intonation between how she presents herself to her in-laws and how she speaks to her mother and sister makes it clear that the sophisticated persona that she embodies in front of her elite in-laws, friends and clients is a construct of her own design.

Yet, this show does not present this ambition as a moral failing, at least not initially. Tara is portrayed as a complex individual navigating a social world in which wealth, privilege, and social status remain unevenly distributed. Her femininity is therefore not built through traditional virtues or even the perceived Indian values that broadcast television narratives lean heavily on. It is born of her determination and her ability to negotiate power within structures that often remain inaccessible to women from her social background. Tara's character reflects what recent scholarship has identified as the precarious relationship between gender, social mobility, neoliberal aspirations in contemporary India, where marriage and intimate relationships frequently become sites through which individuals seek access to economic security, social capital and agency [35, 36].

Tara's character stands out because she repeatedly challenges the notion that women should derive their identity primarily from the institutions of marriage and family. Although her marriage to Adil initially facilitates her social ascent, the revelation of Adil's affair with her close friend Faiza exposes the fragility of the institution upon which her ascent was built. Rather than accepting humiliation in silence or prioritising the preservation of the marriage at all costs, which is what even her mother-in-law advises her to do, Tara learns to muster the strength to assert her independence and seeks to live her life on her own terms. With Tara's decision to divorce, *Made in Heaven* presents femininity as a site of agency, self-determination, and negotiation rather than passive endurance. Tara is ambitious, morally imperfect, emotionally vulnerable, and socially aspirational. Yet the narrative refuses to reduce her to a virtuous wife, a villainous social climber, or even a paragon of liberated women. Through her character, the series expands the representational possibilities available to women within contemporary on-screen narratives by allowing femininity to co-exist with ambition, desire, moral ambiguity, and class insecurity without demanding punishment or redemption for any of them [30, 32, 35, 36].

In the same show, the character Jazz serves as an important counterpoint to Tara because both women are ambitious and seek upward mobility, yet they occupy very different social positions and pursue that mobility through different means. Jazz attempts to gain access to it through labour, performance, and outward self-transformation. In her first appearance, she closely resembles the wide-eyed, aspirational yet grounded young female protagonist that is commonly found in broadcast narratives. Introduced as a young wedding planner from a modest West Delhi background, Jazz initially appears naive and unable to anticipate her affluent clients' needs. However, the series gradually reveals her as a highly observant and resourceful individual who learns to navigate elite spaces without ever fully belonging to them. Jazz is constantly reminded of her outsider status through language, appearance, education, polished diction, and cultural capital. Yet, her femininity emerges as she refuses to accept these limitations as sacrosanct. Through this portrayal, and even through Tara, the series explores the intersection of class and gender in shaping women's opportunities and aspirations [35, 36].

Jazz's aspirations are shown to be professional and familial. She seeks recognition, independence, and self-improvement. For her family, she seeks financial security. For her brother, she hopes for a solution to his addiction issues. Despite all of that, her desires and ambitions are never romanticised by the narrative. Her attempts to reinvent herself often involve awkward performances, missteps, and moments of self-doubt, revealing the labour required to navigate class hierarchies. Jazz's character can be understood through Butler's notion of performativity, as she continually adapts her speech, behaviour, appearance, and mannerisms in an effort to integrate into social spaces that were not designed for someone of her background. Through Jazz, *Made in Heaven* expands the representation of femininity beyond both the dutiful daughter and the liberated elite woman, presenting instead a young woman whose identity is shaped by the ongoing negotiation of class and gender in a rapidly changing yet never truly changing social environment [30, 35, 36].

Priyanka Mishra, the bride featured in Episode 4 of *Made in Heaven*, offers another significant challenge to conventional representations of femininity. Outwardly, her wedding appears to embody the ideal of a modern Indian love marriage: the groom is a newly minted IAS officer, one of the highest civil service posts available in India. He is also seemingly progressive as he protests the lavish spending at his big fat Indian wedding. This marks him out as socially liberal. However, at the climax of the episode, it is revealed that the groom's family has made dowry demands and that the groom himself has been fully aware of these demands; the bride was kept completely in the dark. Dowry is payment from the bride's family to the groom's family at the time of marriage [37]. It is an archaic and outlawed practice. The episode's central conflict thus highlights the patriarchal oppression that has been a longstanding tradition in India. This critique is particularly significant because dowry, despite being legally prohibited, continues to remain embedded within many marriage negotiations and family structures in contemporary India, surviving through social expectations rather than coercion [37].

Upon discovering the truth, Priyanka refuses to proceed with the wedding despite the social embarrassment, financial loss, and familial pressure that accompany such a decision. In doing so, she rejects the expectation that women should preserve marriage at any cost, even when confronted with injustice. This construct of the scene, where the groom refuses to marry at the crucial moment, is well-known to Indian audiences. This is when the hero of the story usually presents himself to marry the bride and save her family from embarrassment. In *Made in Heaven*, the bride is the hero of the story. The series presents Priyanka's refusal as an act of asserting dignity. Her decision exemplifies how autonomy can be expressed not only as a pursuit of a relationship but as a pursuit of self-respect, thus expanding the possibilities for representations of femininity in modern Indian narratives [35, 36].

Nutan, the Dalit-Buddhist bride featured in Season 2 of *Made in Heaven*, represents perhaps the most explicit engagement with intersectionality in the series. Unlike Tara, whose struggles stem primarily from class mobility, or Priyanka, whose conflict centers on patriarchal institutions surrounding marriage, Nutan's experiences are shaped by both caste and gender. The episode reveals how her prospective upper-caste in-laws are willing to accept her as an educated, professionally successful, and economically secure woman, yet remain uncomfortable with her insistence on publicly affirming her Dalit

identity through a Buddhist wedding. The conflict thus arises from the persistence of caste hierarchies beneath the veneer of urban liberalism.

Nutan refuses the pressure to assimilate into upper-caste norms. She insists upon the Buddhist wedding ceremony, which is rooted in Ambedkarite tradition. In doing so, she transforms a private celebration into a public affirmation of dignity, memory, and resistance. Through Nutan's narrative, *Made in Heaven* foregrounds caste as a lived social reality that continues to structure social hierarchies even among highly educated and economically privileged individuals. The episode also challenges the tendency of mainstream Indian screen narratives to treat caste as either invisible or irrelevant within urban modernity, highlighting how it remains embedded in contemporary social life [38–40].

Viewed through Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, Nutan's narrative illustrates how privilege and disadvantage can coexist within the same individual. As a successful and well-known intellectual and scholar living abroad, she possesses forms of economic and cultural capital unavailable to most Indian Dalits. The resistance she encounters shows that economic upward mobility does not automatically equate social acceptance, particularly when historically marginalised identities are openly asserted rather than concealed. The episode also suggests how caste prejudice is not confined to the geographical boundaries of India. Caste identities, familial expectations, and social hierarchies frequently migrate alongside diasporic communities, reproducing themselves across national borders with new social contexts [39, 41].

Nutan's refusal to compromise on the Buddhist ceremony becomes more than a personal decision. It is an assertion that acceptance must not require the erasure of history or identity. She refuses the possibility of 'passing' as an upper-caste individual by sacrificing her identity. Through her character, *Made in Heaven* expands the representation of femininity beyond individual empowerment or romantic fulfilment, situating women's experiences within broader structures of caste, social exclusion, and collective struggle. In doing so, the series engages with intersections of caste and gender in ways rarely seen in broadcast television [28, 40].

Queerness, Masculinity and Social Belonging

Karan Mehta, the male protagonist of *Made in Heaven*, is a significant deviation from earlier representations of homosexuality in Indian screen media, where queer characters were often reduced to stereotypes, comic relief, or symbols of social deviance. Karan occupies a central narrative position and is portrayed as a fully realised individual. Karan is an upper-caste, upper-middle-class, English-speaking businessman operating within Delhi's elite social circles. In many respects, he embodies forms of social privilege that grant him access to economic security, professional success, and cultural capital. Yet, his privileges do not eliminate the vulnerabilities associated with his homosexuality. As mentioned before, knowledge of his sexuality remains confined to a small circle of trusted individuals. His hesitation to publicly acknowledge his sexual identity reflects not only personal anxiety but also the persistent social stigma attached to queer desire within family structures, professional environments, and broader Indian

society. His mother breaks his hand when she finds him in an intimate position with another boy during his school days. His conservative landlords, the patriarch of which is a closeted older man, call the cops on him, invoking Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. One of his arresting officers even attempts to treat him kindly in exchange for sexual favours. Through Karan, *Made in Heaven* shows how privilege and marginalisation can coexist within the same individual, making his experiences particularly amenable to an intersectional reading [28, 33, 35].

The series further complicates queer representation by situating Karan's sexuality within broader expectations of masculinity and social responsibility. Karan does not conform to the stereotypical representations of effeminacy that have historically characterised many portrayals of gay men in Indian popular culture. Instead, it shows the vulnerabilities experienced by queer people. Karan is shown to be permanently scarred, unable to commit to a steady partner. His mother does not accept him till her last breath. His sexuality opens up avenues for endless suffering. He presents himself as confident, professionally competent, financially independent, and socially amicable. Yet, these masculine markers of success fail to shield him from discrimination. Season 1, set before the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018, repeatedly illustrates how legal structures and social prejudices intersect to stifle queer lives. It is rare to see India's queer community get mainstream media coverage. Their representation in the Indian media is restricted, stereotypical, and sometimes missing [44]. By presenting Karan neither as a victim nor as a symbol of liberation, but as a complex individual navigating these contradictions, the series advances a more intersectional understanding of queer identity and realities than has been possible within mainstream broadcast television [28, 30, 33, 35, 36]. However, the focus on upper caste, high society, English-speaking, cisgender gay men in this series reflects a broader trend in digital media, where visibility is framed within the context of neoliberal values and respectability politics. This approach frequently excludes marginalised voices from lower castes, working-class backgrounds, or rural areas [42].

Paatal Lok approaches queer representation through the reactions it elicits rather than through a dedicated queer narrative. This is evident in Season 2 in Hathiram Chaudhary's response when he learns that Imran Ansari, his former subordinate and present superior, is a homosexual. Initially taken aback, Hathiram struggles to reconcile this revelation with his conventional understanding of masculinity. However, the series moves beyond presenting this discomfort as hostility, depicting a gradual process of silent reflection and acceptance. This culminates in Hathiram telling Ansari that his opinion should not matter to Ansari, recognising how Ansari has a different lived reality than him. In doing so, he embraces the bond between them over the prejudices society has instilled in him, thus transforming into an ally. The scene is important because it illustrates how changing attitudes towards sexuality can emerge through personal relationships rather than ideological transformation alone. *Paatal Lok* thus links queer acceptance with the reconfiguration of masculinity itself, suggesting how empathy and self-reflection are more important than conformity to traditional masculine norms [28, 30, 31].

The most tragic queer narrative among the texts examined in this study appears in *Kohhra*, in the relationship between Paul Dhillon and Liam Murphy. In the final episode, we learn that Paul and Liam

were secretly lovers. The concealment of their relationship is closely tied to the emotional and physical abuse of Paul's father, Satwinder "Steve" Dhillon. Steve's rigid and authoritarian masculinity created an environment in which emotional openness and queer desire became difficult to sustain and painful to express. Paul's inability to acknowledge his relationship with Liam and his acceptance of a heterosexual arranged marriage, are not personal choices. It is a consequence of familial expectations, patriarchal authority, and heteronormative social pressures. Eventually, upon learning about Paul's decision to go through with the marriage, Liam ends up murdering Paul before committing suicide.

The tragedy of the narrative lies in the inability to reconcile desire, embrace identity, and succumbing to social expectations. Through Paul and Liam, *Kohhra* demonstrates how queer subjectivities are shaped not only by sexuality itself but also by the intersecting influences of masculinity, family, class, and social respectability. The series moves beyond questions of visibility and acceptance to explore the emotional consequences of a social reality where queer desire is not allowed to express itself [28, 30, 33].

Conclusion

This study began with the aim of examining how contemporary Indian OTT narratives represent masculinity, femininity, and queer subjectivities through the lens of gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity, and intersectionality. An analysis of *Made in Heaven*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Kohhra* reveals that these series depart from many of the representational conventions historically associated with broadcast television. Rather than relying upon stable gender archetypes, they foreground characters, whose identities are marked by contradiction, vulnerability, negotiation, and social complexity.

Across all three texts, masculinity emerges not as an innate quality but as a social performance that requires continual validation. Characters such as Hathiram Chaudhary, Balbir Singh, Garundi, Sanjeev Mehra, and Satwinder Dhillon reveal different responses to the pressures of masculine expectation, ranging from insecurity and emotional repression to growth and self-reflection. Similarly, the women of *Made in Heaven* challenge conventional representations of femininity by refusing to be defined solely through marriage, domesticity, or moral virtue. Characters such as Tara, Jazz, Priyanka Mishra, and Nutan illustrate how gendered experiences are shaped by broader structures of class, caste, and social mobility. The queer narratives examined in the paper further demonstrate that sexuality cannot be understood in isolation from these social structures. Whether through Karan Mehra's negotiation of elite respectability, Hathiram's evolving acceptance of Ansari's sexuality, or the tragedy of Paul and Liam's relationship in *Kohhra*, queer subjectivities are shown to emerge at the intersection of masculinity, family, class, religion, and social expectation.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that the significance of Indian OTT storytelling lies not merely in the inclusion of diverse identities but in its willingness to represent those identities as complex, incomplete, and socially situated. The shift from broadcast television to streaming platforms has therefore enabled not only a technological transformation; but also a representational transformation. By creating space for stories that challenge conventional assumptions regarding gender and sexuality,

Indian OTT platforms have expanded the possibilities of screen representation and opened new avenues for understanding the changing social realities of contemporary India.

Declarations

Article Type Clarification

We would like to clarify that our manuscript is intended as a Research Article, not a Review Article. Although it includes a review of the existing literature to establish the research context, the manuscript presents original qualitative research based on a systematic textual analysis of selected Indian OTT narratives. The study employs a defined theoretical framework and methodology to generate original findings on the representation of gender, sexuality, and queer subjectivities in Indian OTT content. We therefore request that the manuscript continue to be considered as a Research Article.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare they have no financial or non-financial competing interests.

Declaration of Availability of Materials and Code

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article [and its supplementary information files].

No supplementary information files have been created for this article.

Declaration of Ethics

No humans/animals were used for this study. Ethics, Consent to Participate, and Consent to Publish declarations: not applicable.

Author Contribution

Radhika Khanna and Tathagata Mitra conceptualized the study. Radhika Khanna and Tathagata Mitra developed the methodology. Radhika Khanna and Tathagata Mitra conducted the analysis. Tathagata Mitra wrote the original draft of the manuscript. Radhika Khanna and Kamalaveni reviewed and edited the manuscript. Radhika Khanna supervised the research.

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