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Subversive Screens: Queer Representation in Select Indian Web Series

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Abstract

Indian mainstream media has historically marginalized queer characters. The emergence of digital media, changes in laws, and shifting socio-cultural discourses have enabled more complex representation of queer identities. This paper critically analyses the representation of queer characters in contemporary Indian web series. The paper focuses on the web series *His Storyy* (2021), *The Married Woman* (2021), and *Romil and Jugal* (2017). Through narrative analysis, the paper investigates how these series construct queer subjectivity and identity. These web series perform a subversive role by foregrounding queer desires and relationships. The paper explores how queer characters are represented both within and against the heteronormative scripts. The paper argues that these queer representations are significant, but sometimes they try to cater to the heteronormative audiences.

Keywords: Queer representation, Indian Web Series, Digital media, Heteronormativity

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Subversive Screens: Queer Representation in Select Indian Web Series

Digital media plays an important role in influencing contemporary society. It is a tool that shapes our perceptions of the world, influences our values and beliefs, and can even motivate us to take action. The media has a significant impact on how people perceive and treat queer people. According to Megan Todd, Media not only “communicate message to a wider audience, increasingly it also offers a space for consumers to produce texts and contribute to discourse about sexuality” (64). The media can promote social acceptance of queer people in many different ways. When queer people are represented in the media, it helps to normalize their existence and make them more visible to the general public. This can help to counteract negative stereotypes and promote empathy and understanding. The media can also play a role in accurately representing queer people. This means portraying them as diverse individuals with a wide range of experiences and identities.

Media can advocate for the queer community. This can be done by highlighting the issues faced by queer people and promoting change. Media can also be used to educate people about queer issues. This can be done through news coverage, documentaries, films, web series, and any other forms of media. By learning about the challenges faced by queer individuals, people can become more understanding and accepting. Featuring positive representation of queer characters can help to normalize queer identities and promote understanding. By portraying queer people in a positive light and authentically representing their experiences and struggles, the media can help to promote social acceptance and create a more just and equitable society.

For many years, Indian media has offered very little space for queer representation. In the past, Indian media has often portrayed queer people as caricatures of comic relief and presented them in negative light, promoting discrimination. Unfortunately, the representation of the queer community in media has often been problematic, with harmful stereotypes being perpetuated. These stereotypes can have detrimental effect on the mental health and well-being of members of the queer community. One of the most common stereotypes about gay men is that they are effeminate and lack masculinity. This stereotype is often perpetuated in media through the portrayal of gay male characters as flamboyant, overly emotional, and interested in traditionally feminine activities. The emergence of digital platforms and shifting socio-cultural discourses in recent years have led to an increase in queer representation in media. Many films, dramas, and web series have begun challenging the existing stereotypes around queer people and exploring queer identities with more complexity and emotional realism.

This paper examines how contemporary Indian web series construct, and negotiate queer identities within the digital landscape. Alexander Doty in his work *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, argues that representation is often a political act. He opines that “queer positions, queer reading, and queer pleasure are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions” (15). Even though queer narratives are increasingly visible in Indian media, sometimes it gets tangled with dominant heteronormative structures and viewing expectations. This paper examines three Indian web series namely, *His Storyy*, *The Married Woman*, and *Romil and Jugal*. These series offer realistic and resistant queer narratives.

His Storyy, directed by Prashant Bhagia is an eleven-episode Indian web series. It follows the story of a closeted married gay man Kunal. He is married to Sakshi and has two teenage sons. They seem like a perfect couple and lead an affluent life. However, beneath the façade, Kunal has been struggling with his repressed sexuality for years. Sakshi begins to sense Kunal is hiding something as their intimacy is mechanical and emotionally disconnected. Sakshi finds out that Kunal is having an affair with Preet, a food critic. Sakshi confronts Kunal and argues with him for betraying her trust. She questions Kunal’s sexuality by calling it “perversion”. It reflects the deep-rooted heteronormative moralism, which does not see queerness as an identity, but as a threat to the sanctity of the heterosexual family unit. Sakshi’s anguish stems less from Kunal’s sexual orientation and more from the years of deceit she endured. Later while talking to her friend Rafia, she remembers attending a pride parade and believing to be open-minded. However, when someone close to her happened to be gay, she had a hard time accepting it. This shows the gap between performative allyship and genuine acceptance.

His Storyy acknowledges the hurt, and despair of a closeted gay man. Kunal confesses to Sakshi that he has been in denial about his sexuality for a long time. It was only when he met Preet, he felt complete. Sakshi though heartbroken decides to leave Kunal so that he can lead an authentic life. Sakshi and Kunal separate and he tries to rebuild a life with Preet who he loves. They even decide to get

engaged, but Preet called it off in the end. In a conversation with Sakshi, Preet says that Kunal needs her, as they are family. The breaking of Kunal and Preet's relationship exposes the lingering influence of heteronormativity.

The Married Woman, is an eleven-episode web series released in 2021. The series follows the story of a married woman Astha. She is married to Hemant, a controlling and emotionally distant man. She lives the life of a dutiful wife, according to middle-class expectations. However, Astha feels suffocated in her married life. She meets Peeplika, a free-spirited artist. Peeplika is open-minded, and leads an honest life. As Astha and Peeplika become close, their friendship deepens into a romantic attraction. Astha struggles with understanding her sexuality and is torn between societal expectations and her feelings for Peeplika. Her Internalized shame and her emotional conditioning prevent her from fully embracing her queer love.

Adrienne Rich, in her seminal essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," argues that heteronormativity is maintained in a society to oppress women and to maintain patriarchal dominance over them. In *The Married Woman*, Astha eventually returns to her family life. In a heteronormative society, women are coerced and often pressured into heterosexual roles. Despite Astha's awakening, she ultimately returns to her family life, because heterosexual marriage is positioned as the only acceptable and livable life option for many women. Astha and Peeplika's bond show that lesbian existence challenges patriarchal control through emotional bond. By choosing her family over Peeplika, Astha's story demonstrates how compulsory heterosexuality denies the possibility of a fully lived lesbian existence.

His Storyy and *The Married Woman* delve into the repressive framework surrounding queer desire in Indian society and highlights the burden placed on individuals who are forced into heterosexual relationships. Both the protagonists in these series are initially entrenched within traditional family structure. Their queer desire disrupts the normalcy of their heterosexual marriage. It reveals how Indian society often demands personal sacrifice and emotional self-denial to uphold the institution of heterosexual marriage. While both *His Storyy* and *The Married Woman* show queer struggles, the protagonists are forced to return to heteronormative systems by the end of the series. Their ending while hopeful in some ways, can be read as a compromise that sanitizes the potential for a truly revolutionary queer narrative. These series shows that the queer struggle is framed through the lens of cultural acceptability where their life must align with the mainstream expectations of society. From a queer theoretical perspective, these series show how queer narratives in India are often tempered by a return to the idea of heterosexual family as sacred and central.

Romil and Jugal released in 2017 and directed by Nupur Asthana, is a ten-episode web series that portrays a contemporary queer love story. The series is set in a conservative Indian society and follows the story of Romil and Jugal. Romil Kohli is a charming Punjabi man from an affluent family. Jugal Subramanian is a shy Tamil boy from a middle-class household. The story begins when Romil and Jugal become neighbours in a suburban housing society. Both Romil's and Jugal's fathers work for the same company and compete professionally. Despite the rivalry between their parents, Romil and Jugal become friends. Jugal knows that he is gay from a very young age and he falls in love with Romil. Things take a turning point when Jugal kisses Romil. Romil reacts violently to this and beats Jugal. Romil's immediate resort to violence is a manifestation of his internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia is a homosexual person's fear or hatred of their own sexuality. It happens when "the prevalent homophobic attitudes of a heteronormative society are internalized into pattern of information or schema, of attitude involving self-loathing, lowered self-efficiency and poor self-esteem" (Anil and Ravindran 171). When Jugal Kisses Romil, he panics and reject queer intimacy through violence. Homosexual panic is "those behaviors which an individual who may be experiencing subterranean homosexual feelings (whether or not he/she is overtly homosexual), employs to deny/defend against the overt manifestation of active homosexuality" (Baptiste 121-22). Sometimes it can lead to violence like in the case of Romil here. Romil's violence functions as a defence mechanism to protect his socially constructed masculine identity. Romil's subsequent introspection, where he contemplates his behaviours and slowly comes to terms with his love for Jugal, marks a critical process of self-recognition.

Romil accepts his sexuality and apologizes to Jugal for his behaviour. Romil also admits his love for Jugal and both get into a romantic relationship. When their family discovers their relationship,

their reactions are negative. Jugal's orthodox parents consider curing him of homosexuality. It reflects the stigma and medicalization of queerness in Indian society. Romil's family who are outwardly liberals, shows homophobic behaviours towards their son. Sarah Schulman opines that "homophobia originates, and is enforced, initially within the family. This has made family relationships into the primary source of pain and discrimination in the lives of many gay people" (33). Parents, who are supposed to provide unconditional love and safety for their children, can often become a source of disappointment for their queer children due to homophobic attitudes. The societal pressure of heteronormativity is a recurring theme and shows how family honour is tied to it.

Despite their initial disapproval, both the families accept Romil and Jugal's sexuality. Years later, Romil and Jugal get married. They are shown dressed in traditional Indian attire and get blessings from their family. The celebration of their marriage can be seen as a powerful subversion of the heteronormative wedding trope. The series ends on an ambiguous note and unfortunately, it is not renewed for a second season. Despite its ending *Romil and Jugal* remains a landmark in Indian queer web series for offering a complex portrayal of queer love. It was one of the earliest Indian web series to depict gay relationships seriously, with romance, conflicts and family negotiations.

The representation of queer identities in Indian web series such as *His Story*, *The Married Woman*, and *Romil and Jugal* marks a significant shift in the earlier stereotypical portrayal of queer characters. These series perform subversive role by foregrounding queer identities within a media landscape long dominated by heterosexual love. The earlier queer representation has always been marginal and used for comedic relief or as a cautionary moral tale. There is a clear shift in queer representation and queer narratives are now centered on love, desire, and personal struggle. However, the politics of queer representation in Indian web series remain complex. Some web series show progress, while others show limitations. All these series are culturally significant as they move queerness from subtext to text and bring queer representation to the mainstream. Yet, some of them also reveal the ongoing need to challenge and rethink the narrative framework that continues to structure queer lives in normative terms.

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