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Alternate Entertainment or Shifting Discourse: A Narrative Analysis of Popular Web Series in India

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Abstract

This paper discusses the narratives that are being platformed by global OTT giants to break through the Indian subcontinent market. The narratives chosen to be produced and hosted by these platforms throw light on their market positioning strategies as well as outline the position of the web as a popular narrative medium. Picking up case studies of first two Indian web series – *Breathe* (Amazon Prime Video India, 2018) and *Sacred Games* (Netflix, 2018), produced within the Indian subcontinent, the researchers trace the narratological intervention of the medium. Employing Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 1993) on the two samples, the researchers try to ascertain if the web is emerging as a convenient medium of alternative entertainment or if it is gradually helping in changing the course of societal discourse. Narrative analysis not only dissects the narrative structures and tools, but also locates the stories in the Alternative paradigm (Fuchs, 2010). Discussing the narratives and narrative structures, the researchers lastly compare the narratives with the ones popular in media such as Television and film, the paper also points at a contravention of the formulaic storytelling, stereotyped heroic depiction of the protagonist and an entry of themes mainstream media has refrained from using till now, such as gender fluidity and shades of grey in the protagonist. Building upon the study of the Internet as an alternative medium, this essay includes the narratives as a unit of study, especially in the Indian subcontinent, where the OTT market is yet uncharted and is open to both global and local producers.

Keywords: narrative analysis, social discourse, web series, alternative entertainment, Indian subcontinent.

1. Introduction

The Covid virus 19 induced pandemic has led to popularization of many industries dealing with web entertainment, ranging from YouTube to song streaming services which generate revenue from advertising to gaming industry to web comics and lastly the industry in concern, the Video on Demand industry (Rai, Srivastav, 2019). The industry began with hosting the content produced for television and film industries but slowly recognized the difference between the audience segments and identified the dearth of content the web audience wanted to watch. Thus, while Netflix decided to take a plunge in production, Amazon acquired and commissioned many studios to produce content for its platform specifically (Malone, 2017).

While the web promotes binge watching, and has proved flexible in terms of time, space and duration, it also provides avenues for quick feedback and makes the audience feel involved in the story telling by engaging it in more ways that just viewing (Rai, Srivastav, 2021). Social media, interactive storytelling, transmedia formats and gaming are just few of the ways which are

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revolutionizing entertainment on the web whereas TV is still struggling with episodic story formats which are dependent on TRPs to generate advertising revenues (Brennan et al., 2018).

The expanse of the industry can very well be estimated by the fact that global online video revenue to be generated by the industry by the end of year 2019 is estimated to be 29.74 billion dollars with 300 million households worldwide subscribing to the SVOD services. By the end of 2018, 18 percent of the households were SVOD subscribers worldwide already, and the numbers are constantly increasing. Total revenue generated by the VOD industry in the year 2018 was 1070 Crores (155 mn Dollars approximately) with about 5 crore (50 million) users (Statista, 2019).

The web content is relatively a new field for study and thus imperative to study due to the shifting discourse to the medium (Amirudin, 2018). Each medium has its own features and characteristics and thus enables a particular type of narration (Danforth et al., 2016). Another research labelled narratives as a “specific, measurable and significant part” of the web videos (Hughes et al., 2003). Bell *et al* also deduced that digital videos would lose their “aesthetic and semiotic function”, if not studied in the context of the web world (Bell et al., 2010). Thus, the work in context studies the content, compares it with the mainstream narratives and verifies whether it tries to shift the discourse in any manner.

2. Materials and methods

Aim: This study is aimed at studying the narratives and identifying the themes rising from them, that are being told through the medium of web- series.

Objectives: *The specific objectives for the study are:*

1. To identify the features of the narratives from popular OTT platforms
2. To locate the narratives into the paradigm of alternative media

Research questions:

1. What are the distinct features of the narratives platformed through the web series?
2. Are there any thematic similarities in the narratives being utilized in the web series?
3. Can these narratives be placed under the lens of alternative communication?

Method: In order to comment on the choice of narratives featuring in the web-series a thematic Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 1993) was employed for the research. Narrative Analysis leads to making observations about the theme or the structure of a story, and the observations are useful for commenting on the nature of the stories, story tellers, audience or the medium (Branigan, 2013). In the case of this study, the last reason; i.e. elaborating on the medium, was the most important one.

Tool: The study utilized the Structural Narrative Analysis model and the Thematic Narrative Analysis models (Riessman, 1993). While the former deals with *how* of the story, the latter deals with *what* of the story. In case of videos, this model aligns with the Formalist school of cinema, that states that the form of the film dictates its content and thus the meaning (Bazin, 1971), (Bordwell, 2012). Underlining themes, plot and the arterial sub plots, character arcs and motivations were studied deeply in order to comment on the narrative style and strategies.

Factors that were under the microscope:

1. Textual grammar of the narrative.
2. The choice of narrative.

For the purpose of this inquiry, a test was devised by using the factors attributed to Alternative media (Fuchs, 2010), the research question rising from the assumption that the content was leading to a new public discourse. According to him, alternative media must have four distinct properties (Fuchs, 2010):

1. “People must be involved in the creation of what is put out in alternative media.
2. It has to be different from the mainstream.
3. It should create a perspective different from that of the state and major corporations.
4. Must establish different types of relationships with the market and/or the state”.

These four factors were converted into five mutually exclusive categories for the purpose of content analysis, which helped in broad generalization of the content, which are as follows:

1. The narrative avoids the mainstream formula.
2. The protagonist is not the mainstream hero like figure.
3. The language used is vernacular.
4. Distribution pattern & Revenue generation models are different from Mainstream.
5. Non-professional actors/Non-mainstream acting style (Rai, Srivastav, 2019).

Sample: Amazon prime Video India and Netflix are the two most fast growing service providers in India. Their first shows made for Indian audience were *Breathe* (2018) and *Sacred Games* (2018). Incidentally, these were the top rated series on IMDB as well, from their respective channels. *Sacred Games* (2018) was rated at 9.3 and *Breathe* (2018) was rated at 8.7 on July 17, 2018.

Scope: Three factors were kept in mind while narrowing down the universe of the study:

1. Digital audio-visual material, created in the format of web series for screening on online platforms, were considered as text for this study.
2. Secondly, the videos were to be produced by the VOD service provider, for screening specifically on Web, popularly known as an 'Original' or 'Web Original'.
3. Lastly the content produced was to be targeted at the Indian markets specifically.

3. Discussion

A number of studies have been conducted on content produced for web, hosted on platforms such as Netflix and even YouTube. A study propounded that web was giving rise to narratives different from mainstream through OTT services due to the breaking in traditional film/tv production practices (Feiereisen et al., 2021; Hadida et al., 2021). A study by Fung in 2017 explored web narratives and discovered that gender issues emerged as one of the primary themes depicted in the content on Internet thus signaling to a breaking down of the hierarchy of gender in storytelling. She opined that the platforms provided by Internet cut down the elaborate process of hunting for funds, production, passing the censors and finally distributorship associated with mainstream film/TV production thus affecting the content (Fung, 2017).

Another group of researchers found that Internet's transmedia structures were enabling audience aggregation for 'queer' story telling. They addressed the fact that the flexible structures of narratives were helping experimentation, and thus were enabling film makers to pick up topics that were so far untouched (Hernández et al., 2020).

While independent work can afford to be free of organizational hegemony, Netflix's '*Orange is the New Black*' (2013-present) triggered a lot of discussion and debate on Internet and academic circles about the depiction of gender, romantic relationships and an ethnicity which was not featured in mainstream medium as much. The narrative handled gender not as two poles, but as a fluid entity, ranging on a scale with two opposite poles (Symes, 2017; Thomas, 2020). While ethnicity was a major contributor to the shape of the narrative, cross ethnic relationships were also addressed without dragging in the stereotypes attached to any communities (Bucciferro, 2019).

Another study researching about third world participation on Internet discussed its rise with the help of video narratives. Benfield in her thesis '*Apparatuses, Globalities, Assemblages: Third Cinema, Now*' stated that the third world participation in story telling had also increased manifold with the help of new narrative structures on the Internet. Picking up the case studies of organization curating and screening films for special audience segments, working in India, namely *Sarai Foundation* and *Raqs Media Foundation*, both functioning from New Delhi, Benfield discussed how the author/film maker, the text/ film and the spectator/ audience had evolved with the help of technology (Benfield, 2012). Another study by Trice et al., also discusses the implications of expanding digital video industries in South Asian sub-continent (Trice, 2021). Another study identified the challenges faced by global giants such as Netflix while expanding in Indian subcontinent and explored inclusion as a policy (Lobato, Lotz, 2020).

In another paper touching upon the choice of narrative by the Video on Demand platforms, the researchers discuss that the web is free from censorship, thus it can pick up topics that may be controversial for the mainstream media. With the narrative analysis of Netflix's *Ghoul* (2018), the second Indian production by the company, researchers try to analyze the narrative strategies and the content on the web (Rai, Srivastav, 2019).

Few researchers explore the trends in global film making and due to digital technologies and predicts a rise in experimental content production (Brown, 2018). After conferring to these studies, it became evident that due to the shift in production practices, experimental viewing and screening patterns and reach to a vast private audience, narratives which were not common on mainstream media platforms, were starting to find a place on new media. A displacement of hegemony in storytelling, be it games, or social media or films, was being heralded all over the web. The current research tries to locate this shift in Indian OTT markets.

4. Results

The two web series were watched and analysed over a period of two months. Observations were noted in an excel sheet for categorization and cross verification. They are discussed as follows:

Breathe (2018)

Observations: *Breathe* is a 2018 crime thriller starring R. Madhavan who is a renowned actor in the Tamil and Hindi film industries. Supporting him is an ensemble cast which has also appeared in a few choice Hindi films over the years. The series has been produced by Abundantia films who have produced mainstream Hindi films like *Baby* (2015), *Airlift* (2016) and *Toilet-Ek Prem Katha* (2017). It has been directed by Mayank Sharma, who has in the past been an Assistant director in small budget films. Sharma has written the series along with Abhijeet Deshpande, who has written many Hindi thrillers like *Wazir* (2016), *Table No. 21* (2013), *David* (2012) and *Shaitan* (2011).

The basic premise of the story is of a father who would go to any lengths, even commit murders, to save his child. On the other hand, his nemesis is a police officer who needs to solve this case of murders happening around the city in order to battle and emerge from his own demons. These two protagonists are the antagonists in each other's tales.

Video: The cinematography is sleek and is speckled with shaky camera and shallow focus close ups heightening the immediacy and urgency of the situation. A lot of foregrounding of the shot composition is used to put situations and characters in perspective and hide them at the same time. The viewer is given the feeling that he cannot see the whole picture, visually and thematically. Shadow and light play takes place in interior spaces to highlight the brooding characters. High contrast lighting and patterns induce the feeling of characters being trapped in their own spaces. A lot of skyline shots of the city of Mumbai are also used to establish the vast ever growing expanse of the city, horizontally and vertically. This expansion brings a lot of lives together, crossing each other knowingly or unknowingly. The entire show has a graded sepia colour tone, to give the visual a more timeless, cinematic visual appeal.

Audio: Alokanda Dasgupta's music is thumping with energy. It gives pace to action and substitutes a lot of dialogues, fitting in seamlessly with the narrative. The entertainment industry is seeing a rise in number of female music directors (S. Khanwalkar, R. Arora), and while it is outside the purview of this study to comment and compare on the style of music by different sexes, it is a new to see this avenue opening up for women.

Editing: The narrative utilizes parallel cutting to unravel the stories of two protagonists events of which are happening simultaneously. One's actions drive another's story forward. At times split screen is also used to juxtapose how events are unfolding in two places at the same time. This happens most notably till the time they both start occupying the same space on the screen due to their meeting. This tries to give the audience window to see both characters at the same time and build two points of interest or sympathy.

The series also utilizes nonlinear narrative as the narrative jumps backward and forward in time in a multiple place. For e.g., the murders do not take place in the present timeline. They are revealed through flashbacks, creating suspense for the audience regarding the fact whether the character was able to commit the murder or not. Writers also foreshadow the story with the help of many dialogues, character introduction and development. This foreshadowing tightens up the loose ends later and wraps up a neat narrative.

The narrative utilizes several characteristics of the Internet as many characters use mobile phones to record and upload videos which go viral on YouTube. This plays an important aspect in the story as the expanse of the city would have made it difficult for the cop to look and find a common thread in the murders, but social media and a platform like YouTube bring the world closer and under the nose as well. The protagonist uses Internet extensively to read and research about the donors, their lifestyles, contact details, the process and legalities of organ donation and ways to commit murder based on the victim's lifestyle.

The narrative structure uses text on screen along with the usual video and audio to establish the facts in the plot, including information about the donors. This Augmented Reality like display helps in dispensing a lot of knowledge at once, priming the audience for further storyline. Danny uses smart phone's Web search, camera and audio recording and smart watches as well as aides in murders.

Tropes: Reverse whodunnit: The audience knows who commits the murders and supports the murderer. The thrill here comes from the chase as the murderer escapes from the law. A twist on the original genre, this plays the emotions of the audience in a different manner and offers a new

story telling method. Also known as caper stories, where thrill is derived from the way the crime takes place, much like heist films.

Defective Detective: An alcoholic, socially impaired detective who is gifted and is able to see what other can't, a lot like the original Sherlock Holmes. He is haunted by his own demons, mostly loss of a woman in life and overcomes his own troubles as well at the end along with the case.

Themes: Few themes highlighted in the narrative are as follows: Underbelly of the city: While a city is sprawling vertically and horizontally, complete with the sea link and sky scrapers and housing societies, it is the underbelly which runs it. The city also deals with seedy hotels, prostitution and drug rackets. Dance bars, ghettos and chawls provide a window into a life that is more chaotic than organized. The crime is shown to be originating not in the main city, but in the suburbs. Here criminals are not born but are made due to circumstances, and those circumstances are nearer than the skyline of the city (Raj, Sreekumar, 2017; Stadler, 2017).

Second theme is depiction of police. Stereotypically verging on the borderline of good vs. bad cop, the character of the cop has the audience rooting for him because of sympathy for his grief, and his ability to solve crimes. A character with grey shades, indulging in corruption, misusing his position and using only his angst in personal relationships, this is an extension of the popular angry young man, battling not the system anymore, but his own fallacies (Bhatia, 2018).

Last theme is depiction of fatherhood. While adhering to the patriarchal set of responsibilities, the new age father is not an oppressive authoritative figure. He needs his family and is very expressive about it (Rajiva, 2010). Both the fathers here are driven by their children, dead or alive. The wives are secondary. Trickling down from the mainstream sagas of depiction of Indian family, the unit is much smaller and alienated from surroundings and even the society now.

Narrative: The narrative unfolds in the manner of a reverse whodunnit crime thriller, not unheard of in mainstream cinema, but rare on Television. While the production crew is experienced, but are helming the affairs for the first time. The actors also range from seasoned to theatre actors. A listers from other industries can be seen experimenting with the roles and content. A story like this could have made for a profitable film for the big screen if not for the length. But the TV audience is far from comfortable with plots like this. Shows like *Crime Patrol* and *Savdhaan India* do address crime tales like piece of fiction, but reverse whodunnits are still unexperimented with on Television, that too in so many shades of grey. Very stylistically told, the series does lie in the paradigm of either film and Television, thus suiting the platform of web-series.

Narrative Structure: The format is episodic, with hooks at the end to keep the viewer hooked in for the next episode, supporting Binge watching. This could be the reason the makers decided to make the story into a web series. Various flashbacks are used to reveal how the crime occurred and false chases are build up in order to keep up the thrill factor. The textual grammar utilizes not only video and audio but text as well on screen providing greater information not unlike the Augmented Reality technology.

Alternative Content: The series is distributed through Amazon Prime Video India platform. There are no ad breaks as the platform works on subscription format. It has been made for the web probably due to the following factors:

1. Length of the content
2. Lesser budget thus the command given to new director, breaking the hierarchical structure of the industry
3. Content requires the audience to involved.

Sacred Games (2018)

Observations: Releasing in 2018, four years after Netflix's entry in the country, *Sacred Games* is the company's first production for the Indian market. It has been produced by Phantom films, helmed by Anurag Kashyap along with others, who is considered to be one of the flagbearers of the revival of New Wave in Indian Cinema. Netflix approached director V. Motwane in 2014 with the Vikram Seth's 2006 novel by the same name and asked him to develop it into a web series. Motwane has directed films like *Udaan* (2010), *Lootera* (2013) and *Trapped* (2017) in the past, which have garnered international acclaim. He brought in Anurag Kashyap on board to direct parts of the series along with him. Making news much before its launch, the series was awaited for with bated breath by fans of Netflix, of the book and of the celebrities producing or acting in it.

Sacred Games is a gangster thriller, with two protagonists Sartaj and Gaitonde, played by Saif Ali Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Sartaj's story is set in present-day Mumbai, while Gaitonde's story begins in 1970's, narrated in flashback with his voice over. Both the characters

meet in present timeline when Gaitonde, a gangster, wants to blow up the city and Sartaj, a police officer, wants to save it. Sartaj's story, the current timeline is directed by Motwane while Gaitonde's tale has been narrated by Kashyap.

Video: The series has been shot by three different cinematographers to render different visual look to both the parts, past and present. Past has been shot in order to highlight the idea of Bombay, an emerging, struggling city which is still amidst a flux of migration. The present deals with Mumbai a cosmopolitan metropolis with secrets in the underbelly. Gaitonde's segments needed to invoke a certain nostalgia and thus are treated with an earthy rusty colour palette.

On the other hand, Sartaj's segments are shot in warm hues with neon colours to show the present-day city (Ramnath, 2018). Nights are dark and neon, while days are shadowy with foreboding due to the high contrast treatment. A lot of visual variety can be seen in the camera angles, frames and shot selection corresponding with Kashyap's neo noir and post-modernist style of film making (Mukherjee, 2017). The conversations taking place in interior locations use a lot of mirrors, denoting self-reflection and deliberation involved in words spoken by the characters. Use of mirrors and various glossy surfaces create a façade of gloss and gleam while also hinting at a mood that all actions and words have deeper repercussions than visible on screen.

Audio: The dialogue is mainly in Hindi and English, speckled with Marathi as the story is set up in Mumbai. Motwane chose to shoot the production mainly in Hindi despite the original book being in English, because he found English speaking characters in Indian set ups 'sound fake' often. Using a lot of expletives without being beeped out, the series banks on no censorship laws on the platform. Aloknanada Dasgupta has created a suspense inducing soundtrack that creates an atmosphere of impending doom. Along with Rachita Arora, another female music composer, the series' musical score is dark and melancholic. The notes of a clock have been used repetitively to highlight the emergency of the situation varying in pace and rhythm.

A lot of diegetic sound effects have been used to highlight and accentuate the emotions and drama without breaking the realism. For e.g., when Gaitonde kills one of his henchmen, the whistle of a cooker goes off in the background, symbolizing him letting off steam with a murder. Along with few famous tracks from Hindi cinema, bit of South American Tampa music has been used, drawing parallels with *Narcos* (2016), another series on Netflix. Few traditional Indian instruments like sarangi have also been used. Silence, sound effects and music replace dialogues seamlessly and effectively in many places creating a multilayered narrative.

Editing: The editor cuts between not only through the tales of two protagonists, but also between two characters in the present, Sartaj and RAW agent Anjali Mathur, to tighten the plot further. Gaitonde's narrative is interspersed with the political developments in India along with the times and brings in thematic similarities. A lot of cross and parallel cutting is in place, dissolving the lines between different times and places. Slow motion has been used to emphasize and glamourize certain situations. Action sequences involving Gaitonde use this effect to glamourize and hero-fy him.

Writing: The series starts as not a story of people, but of a country India, over few decades and how it has shaped up the life and times for the protagonists. According to Kashyap, it is a 'saga of how Bombay became Mumbai'. The title sequence deals with images from Indian mythology, history and includes typography inspired from the Indus Valley Script. It also hints at the rapid construction of society, power bastions and social structures specially in urban centers.

The narrator of the story, Gaitonde, weaves it with a narrative fitting recent historical events ranging from the Emergency (1975-77) to the *Shah Bano* case (1985) and to the fall of *Babri Masjid* (1992). The voice over talks about how these incidents not only affected India and Mumbai, but him too, personally. Gaitonde as a narrator hinges his memories on the collective memory of the nation, in order to render the story a larger-than-life appeal, but still remaining relatable. Several flashbacks from Sartaj's timeline to Gaitonde's work as narrative plugs, switching from past to present, drawing narrative and thematic parallels.

Apart from the national history and events from Gaitonde's life, there is a third track which deals with Sartaj and his life trajectory. He is a conscientious cop, who does not fit in his corrupt police department and has been left by his wife, for unknown reasons. Fourth track involves a RAW agent Anjali Mathur, played by Radhika Apte, who is a woman operating in a field populated by more men than women. Mathur and Sartaj's life have thematic similarities and parallel unfolding which make the viewer sympathize with both without taking sides. They both are undermined by their bosses, struggling to make their points heard, have to rely on each other as a last resort, and

are deeply passionate about their work. All these tracks intertwine and corroborate the plot. Major reveals at the end of each episode motivate the viewer to binge watch. The biggest of them is at the end of the last episode, thus creating a palpable waiting period till next season. The story arcs are defined for each episode and for the entire season separately.

Tropes: The series thrives on a lot of violence, blood, gore and expletive language, blatant but no more than a few Hindi films based on mafia.

Second trope is of a gold hearted gangster. The audience is able to see through Gaitonde's struggles and understand his motives behind selling drugs or killing people. The makers while not justifying or vilifying any acts, do not take a holier than thou approach while talking about mafia, neither the police, law or even politicians. The depiction of power and its shifting from bastion to bastion is also an important trope. The balance keeps tipping from one person to another, depicting its transient nature and thus creating a rush to utilize it. Corruption is rampant in all departments and loyalty is extremely valued.

Third trope is slum porn. This genre of films and series showcase third world countries and their poverty in a very exotic light. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) was criticized for similar reasons (Mendes, 2010) as it showed India in a very poor light, according to some critics. But the fact finds a parallel in *Narcos* (2016), another production by Netflix, based in Brazil- Columbia – Mexico, third world countries.

Fourth trope is of a broken cop, who is socially inept, needs a sidekick to conversate, is ready to put his all at stake for his job but suffers from non-acceptance from his own department. Troubled from his family, usually left by wife, he is a noble soul and the onus of saving the heroine/city/country lies on his shoulders. He also has a sidekick; Katekar. While neglecting his familial duties to help Sartaj, Katekar emerges as a fitting partner. Memes over the social media have been comparing both as *Jai – Veeru* (*Sholay* 1975) and *Munna – Circuit* (*Munnaabhai film series* 2003 – 2006).

The writers also work upon knowledge or information hierarchy. We as viewers are revealed few things even before the characters get to know of them. So, while the audience chases the thrill along with the characters, they are armed with certain knowledge. The suspense is resolved in two different ways, one for the audience, by revealing something only to the camera and other for the characters only, by revealing something in front of them. This keeps audience on the edge of the seat and more engrossed.

Themes: The first and prime most theme of the series is discussion around religion. Gaitonde even though being a *Brahmin* (an upper caste Hindu), does not believe in religion. Series's most meme-fied dialogue, '*kabhi kabhi lagta hai, apun hi bhagwan hai*' (At times I feel I am the god) mouthed by Gaitonde, hints at him questioning the existence and omnipotence of god. He believes that god is an entity which divides the human beings through fear and after he also learns to do so, he believes he has become the god himself.

A lot of religious imagery and metaphors are used in places to draw parallels with what religion preaches and what society applies. For e.g. A female character, who is a prostitute by profession, is called '*devi*' (goddess) by other characters, while an actress playing a goddess in a TV show, suffers from physical and sexual violence at the hands of a mafia don. The narrator also opines that the masses need the religion to feel empowered, hopeful and included. This reverberates with the Participation Model of religion (Wolterstorff, 2017).

Second important theme is mythology. The series utilizes visual and textual imagery invoking mythology. The titles of the episodes are derived from various characters from Hindu mythology and the story traces the mythical characters journey being mirrored with the characters.

Third important theme is neo noir story telling. The series tries to imbibe the characteristics of a classic neo noir thriller, something Kashyap has been associated with earlier as well (Ostepeev, 2017). The narrative blurs the lines between good and bad, includes the themes of revenge and inherent power struggle. Gaitonde becomes the morally compromised lead character, while Sartaj plays the brooding protagonist who is chasing behind the shadows. Kuku, the romantic interest of Gaitonde, who is a transgender, becomes the 'Femme Fatale'.

While it has been redefined as the 'Kashyap style' of filmmaking, the social degeneration, the elusion and chase of power, the underbelly of the city and how people's lives are shaped up by their surroundings make for a riveting tale. Motwane's style, while suaver and sleeker than Kashyap's rugged; follows a conflict which is more anguished and internalized. Words and silences are chosen

wisely, and the city noises drown and bottle up the emotions. The cinematography also utilizes neon colours along with stark contrast schemes.

Fourth theme is depiction of Mumbai. The Bombay Gaitonde talks about has a dark and glum side to it. From drugs to prostitution to smuggling, the city sees, and perpetrates it all from its depths. On the other hand, Mumbai is glamorous with high skylines and glittery facades, but they all have shaky foundations. Mafia is involved in every possible industry in the city of Mumbai, from producing films, to selling drugs and ammunition to supporting leaders in elections. The city acts as their playground with innocent lives being pawned and killed off in fights between two opposing groups. Thus, the two cities are feeding off each other. One is bright, expansive, and touches the heights of the sky. Other is dark, seedy that it appears almost underground.

Another important theme is depiction of gender. The women in the series are RAW agents, actresses, models, housewives and mothers. They all play interesting roles, and not the second fiddles. In fact, one of the characters is so bored of being the second fiddle that she stages a case of domestic violence and traps her violent and drug addict partner in a drug case. While virtue is attached to all female characters, they all have expanded its definition and ways of dealing with the expectations from them.

Another note on having a transgender in an important role for the first time in Film/TV history. Kuku is a transgender who dresses up as a woman for the world. While digging in the myth of transgenders having a certain luck to them, the story beautifully deals with her (she prefers to be addressed as a woman) relationship with Gaitonde and creates a sensual and enigmatic character for the actor. Such portrayal is far removed from the usual caricature-ish depictions in the mainstream. Female characters while liberated are shown struggling for equality in whatever relationships they are in. They are also seen using these relationships to secure safety for themselves.

Narrative: The total duration of the series is around 450 minutes. While the story could have been adapted for a film, it would have not given such long time for the characters to be established and develop in this manner. Television Channels would not have let content with so much blood and gore bypass its regulations. Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* films (2012) were also of a combined duration of 320 minutes.

The duration helps in unfolding multiple narratives together, interweaving history and philosophy regarding religion, urbanization and power. The content would also need a more educated audience, thus limiting the audience base as well. Fast paced edit and nuanced cinematography also make it a very technically sound product, needing more exposed audience to fully appreciate it.

Narrative Structure: The format is episodic once again, with cliffhangers at the end of each story unfolding, to purport binge watching. The season also ends with a huge reveal, thus making the audience hooked till the next season. Reports also say that the sales of the book also increased after the streaming of season one. Flashbacks, continuous jumps in time and space to construct the narrative with thematic continuity.

Alternative content: The series is available on Netflix, which can be accessed only by paying the subscription amount. Released in India in Hindi and English, the series is available worldwide dubbed in many languages with subtitles in more than 20 languages. Thus, pointing at the fact that Netflix is targeting not only local but International markets with this product. Secondly, while based on a book, and involving already popular names in production and casting, the series did not involve public in its conception or production.

Motwane found the format to be liberating as he did not have to end the story in stipulated 2.5 hours (Radhakrishnan, 2018), he also did not choose to make it in English as it 'sounded fake' to him (Choudhary, 2018). Research on the project was done by Chandra himself as he was on board in the scripting stage. Siddiqui on the other hand chose to do the role because he wanted to experiment with the format and spend longer time with a character. In his opinion, this is the most complex character he has played till now (Radhakrishnan, 2018). Thus, the format has played an important factor in the production of the series.

Drawing interpretations for tracing the emerging narrative structures first:

1. **Story Arcs:** A conventional story arc has an introduction, a conflict, a resolution and climax. But in order to promote binge watching, the web series needed to revise this conventional arc. Being episodic in nature, the writers needed to end each episode, then each season on different climaxes and introduce hooks for next instalment. The narratives are thus structured in a manner

that each episode has its own story arc, and creates a larger arc for the season when combined with other episodes. Thus where on one hand, a sense of finality has to be delivered at the end of a season, enough suspense has to be created to keep the audience hooked on for the rest of the season. This leads to creation and delivery of many climaxes within the plot. Working backwards, for the creation of many climaxes, one needs to have multiple resolutions, thus multiple conflicts. Thus it can be presumed that in a web-series, plots need to have and resolve multiple conflicts, leading to denser plots and characters with greater complexity, as compared to a film.

2. Multiple narrators/protagonists: The web-series usually have more than one narrator/protagonist in order to create multiple points of views. While this leads to greater number of conflicts to resolve in the end, it also enriches the perspectives provided to the audience. Multiple points of interest also help in hooking different segments of the audience as each may find a character they like and relate to. Thus while the story might not be designed to have a mass appeal, the plethora of characters help everyone find something relatable. Also when a multitude of perspectives are available to the audience, for a greater duration of time, it becomes easy to empathise with the characters, thus creating no black characters, but characters of various shades of grey.

3. Technical aspect of production. Most of the series were produced by personnel from film and TV production industries, thus this rendered them with neat production values and standards. While film and TV industries still rule the roost, people who cannot find a foothold, or ideas that do not find buyers are ensuring a place for themselves in the web series arena. This standard of production is also necessary as the platform facilitates the audience to access content from various international markets, thus to keep up with the competition, the content needs good packaging and production values.

These findings about the emerging narrative structure on web are summarized in [Figure 1](#).

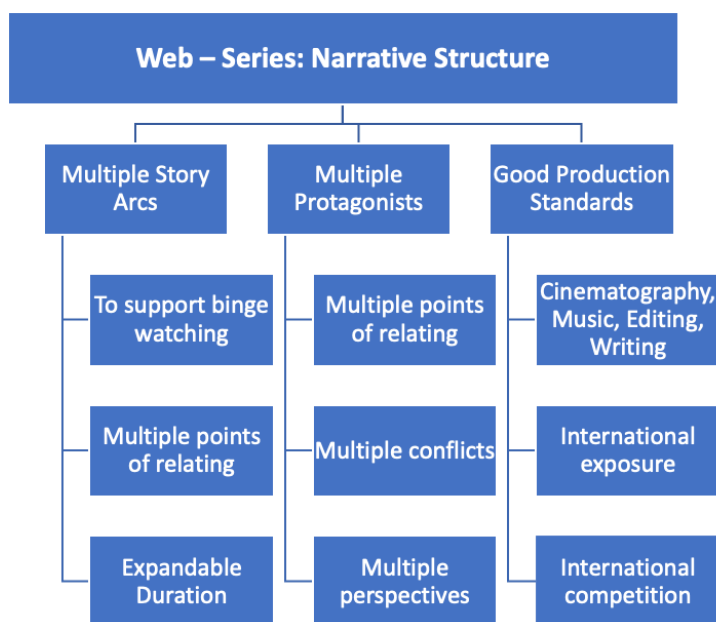


Fig. 1. Web – Series: Narrative Structure

Further after discussing the features of the delivery of a story, let us focus on the factors that dictate the choice of stories on the platform:

1. Youth oriented shows: Most of the content was created in order to cater to the young audience base, who has access to internet and time to binge watch the content. Thus the content had a generic young, stylized look and the stories were heavy with content based on romance and suspense genres.

2. Competition: The target audience has access to international content as well through the same medium of Internet. Thus, the content providers are not only competing with other indigenous content providers, film and TV industries, but also with their international counterparts. They have to match up to certain production and content standards, thus raising the bar for the quality of narratives and delivery process as well.

3. Experimentation with content: Due to lack of censorship, flexibility of the medium and thus formats and requirement of lesser resources to produce, screen and promote content; greater experimentation in content, style and delivery can be seen. From experimenting with mythology or blurring the boundaries between hero and villain, the themes chosen to delve into by these web series were novel and original.

4. Writing: The writing majorly drew from the pop culture references including Bollywood and Hollywood films, literature and TV shows as well. This led to a transmedia mesh of references, drawing upon the mass collective psyche of the target group. While few tropes of the popular cinema style of storytelling were adapted, but even they were found to be more flexibly adapted in reference to those populating the mainstream. The plots chosen to divulge the stories were quite different from the current content on Television and closer to films, but the web format provided scope for greater variability and variety without compromising on production standards.

The findings emerging out of this segment are summarized in [Figure 2](#).

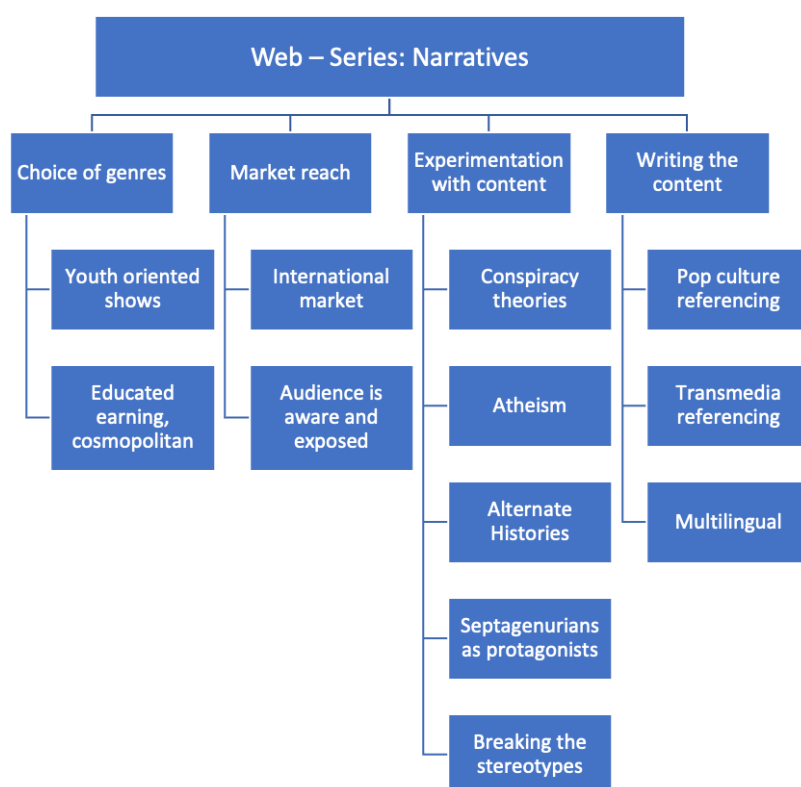


Fig. 2. Web – Series: Choice of Narratives

Last segment of analysis was done to judge if the stories fit into the paradigm of alternative storytelling. The considerations were drawn by loosely adapting parameters of Alternative Communication ([Fuchs, 2010](#)). The following were the pertinent observations that were derived from the analysis:

1. The narrative avoids the mainstream formula – this could be due to the set format, censorship, multitude of resources thus lack of experimentation on the traditional medium/s. On the other hand Internet proves to be a flexible platform that supports narratives not hosted in mainstream. Be it conspiracy theories or thematic attitudes towards social issues, or even when catering to a niche audience, the web-series were not trying to fit onto any formulaic story delivery nor were they trying to please the masses with recipe of potboilers.

2. The protagonist is not the mainstream hero like figure – The protagonist is not the Adonis like hero figure, nor is he a saviour of justice, neither is he a clean shaven innocent college boy. He is not even only a ‘he’ anymore. Women, Transgenders, characters forgotten from textbook history, people not fitting into the stereotypes, body-shamed women, and septuagenarians graced these stories thus shifting the idea of what a hero or even a protagonist is supposed to be like.

3. The language used is regional – Gujrati, Marathi, Bengali and Punjabi, a mix of languages was used in these stories. While one series had expletives just like the regular street vernacular, another graced Hindi with an elite status. Hinglish was the most common language

spiced with the Internet lingo. While this made the content and the medium more inclusive, it also created a wider audience base.

4. Distribution pattern & Revenue generation models are different from mainstream – While the first few series in India were released on the pattern of television broadcasts and streamed one episode every week, the latter series followed the web model of streaming all episodes in the same day. Three platforms were free of costs, thus watching their content was free. They relied on advertising revenue. Rest three platforms were subscription based. One out of them was freemium based, that is it showed one episode for free and asked for a fee to watch the rest. Thus it was observed that while being in a shift, the revenue generation models were aspiring to be different from TV and Film industries, which are ticket and advertising based primarily.

5. Professional cast and crew – Stories were driven by star value as the faces were recognized on other mediums as well. Along with this the story tellers or the creators were also from the film and TV industries. They could have chosen to move to the format because of several reasons: lack of censorship, flexibility and lack of avenues in mainstream for their choice of stories. Thus the acting style and production values are still being derived from the film industry primarily.

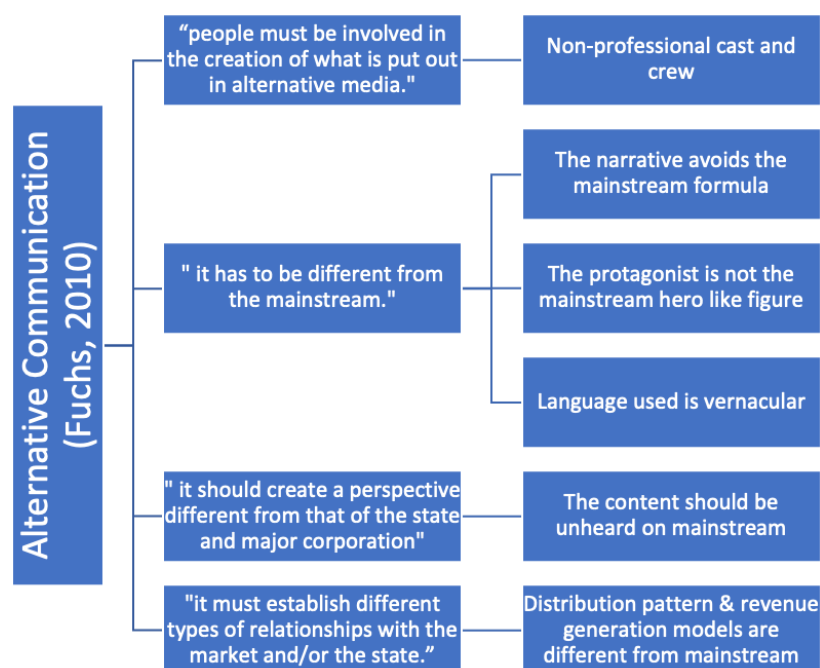


Fig. 3. Web – Series: Alternative Communication

These findings are pictorially depicted in Fig. 3. On the right side are the statements from the theory (Fuchs, 2010) and on the left findings from the study vis-à-vis.

5. Conclusion

The study delved into the content served by the medium. It explored the new emerging dynamic story arcs, complex-er story lines and characters, and freedom from restrictions posed by the agencies governing content on the cinema and TV industries. It also pondered over the hinderances posed on the creative imagination through censorship or the mandate to follow the TRPs.

With the findings, it emerged that while the web remains heterogenous and the Indian audience remains a vast and myriad entity, there is a niche for every type of content on the Internet. These niches are being tapped by different service providers catering to different segments. This is not unlike different TV channels catering to diverse audiences or film makers making films for distinctive viewer segments.

But what emerged as the principal argument is that the web has liberated the maker from the expectations of the mainstream market. They can now have a say in the choice of the story that was earlier dependent on the production industry hierarchies and audience demands. Now as the artist gets the liberty to practice the craft as per their choice, there is an observed marked difference in the content produced. It has been opined and discussed in many artistic discourses that

patronizing of art forms is a mark and a need of a developed society and the audience segments through web in this case emerge as eager patrons.

However, as the study tried to test if the discourse heralded by the medium was fit to be considered as Alternative media and thus alternate communication or storytelling according to the parameters (Fuchs, 2010), the results were not very short. While the stories were from the subaltern, avoiding the mainstream formula, targeting the vernacular sections, and dependent on evolving models of revenue generation, they were being backed by huge corporates like Netflix, Amazon, Fox Star Studies, Viacom 18, Sony India etc. and had renowned names as cast and production crew.

Thus, it can be assumed that these conglomerates are realizing the potential of stories closer to ground, from all walks of life. And the fact that they are utilizing the platform of web to host them and reach out to the world supports McLuhan's both statements: 'Medium is the message' and 'The world is a global village'. Why would Netflix, an American corporate otherwise, would pick up a book written by Vikram Chandra, an Indian author, make it into 'Sacred Games', a web-series for Indian audience and then translate and subtitle it in more than 30 international languages, so that it can be screened for a worldwide audience, and all of it on web?

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