

Women Identity and Space: A Study of MAI - A Netflix Series

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Abstract

The goal of feminism is to alleviate the daily gender disparities that women experience. With modernity, it is evident that spreading knowledge about women's rights through various media has helped alleviate women's precarious state. Feminism, specifically the name "Feminism" for the female gender, is essentially a global movement with ideals that strive for equal gender rights. According to history, a woman had been denied nearly every human right that a male was always guaranteed. privileges such as sexual, political, economic, and social rights, for example. Feminism's fundamental goal is to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all genders in our society. This research study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Sheel, a character from the web series "Mai: A Mother's Rage." Sheel's persona exemplifies what it means to be a feminist in Indian society. Sakshi Tanwar beautifully plays the unusual role of Sheel, a dedicated wife, loyal employee, and above all a responsible and adorable mother. The Netflix original series Mai, which stars Sakshi Tanwar in a powerful performance, captures attention, but the storyline tests the viewers patience for something meaningful to happen. In the six-episode series Sakshi Tanwar strongly reminds us of memorable character played by Sridevi in Ravi Udyawar's Web series Mom released in 2017 on Netflix in which the character kills several men who raped her daughter.

Keywords: Courage, Changing roles, Extraordinary character; Murder mystery; Netflix; Relationship; Thriller; Web series; Women empowerment.

Introduction

Sheel's persona exemplifies what it means to be a feminist in Indian society. Sakshi Tanwar beautifully plays the unusual role of Sheel, a dedicated wife, loyal employee, and above all a responsible and adorable mother. The feminist aspect of Sheel is the primary depiction of a women power

in various interactions as beautifully and brilliantly shown. Our Indian theatre has a distinctive literary voice. Of course, Indian play has greatly aided in raising awareness of the feminist struggle. One of them, *Mai*, takes aim at the entire legal system and society, which may be regarded as an echo of Sridevi's role in *MOM* and Denis Villeneuve's 2013 crime thriller where women were denied the opportunity to assert their rights and stand out from the crowd. This Indian play, titled "A Mother's Rage," was created by Atul Mongia. The protagonist of this drama-thriller is a middle-class woman whose daughter was hit by a truck in front of her eyes; however, Sheel soon learns that it was murder and not an accident. The mother is naturally driven by intense sadness, but something in her hardens, and she is suddenly transformed into someone who is vengeful. This play did a great job of portraying the extraordinary Sheel as a mother and a woman with an iron resolve who would only seek retribution (Bhat-tacharya, June 2022).

Drama plays a significant role in our modernist day, as technology affects every aspect of life. The very important part contributes to a more comprehensive knowledge and picture of the drama's message for our society. Atul Mongia has chosen a very lovely way to examine the features of modern women and explodes the propensity every woman possesses but may not be aware of because society failed to allow them to fully develop and has instead always kept them confined to the boundaries of gender-determined roles by us. Our life cycle activities can only run smoothly if gender roles are balanced nicely. (Hindustan Times, 2022). Sheel, the protagonist, is the wife of the younger brother. Sheel spends her days caring for her family and extended family, helping to ensure that the entire house runs properly. Even so, through a strange coincidence of fate and options, Sheel is flung deep into the criminal world. When Sheel's daughter is brutally murdered, she vows to avenge her. Her path is not an easy one, as it is riddled with white-collar crimes and shady politics.

This paper attempts to shed light on the inner psychological corners of Indian women who are prevalent in Indian society. The deeper issue and pressure that never heals the wounds, but cuts deeper are the result of the male-dominant society's inequalities. a woman is aware of her rights and opportunities, but at every stage of her journey, society, family, and friends remind her of the female roles she is expected to play. She believes there has been some progress in the state of feminism, but there is still a long way to go, and awareness and understanding are critical. Sheel, an ordinary middle-class woman like any of us, is simply a reflection of every common woman causing all to delve deeper into most psycholog-

ical spaces and confront the question of being a woman. Sheel is a simple woman who continues her journey in search of a new woman, evolving from a gentle lady to a ruthless woman determined to punish those responsible for the death of her innocent deaf daughter (Sharma, 2022).

Review of Literature

Aiyer (2005) explains that in today's era television has an important role in our society and it plays a very important role in our life. Television informs us as well as entertains us. Since television is changing from time to time because of better techniques. Digital television means better picture quality and good sound effects that completely attract the viewers. On the other hand, it increases business and opportunities in the television industry. Basically, in this literature the author summarizes that television becomes digital television and it has a more powerful and effective impact on the viewers. The objective of this study is to explain some of the important points that are linked with interactive television. There are three types of interactive television: new forms, interactive genres, and interactive users. New genres, interactive design, new standards, the internet, and digitalization are all discussed in this book.

Wolff (2015) opine that the traditional TV industry was probably concerned not so much by new technology as by some of those lower economic the broadcast chain unexpectedly trying to force up by appearing to be more resourceful, speedily, knowledgeable, and daring. There was simply no discourse on a big and successful sector founded on deeply rooted customer behavior, extensive professional networks, and an entrenched power structure was going to be elevated, unavoidably and soon. Since it's very frequently the case with the media, it boils down to a generational conflict. Friedrichsen & Kamalipour (2016) defines digital transformation as speeding up, presenting enormous prospects and dimensions for innovation, growth, and job creation. It's about creating hundreds of thousands of employees in developing new industries like data analytics, content, and service applications, as well as leveraging the sharing economy's development potential. The cultural, social, economic along with political landscapes are all being redefined in the wake of digital and media convergence. New economic models and practices come out from media convergence, as well as new opportunities for democratic involvement and cultural expression.

Jenner (2018) says that Netflix's interface, publication model, discourses, and transnational productions, have fundamentally modified and OTT

audience think about television. Moving from TV history to Netflix's re-invention as a streaming video platform, this research work explores the notions of user control that Netflix has incorporated into its corporate philosophy through its interface, serial publishing model, and techniques. Binge watching, which Netflix originated for streaming serial content, is discussed as a new mode of operation with its cluster of cultural discourses and discussions. McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2018) describe the democratic, cultural, spiritual, and financial aspects of the new traditions between media content provision and consumption motivated by technological innovation and connectivity. Netflix uses rich insights into where the development of such connections styles is formed by the production of digital content, companies, new tech, and culture. The inclusion of convergence as a link enables discussion of the connection involving content creators.

Lobato (2019) in his book clearly examines that Television as an important medium for masses was originally only available by broadcast, and is now readily available over telephone lines, fiber optic cables, and wireless networks. Audiences can access it through smartphones, large and small displays, and other audio visual media players. New global television distribution giants are emerging in this unfamiliar context, including Netflix, the world's biggest subscription video-on-demand service. Netflix Nations observes a major dispute in the digital media landscape: the conflict between the internet's global distribution capabilities and the territorial and local structure of media trade, taste, and regulation.

Research Methodology

Objectives:

1. To explore the representation of the female gaze in the Netflix series MAI and its impact on storytelling on OTT platforms.
2. To analyze the portrayal of women's identity and the extent of space provided to female characters within the framework of patriarchal societal structures on OTT platforms.

Hypotheses:

Based on the study's focus on women's identity, space, and representation in the Netflix series MAI, here are two hypotheses for the research:

H1: The portrayal of the protagonist Sheel in MAI challenges traditional gender roles by highlighting a strong, independent female identity within a patriarchal society, thus fostering a feminist narrative on OTT platforms.

H2: The series Mai employs the female gaze to reframe storytelling by emphasizing themes of determination, responsibility, and the complexity of relationships from a woman's perspective, effectively addressing societal and gender-based inequalities.

The proposed study employs secondary research methods through the content analysis of the web series Mai. Thematic analysis method has been used to observe the series and its 6 episodes. The researcher systematically viewed all six episodes of the first season in different steps to analyze the key themes and elements relevant to the study.

Data Collection- The primary data source for the study is the first season of Mai, a murder mystery web series available on Netflix. The researcher viewed all six episodes in a structured manner, focusing on specific parameters to collect meaningful insights. Each episode was analyzed thoroughly to explore recurring themes and narrative patterns.

Data Analysis-The study confines its scope to a set of well-defined parameters for analyzing all six episodes of Mai. These parameters were selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and themes, helping justify the study's hypothesis and objectives.

The following *parameters* have been taken to analyze the research study-

- 1. Narrative Structure and Plot Development:** Examination of the storyline, pacing, and key elements driving the narrative.
- 2. Representation of Women's Identity:** Analysis of female characters' agency, roles, and portrayal within the societal framework.
- 3. Depiction of Patriarchal Dynamics:** Evaluation of societal norms, male dominance, and their influence on characters and events.
- 4. Exploration of Interpersonal Relationships:** Understanding the complexities of familial, societal, and personal connections.
- 5. Murder Mystery Elements:** Assessment of suspense, intrigue, and un-

raveling of the mystery.

6. **Investigation and Problem-Solving:** Analysis of the investigative process, challenges, and methods employed.
7. **Themes of Determination and Resilience:** Focus on characters' perseverance and strength in overcoming obstacles.
8. **Sense of Responsibility:** Examination of accountability and moral obligations portrayed.
9. **Portrayal of Challenges:** Identification of external and internal struggles faced by characters, particularly women.
10. **Impact of the Female Gaze:** Insight into how the narrative reflects female perspectives, experiences, and agency. **Story Development:** Examination of the plot structure, pacing, and key narrative elements driving the murder mystery.

By applying these parameters, the study aims to decode the underlying themes and highlight critical societal and gender-based issues represented in *Mai*. The analysis facilitates deeper insights into storytelling and the depiction of women's roles within a patriarchal framework while addressing the interplay of relationships and the murder mystery plotline.

Thematic Analysis

1. Narrative Structure and Plot Development

The six episodes of *Mai* maintain a strong narrative structure that evolves steadily to create an engaging story arc. Episode 1 establishes the emotional and thematic foundation with Supriya's tragic death. The pacing here is deliberate, setting up the emotional stakes and hinting at a deeper conspiracy. Episode 2 introduces suspenseful elements with Sheel uncovering cryptic evidence, emphasizing her decision to investigate further despite societal pressures. Episode 3-4 gradually escalate the stakes. Sheel becomes increasingly entangled in the criminal underworld, with each episode revealing new layers of deceit and danger. Episode 5 sees the plot take a sharp turn as Sheel starts manipulating her adversaries using the evidence she gathers, showcasing her growth as an investigator. Episode 6 delivers a resolution, tying together narrative threads and revealing the true depth of the conspiracy. The pacing here is rapid, reflecting the

urgency of Sheel's final actions. The plot effectively balances emotional depth and suspense, keeping viewers invested in both Sheel's personal journey and the broader mystery.

2. Representation of Women's Identity

Sakshi Tanwar (Sheel) plays a mother seeking the truth and desperately wanting revenge in Netflix's web series. Her flawless performance solidifies her position as one of the best actors in the Hindi TV-movie industry. She plays a fantastic role in the Mai web series. In this series, she establishes her identity as she spoke in one of her interviews in 2013 that women are not doormats, but fighters, such as a mother determined to find her daughter's murderer at any cost, who is prepared to face challenges and the world at large. Women's attitudes are changing, and so are the characters depicted on OTT platforms.

Sheel's transformation across the episodes serves as a powerful representation of evolving female identity: Episodes 1-2 depict Sheel as a grieving mother constrained by societal norms, struggling to reconcile her loss within a patriarchal framework. Episodes 3-4 see her begin to challenge these limitations, stepping out of her traditional roles to take on the mantle of investigator and avenger. Episodes 5-6 highlight her complete evolution into a figure of agency and empowerment, capable of outsmarting her adversaries and asserting control over her narrative. Through Sheel, the series challenges traditional gender roles and celebrates the multifaceted nature of women's identities.

3. Depiction of Patriarchal Dynamics

Gender bias is a central element of patriarchal culture and is often the primary driver of patriarchy in any society. This bias stems from the belief that men are inherently superior to women in intelligence, strength, and other attributes. As a result, women are frequently reduced to roles seen as secondary, such as homemaking and childbearing. In a patriarchal society, male dominance is evident in the fact that men control both family dynamics and societal structures. They occupy positions of authority and power at every level and are perceived as superior in all respects. With the change of time, the things are changing, the women today realize their identity amidst patriarchal social structures. The web series Mai sets an example by creating a character of Sheel who becomes an ideal for many mothers. She is seen confronting the male world in her own way by retaining her own identity. The character is endowed with deep love,

compassion, commitment and a zeal and passion to attain something. The character of Sheel justifies the agony, aggression, and a lust for revenge by her actions and activities.

The series critiques patriarchal structures by portraying the systemic obstacles Sheel faces: Episode 1 introduces the male-dominated societal framework, where Supriya's death is dismissed as an accident, and Sheel's grief is trivialized. Episodes 2-4 showcase the pervasive influence of patriarchy, with Sheel encountering resistance from her family and being undermined by powerful male adversaries. Episodes 5-6 present Sheel defying these dynamics, confronting male authority figures, and exposing their corruption. This arc underscores the resilience required to navigate and resist patriarchal oppression.

4. Exploration of Interpersonal Relationships

Sheel is a nurse at Gita Bhawan, an assisted living facility. This informs the audience about the possibility of continuing their studies and then Going back to the topic of work, even though Sheel's dream of becoming a doctor was never realized, she is unwaveringly supportive of her mute daughter Supriya, who is determined to realize her mother's dream. In this case, a lovely mother-daughter relationship is seen and the role that womanhood plays in the overall development of women.

The series delves into the complexities of Sheel's relationships: Episode 1 focuses on the mother-daughter bond, with Supriya's death serving as the emotional catalyst for Sheel's journey. Episodes 2-3 explore the tensions within her family, highlighting the lack of support and the societal expectations placed on her. Episodes 4-6 shift to Sheel's interactions with her adversaries, illustrating how her determination and ingenuity redefine these relationships. The exploration of relationships adds emotional depth and contextualizes Sheel's actions within a broader social framework.

5. Murder Mystery Elements

Sheel has a strong maternal instinct that tells her that someone is responsible for her daughter's death. To establish that it was a murder, she resolves to take matters into her own hands. She unearths more unsettling secrets the more questions she probes for. Was Supriya's death a murder, in fact? Whom and why did she die? Will Sheel identify the real offender without being discovered? The six episodes are an attempt by the creators to solve the riddle. The show by Sakshi Tanwar Mai makes a strong im-

pression right away, piquing your curiosity. In the first 20 to 30 minutes, unfortunate things happen. Finding solutions is never simple, though, as there are always dangers and traps lurking nearby. It is difficult to understand the mother's desire for vengeance as a result.

The murder mystery unfolds methodically, maintaining suspense across episodes: Episode 1 raises questions about Supriya's death, setting up the central mystery. Episodes 2-4 introduce clues and red herrings, such as the cryptic key and hidden alliances, deepening the intrigue. Episode 5 ramps up the tension as Sheel manipulates evidence and confronts suspects. Episode 6 resolves the mystery, revealing the conspiracy's true scope and delivering a satisfying narrative payoff. This structure keeps viewers engaged while weaving the themes of justice and empowerment into the mystery.

6. Investigation and Problem-Solving Aptitude

MAI promised herself to give justice to her daughter. As a mother seeks retribution for her daughter, Sheel decides to launch her own investigation, opening the door to a world of political scandals. She is steadfast about her chosen path, which takes her to the first target, the wife and kid of the truck driver, despite the cautions of her family and the hazardous conditions. As she continues her research, she learns that a politician named Jawahar Vyas, the son of a patient of Sheel's at the nursing home, helped the poor youngster get into a very expensive school that was out of their reach. The willpower of a lady who had taken control of her life after becoming aware of the brutal world is demonstrated by this plain woman.

Sheel's investigative journey is central to the narrative: Episodes 1-2 show her initial foray into uncovering the truth, driven by maternal instinct and emotional resilience. Episodes 3-5 highlight her strategic thinking, as she navigates the criminal underworld and manipulates evidence to gain an advantage. Episode 6 culminates in her using all she has learned to outsmart her adversaries, showcasing her growth and ingenuity. Her progression from amateur sleuth to a skilled investigator reflects her evolving agency.

7. Themes of Determination and Resilience

In the series Keshav, Neelam's right hand, tries to stop them but Sheel faints at him and locks him in an empty house to get information out of him. At first, he refuses, but under pressure, he eventually admits

Neelam's involvement in Supriya's murder. It is revealed that Sheel has thrown away the key. To find information about Supriya's murder, she goes to the medical waste disposal with Prashant and Shankar. witness the effectiveness of Sheel's determination as she uncovers the causes of Supriya's murder.

Sheel's perseverance is a recurring theme: Episode 1 portrays her grief but hints at her underlying strength. Episodes 2-4 reveal her determination to overcome societal and personal obstacles. Episodes 5-6 emphasize her resilience as she confronts dangerous adversaries and persists despite overwhelming odds. This theme reinforces the series' feminist narrative.

8. Sense of Responsibility

Creator and Director Atul Mongia takes that single query and seeks the solution over the course of six touted, suspenseful episodes. Sheel (Sakshi) spends her entire day on the mountain because of her responsibilities, goal, and her disappearing family. A bag of worms wide open unexpectedly amid all of this, she has lost a daughter, her husband is now an outsider, new secrets about Supriya emerge daily, the family isn't very supportive emotionally, she is expected to perform rituals, but she doesn't want that to be how she wants her daughter to rest in peace. Her internal struggle to decide whether she is a good parent or not is perfectly depicted on the screen.

Sheel's actions are motivated by a deep sense of accountability: Episodes 1-2 depict her responsibility as a mother seeking justice for her daughter. Episodes 3-6 expand this to a broader responsibility, as she confronts systemic corruption and societal injustices. Her journey reflects the moral obligations women often bear in patriarchal societies.

9. Portrayal of Challenges

The Netflix original series *Mai*, which stars Sakshi Tanwar in a powerful performance, captures attention, but the storyline tests patience for something meaningful to happen. The six-episode series Sakshi Tanwar strongly reminded us of *Sridevi's Mom* film, in which the character kills several men who have assaulted her daughter.

Sheel faces numerous challenges: Episodes 1-2 highlight external challenges, such as societal prejudice and familial opposition. Episodes 3-4 depict internal struggles, including self-doubt and grief, alongside the

dangers of confronting powerful adversaries. Episodes 5-6 showcase her ability to navigate and overcome these challenges, solidifying her transformation. These struggles add depth to her character and underscore her resilience.

10. Impact of the Female Gaze

Alicia Malona in her book "The Female Gaze: Essential Movies Made by Women" believes that female gaze is a window to see the outer world where in the female perspective takes the upper shelf to understand the society of men. Sheel's persona exemplifies what it means to be a feminist in Indian society. Sakshi Tanwar portrays the extraordinary role of Sheel where in the journey of a mother to take revenge is portrayed on screen. According to societal expectations, trials make delicate ladies much stronger and more capable. Sheel, a fresh woman, shatters all the barriers that caged her from being a woman, even though most women are assigned a fixed role to play and are muted in accordance with social conventions. According to societal perceptions, trials make weak women far more capable and stronger. Sheel, a fresh woman, shatters all the barriers that imprisoned her for being a woman, even though most women are given a definite role to perform and are muted according to social conventions.

The female gaze shapes the narrative throughout: Episode 1-6 center Sheel's perspective, emphasizing her emotions, agency, and lived experiences. The series reframes traditional storytelling norms by prioritizing women's viewpoints, offering a nuanced exploration of themes like justice, identity, and empowerment. The female gaze challenges patriarchal narratives, presenting Mai as a groundbreaking contribution to feminist storytelling. The study highlights Mai's layered storytelling and its impactful critique of gender and societal dynamics. The series blends suspense, emotional depth, and social commentary, creating a compelling narrative that resonates with contemporary feminist discourse.

Findings and Discussion

Sheel's persona exemplifies what it means to be a feminist in Indian society. Sakshi Tanwar beautifully plays the unusual role of Sheel, a dedicated wife, loyal employee, and above all a responsible and adorable mother. The Netflix original series Mai, which stars Sakshi Tanwar in a powerful performance, captures attention, but the storyline tests the viewers' patience for something meaningful to happen. After watching several films and online videos with feminism as their main theme and conducting a fe-

male survey in the neighborhood, it is concluded that most Indian women are denied their basic needs and wants, as well as equal opportunities to develop and lead respectable lives. Strict regulations and women's rights that must be adhered to can change things. There must be awareness campaigns on feminist rights for the current generation, and counseling services can help a little bit more. These aspects must be adopted at every stage, even in schools, and the next generation will undoubtedly see the benefits. Mai is an example for many to see how women can be strong and determined when needed in the pangs of our so called patriarchal society where in a mother finds her way to bring justice for her daughter. Mai is a journey from a weaker women, a simple house wife to a stronger women, a loving mother.

The Netflix series Mai effectively achieves the objectives of exploring the representation of the female gaze and analyzing the portrayal of women's identity within patriarchal societal structures on OTT platforms. Through its central character, Sheel Chaudhary, the series highlights the power of feminist storytelling by centering a woman's perspective and delving into the complexities of her journey.

In alignment with Objective 1, Mai employs the female gaze to reframe conventional storytelling. By prioritizing Sheel's experiences, emotions, and agency, the series challenges the male-dominated narrative structures traditionally seen in media. The female gaze brings themes of resilience, determination, and responsibility to the forefront, providing a nuanced exploration of justice, motherhood, and identity. This perspective enriches the storytelling on OTT platforms, offering a refreshing departure from conventional tropes.

Addressing Objective 2, Mai portrays Sheel as a multi-dimensional character who defies traditional gender roles. Set against a patriarchal backdrop, her journey from a grieving mother to a formidable force for justice underscores the extent of space provided to female characters. The series critiques societal norms and power dynamics, emphasizing the potential for women to break free from the constraints imposed by patriarchal frameworks.

The hypotheses set for this study are validated through the narrative and character development in Mai. H1 is affirmed as Sheel's portrayal challenges traditional gender roles, presenting her as a strong, independent woman whose determination fosters a feminist narrative. H2 is supported by the series' use of the female gaze, which emphasizes themes of agency,

accountability, and the intricate dynamics of relationships.

Mai exemplifies how OTT platforms can be a medium for transformative storytelling that champions women's voices and experiences. It paves the way for a more inclusive and empowering narrative landscape, demonstrating the potential of feminist narratives to inspire, challenge, and resonate with audiences

Conclusion

Sheel, the drama's main character, displays several traits that, although occasionally appearing to be macho, brutal, and tough, also reveal a kind, affectionate, and soft-hearted side. A nasty woman is one who has all the characteristics. Woman in a world of terrible men played her part to the best of her ability. Sheel originally misbehaved with Prashant and Shankar, throwing her garments from her body, but she stuck with them till she discovered Prashant's true intentions. A woman who is initially kind and naive can quickly become a vicious foe due to the buried sorrow of losing a son without her will, having to deal with it every day, and then losing her only daughter permanently. While she is torturing Keshav to extract information from him, Sheel is also seen tending to his wounds, displaying her compassionate side. Sheel is a bold, courageous woman who is aware of everything going on around her, a quick thinker with a tremendous presence of mind, and can do anything to achieve her goals. Throughout the entire plot, Sheel is seen employing her knowledge to the maximum. It can be said that women must assume responsibility for themselves because our society will not readily do so. The journey of Mai is not only a journey of a mother but it sets an example how women play a strong role in the society as depicted in the series.

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