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Reimagining Narrative Forms in Popular Hindi Cinema: OTT Platforms and Digital Storytelling Practices

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ABSTRACT
This article examines changing narrative forms in Popular Hindi Cinema in the context of digital media. The storyline of Hindi films drew on myths, folktales, and theatrical traditions, resulting in linear narratives with clear moral structures. In recent years, filmmakers have increasingly moved toward more complex and layered storytelling, leading to the emergence of film series, cinematic universes, and long-form narratives. The article argues that the internationalisation of Indian cinema shapes this shift, changing audience expectations and technological developments. The rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and others has had a significant impact on storytelling practices. These platforms support multi-season formats that encourage detailed character development, extended narrative arcs, and greater experimentation with pacing and structure. By analysing selected Netflix-funded films, the study explores how traditional narrative frameworks in Popular Hindi Cinema are adapted to the possibilities offered by digital platforms. The article demonstrates how digital platforms are reshaping narrative strategies in popular Hindi Cinema and contributing to broader shifts in Indian media culture.

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Introduction

The narrative traditions of Mainstream Hindi Cinema have historically drawn upon mythology, folklore, theatre, and popular literature, producing storytelling forms that emphasised moral clarity, emotional resonance, and recognisable narrative patterns. Early cinematic productions, particularly during the silent and early sound periods, frequently adapted episodes from epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reinforcing didactic storytelling and clearly defined ethical binaries. These influences, inherited from oral and performative traditions, played a decisive role in shaping narrative conventions that prioritised melodrama, archetypal characters, and emotional excess.

As Mainstream Hindi Cinema transitioned into the sound era and later entered the dialogue-driven scripts, song sequences, and tightly structured plots became central to cinematic storytelling. The imperatives of theatrical exhibition, censorship regulations, and the expectation of mass appeal deeply influenced screenwriting practices during this period. Narrative forms were largely linear, resolutions were morally unambiguous, and deviations from established formulas were rare, as commercial viability depended heavily on reaching the broadest possible audience. These industrial and regulatory constraints contributed to the standardisation of storytelling practices that dominated mainstream Hindi Cinema for decades.

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However, the advent of digital media and the rapid rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms in India around 2008 have significantly disrupted these established modes of storytelling. OTT platforms have altered not only the distribution and consumption of films but also the conditions under which narratives are conceived, structured, and received. The shift from collective theatrical viewing of single and multi-screen cinema to personalised digital consumption has introduced new viewing habits, audience expectations, and creative possibilities. Freed from rigid runtime constraints, box-office pressures, and conventional censorship frameworks, filmmakers are increasingly experimenting with narrative pacing, fragmented structures, and thematic complexity, and have greater liberty to explore stories. This transformation has enabled the emergence of characters who resist idealisation, narratives that accommodate moral ambiguity, and stories that engage directly with socially and politically sensitive themes.

Unlike traditional theatrical cinema, where commercial considerations often temper narrative risks, OTT platforms foster experimentation and narrative innovation. As a result, mainstream Hindi cinema is gradually moving away from linear, formulaic storytelling toward layered narratives that reflect lived realities, regional specificities, and evolving cultural sensibilities. Against this backdrop, this paper argues that digital platforms function not merely as alternative exhibition spaces but as narrative enablers that actively shape cinematic form, representation, and storytelling strategies, through a qualitative textual analysis of three Netflix-funded films, Amar Singh Chamkila, Laapataa Ladies, and Deva.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on narrative transformation in cinema have long emphasised the interdependence between storytelling practices and the technological, industrial, and cultural conditions under which films are produced and consumed. Film and media scholars have consistently argued that shifts in media technologies do not merely alter modes of distribution but fundamentally reshape narrative form, aesthetic strategies, and audience engagement. Within this broader tradition, the rise of digital platforms has generated renewed interest in how cinematic narratives adapt to changing modes of production and reception.

A central theoretical reference for understanding contemporary digital storytelling is Henry Jenkins's concept of transmedia storytelling. Jenkins (2014) argues that modern narratives increasingly unfold across platforms, formats, and media environments, allowing stories to expand in complexity and depth while fostering sustained audience engagement. Although Jenkins's work primarily addresses franchise-based and global media ecosystems, its relevance to mainstream Hindi cinema driven by OTT lies in its emphasis on narrative flexibility and participatory modes of consumption. OTT platforms encourage extended story arcs, layered character development, and narrative continuity that contrast sharply with the time-bound, closure-oriented structures of theatrical cinema. Even in non-franchise contexts, digital platforms promote storytelling practices that privilege expansion, accumulation, and long-form engagement.

Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" further illuminates the relationship between narrative form and technological context. McLuhan (1964) contends that media technologies actively shape not only how content is delivered but also how meaning itself is constructed. Applied to OTT platforms, this perspective suggests that digital media environments fundamentally reconfigure narrative possibilities by enabling non-linear storytelling, flexible pacing, and personalised modes of viewer engagement. The shift from the collective experience of theatrical viewing to individualised, on-demand consumption has reshaped narrative aesthetics, encouraging slower rhythms, episodic structures, and greater psychological interiority in Popular Hindi Cinema.

Lev Manovich's work on digital media deepens this understanding by foregrounding the aesthetic and structural implications of digital technologies. Manovich (2017) identifies key characteristics of digital media, such as modularity, variability, and hybridity, that allow narratives to move beyond fixed formal structures.

These features are increasingly evident in OTT-produced Hindi films, where experimentation with genre, tone, and narrative organisation reflects the affordances of digital storytelling environments. The flexibility enabled by digital production and distribution allows filmmakers to depart from rigid narrative formulas and explore ambiguity, fragmentation, and tonal shifts with greater confidence.

Within the specific context of Hindi cinema, scholarship on screenwriting and narrative tradition provides important historical grounding. Anubha Yadav's analysis of screenwriting practices traces the evolution of Hindi cinema from mythological and theatrical narratives to dialogue-driven storytelling during the Golden Age (Yadav, 2011). Her work demonstrates how cultural traditions, industrial demands, and censorship norms shaped narrative conventions over time. Building on this historical foundation, recent scholarship suggests that OTT platforms are facilitating a gradual departure from these entrenched formulas, enabling filmmakers to revisit cultural themes through more nuanced, realist, and character-driven lenses.

Studies of Indian popular culture and media further contextualise these narrative shifts. Asha Kasbekar's examination of post-liberalisation cultural production highlights how changes in media industries have expanded representational possibilities by challenging dominant moral binaries and normative frameworks (Kasbekar, 2006). In the OTT era, comparatively flexible regulatory environments have allowed filmmakers to address politically sensitive themes, social marginality, and moral complexity with greater openness. Scholars have noted that digital platforms provide space for narratives that were previously marginalised or diluted in mainstream theatrical cinema under commercial and censorship pressures.

Building on the sociological framework developed by Athique (2018), digital media can be understood not merely as channels of distribution but as structural conditions that reorganise audience formation, modes of engagement, and cultural consumption. Athique conceptualises digital media as embedded within everyday social life, arguing that they unsettle earlier models of mass communication predicated on a unified, homogeneous public. Instead, digital environments foster networked, dispersed, and increasingly individualised forms of media engagement, shaped by platform infrastructures, data-driven mediation, and user interactivity. Applied to the context of OTT platforms, this shift has important implications for narrative form and cultural production. As filmmakers are no longer compelled to appeal exclusively to the broad imperatives of theatrical mass consumption, digital distribution environments create conditions conducive to narrative diversification and formal experimentation. The emergence of segmented yet sustained viewerships allows for storytelling that foregrounds thematic complexity, character-driven narratives, and culturally specific concerns that may not conform to formulaic mainstream conventions. In this sense, Athique's broader theorisation of digital media as socially embedded and structurally transformative is particularly useful for analysing how OTT platforms enable new alignments between audience segmentation and narrative innovation in Popular Hindi Cinema.

Taken together, these theoretical and contextual studies establish a framework for understanding OTT platforms as active agents in narrative transformation rather than neutral channels of distribution. By altering production practices, exhibition modes, and audience engagement, digital platforms reshape storytelling conventions and expand the narrative possibilities of Popular Hindi Cinema. This study builds on existing scholarship by examining how these transformations manifest at the levels of narrative structure, character construction, and representational strategy in selected OTT-produced Hindi films.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual and narrative analysis to examine the transformation of storytelling practices in mainstream Hindi cinema influenced by Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. Given the paper's focus on narrative form, representation, and character construction, qualitative textual analysis is particularly suited to identifying shifts in cinematic language and storytelling strategies enabled by digital media.

Selection of Case Studies

The analysis focuses on three Netflix-funded Hindi films: Amar Singh Chamkila (dir. Imtiaz Ali), Laapataa Ladies (dir. Kiran Rao), and Deva (dir. Rosshan Andrrews), released between 2023 and 2024. These films were selected purposively for three key reasons. First, all three were produced or funded by a major OTT platform (Netflix), ensuring that their narrative strategies were shaped primarily by digital distribution rather than theatrical imperatives. Second, the films represent diverse genres and thematic concerns, including biographical storytelling, social realism, and crime drama, allowing for comparative analysis across narrative forms. Third, each film departs from conventional mainstream Hindi Cinematropes through experimentation with character complexity, moral ambiguity, and representational freedom.

Analytical Framework

The analytical focus is placed on identifying departures from conventional theatrical storytelling, particularly in relation to linear narrative progression, moral resolution, and formulaic character archetypes. Attention is directed toward extended narrative arcs, the portrayal of morally ambiguous protagonists, and the integration of socially reflective themes, which are increasingly evident in digitally mediated cinema. By foregrounding these elements, the framework allows for a systematic assessment of how OTT platforms facilitate narrative depth and complexity.

The study further examines how digital viewing conditions, such as on-demand access, personalised consumption, and the absence of fixed runtime constraints, affect narrative pacing and audience engagement. These conditions are treated as structural factors that enable filmmakers to experiment with slower narrative rhythms, fragmented storytelling, and heightened character interiority, which contrast with the conventions of mainstream theatrical cinema. Finally, the framework accounts for the formal and representational flexibility enabled by digital production and distribution. This includes attention to narrative variability, tonal shifts, and departures from genre rigidity, as well as the treatment of culturally and politically sensitive themes.

Case Studies and Discussion

Amar Singh Chamkila: Digital Form and Narrative Experimentation

As a biographical film based on the life of Punjabi singer Amar Singh Chamkila, the narrative integrates multiple languages, musical traditions, and cultural references that might have posed challenges within a conventional theatrical framework. One notable example of digital affordance is the film's innovative use of subtitles. Rather than adhering strictly to standardised subtitle placement, the film dynamically positions Hindi subtitles in relation to character movement and framing, thereby enhancing narrative immersion without disrupting visual composition. This stylistic choice reflects the adaptability of digital platforms and aligns with McLuhan's assertion that media forms shape narrative meaning (McLuhan, 1964).

The film also departs from idealised biographical storytelling by presenting its protagonist with moral complexity rather than reverence. Chamkila's personal contradictions, professional ambition, and controversial public image are portrayed without narrative sanitisation. Such representational freedom is emblematic of OTT-enabled storytelling, where character depth is prioritised over heroic idealisation. In line with Jenkins's notion of narrative expansion, the film allows audiences to engage with layered character construction rather than a singular moral trajectory (Jenkins, 2014). The digital platform thus functions not only as a distributor but as a space that permits narrative risk-taking and cultural specificity.

Deva: Moral Ambiguity and the Anti-Hero Narrative

In Deva, the narrative transformation enabled by OTT platforms is most evident in its reconfiguration of the police protagonist. Traditionally, Mainstream Hindi cinema has portrayed law enforcement figures as righteous heroes whose moral transgressions are justified by noble intentions. Deva subverts this convention by presenting Dev Ambre as a morally ambiguous figure whose actions are driven by self-

-interest rather than ethical duty. This departure from the archetypal "heroic cop" reflects a broader shift toward character-driven narratives that resist moral absolutism. OTT platforms provide a conducive environment for such portrayals by reducing the pressure to conform to censorship norms and audience expectations associated with theatrical cinema. The digital medium allows for sustained engagement with flawed characters, enabling narratives to explore ethical grey zones without imposing redemptive resolutions. This aligns with Manovich's observation that digital media encourage narrative variability and hybridity, allowing stories to deviate from fixed moral structures (Manovich, 2017). Deva exemplifies how OTT platforms accommodate complex character psychology and challenge established cinematic tropes within Popular Hindi Cinema.

Laapataa Ladies: Social Realism and Gendered Narratives

Laapataa Ladies illustrates how OTT platforms support content-driven storytelling that foregrounds social realism over spectacle. Unlike high-budget theatrical films reliant on star power and grand production values, the film emphasises character development, emotional authenticity, and social commentary. Its narrative centres on women navigating structural constraints, focusing on agency, resilience, and self-determination rather than idealised femininity. The film's portrayal of female characters who exist outside conventional marital and social frameworks marks a significant narrative departure from mainstream Popular Hindi Cinema. By presenting women who are self-reliant and emotionally complex, Laapataa Ladies challenges entrenched gender norms and expands representational possibilities. This narrative approach resonates with Kasbekar's argument that digital media have opened spaces for alternative representations previously marginalised by mainstream cinema (Kasbekar, 2006). OTT platforms, by prioritising narrative substance over mass-market appeal, enable such films to achieve cultural relevance and critical recognition without conforming to commercial formulas.

Comparative Analysis and Narrative Transformation

Across these three case studies, a common pattern emerges: OTT platforms facilitate narrative transformation by enabling experimentation with form, representation, and character construction. Whether through formal innovations in subtitling, morally ambiguous protagonists, or socially grounded gender narratives, these films demonstrate a departure from linear, formula-driven storytelling. The comparative analysis underscores that OTT platforms function as narrative infrastructures that recalibrate storytelling priorities within Popular Hindi Cinema. Moreover, these platforms have redefined audience engagement by catering to viewers seeking complexity, realism, and thematic depth. As a result, success is increasingly measured not solely by box-office returns but by cultural resonance and critical discourse.

Conclusion

The rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has fundamentally reshaped narrative practices in mainstream Hindi cinema by transforming the conditions of production, representation, and audience engagement. As this study demonstrates, digital platforms such as Netflix operate not merely as alternative modes of distribution but as narrative enablers that actively influence cinematic form and storytelling priorities. Freed from the constraints of theatrical exhibition, box-office imperatives, and conventional censorship frameworks, filmmakers are increasingly able to experiment with narrative structure, character psychology, and thematic focus in ways that were previously difficult to sustain within mainstream cinematic models.

Through a qualitative analysis of Amar Singh Chamkila, Laapataa Ladies, and Deva, this paper has shown how OTT platforms facilitate departures from the formulaic narratives traditionally associated with popular Hindi Cinema. These films exemplify a marked shift toward narrative depth, cultural specificity, and representational freedom. Whether through formal experimentation and linguistic hybridity, the portrayal of morally ambiguous protagonists, or the foregrounding of gendered experiences and social realism, these case studies illustrate how digital platforms create space for storytelling that resists simplification and moral absolutism. In doing so, they reflect broader transfor-

-mations in audience expectations and viewing practices shaped by digital consumption.

The narrative transformations identified in this study align with wider theoretical perspectives on digital media, which emphasise the role of technological environments in shaping narrative meaning, aesthetic form, and modes of engagement. OTT platforms, as digitally mediated spaces, enable variability, narrative extension, and sustained character development, thereby encouraging filmmakers to move beyond self-contained storytelling toward more layered and reflective narrative structures. This shift underscores the importance of considering platforms not as neutral intermediaries but as active forces in the production of cultural texts.

The findings further suggest that success in the digital era is increasingly defined by cultural resonance, critical engagement, and narrative sophistication rather than by commercial spectacle alone. OTT platforms have thus emerged as critical spaces for cinematic innovation, enabling Mainstream Hindi cinema to engage more meaningfully with contemporary social realities, regional identities, and evolving audience sensibilities. By accommodating risk, experimentation, and representational diversity, these platforms are contributing to a redefinition of creative and cultural value within the Indian film industry.

As digital storytelling continues to expand across platforms and formats, future research may explore how these narrative shifts shape long-term cultural memory, influence transmedia storytelling practices, and affect the global circulation and reception of Indian cinema. Such inquiries would further illuminate the enduring impact of OTT platforms on narrative form, creative labour, and the cultural imagination, positioning digital media as a central force in the ongoing evolution of Popular Hindi Cinema.

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