

A Study on the Behavioural Traits of Antagonists and Protagonists in Psycho-thriller

Web Series

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Abstract

Happiness is a psychological state and subjective in nature. Psychological thrillers in various media forms including the web series have represented both hedonic happiness and eudemonic happiness with a focus on the psychology of the principle characters. What brings happiness to one might become a source of sadness and horror for another. Most psycho thriller web series try to explore this variation through the point of view of the main leads - the antagonist and the protagonist of the show - the life they lead, the things that provide a source of happiness and satisfaction towards them, their social surroundings, their relationships, etc. The feeling of happiness can come from different sources in different forms for different characters. For the protagonists, happiness might be associated with some fond memories whereas for the antagonists, the source of happiness can be the thrill of killing or hunting of their prey without getting caught. While most of the thriller web series suggests that psychopath killers lack empathy and thus, they do not feel the pain of one's loss, these web series also showcase a commonality among the protagonists -those chasing the antagonists- as not being able to carry on a happy life while trying to balance between their personal and professional responsibilities. This paper explores as to how the concept of happiness are represented in the selected psycho-thriller web series by adopting the psycho-analytical approach of Sigmund Freud in exploring the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious actions of both the antagonists and protagonists while a qualitative research approach was adopted for analysing the interaction between the main leads - the protagonist and antagonist and people around them, besides the intrapersonal communication that goes on within the characters themselves.

Keywords: Antagonist, Behavioural traits, Psycho-thrillers, Protagonist, Web Series.

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Introduction

A movie like a psycho-thriller is born of three established genres namely, psychological thriller, horror picture, and science-fiction films. The defining quality of a psycho-thriller is that the film must depict a psychological theme which is referred to as “Psychological Fiction” as the central aspect of the characters or the plot but it must be primarily psychological in focus. Every film has a psychological component to it which are generally the broadly construed psychological elements such as neurotic (internal) conflict, identity (character) development, and emotional (dramatic) motivation, as they are the necessary ingredients of every story and script. Psychological thrillers series are those which feature unseen dangers, untrustworthy characters, and unsettling suspense. The best psychological thriller shows incorporate elements of suspense, drama, and intrigue to keep its characters along with the viewers guessing and keeping them on edge.

The lockdown marked by the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new normal to the people including a new way to interact, communicate and choose new innovative modes of entertainment. Almost all brands re-equipped themselves with digital changes by upgrading their features to the remotely accessible systems, and better customer services. The OTT industry with its prominent service provider brands like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Voot etc. Continues to make headlines every day by churning new attention-worthy content. Web series have penetrated the lives of millions in the world as well as Indian audiences during this pandemic with the advent of various OTT platforms. These streaming services have grabbed eyeballs with a bouquet of offerings across genres. Crime thrillers are one such genre that has kept the Indian audiences on the edge of their seats, spawning the rollout of second seasons for some and plans in the pipeline for others. Most entertainments during the lockdown were more of watching videos, browsing through social media websites, and binge-watching series on the online platform. While there was no limit to the type of content churning out that gathered the most views and attention from the audience, certain genres were preferred and had the potential to quickly escalate on the running trends.

The crime/thriller genre has been entertaining audiences for ages, as crime/thrillers dwell on the mental make-up of the characters before committing the crime or what psychological trauma/incident leads them to commit such crimes. This study is based on a few web or television series that have attempted to venture into the less explored psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud, regarding the segregation of the human psyche into the ‘Id’, the ‘Ego’ and the ‘Superego’. This research study is mainly focused on exploring what goes on

within the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious minds of the characters in a crime thriller web series, especially the leaders of the story and how it impacts the storyline and the audience all together. The paper also tries to dwell deeply into exploring the behavioural traits of the protagonist/antagonist and how the term “Happiness” is represented in their lives.

Objectives

1. To study in detail as to how Happiness is represented in the selected Psycho-Thriller web series.
2. To identify the different behavioural traits of both Protagonist and Antagonist.
3. To study what constitute the happiness factor in the lives of both the Protagonist and Antagonist.

Hypothesis

It can be hypothesized that while creating a complex and intriguing character in a psychological thriller web series, most writers tend to draw some similarities in behavioural traits of the Antagonist and Protagonist of their stories.

Methodology

Psychoanalysis was developed in the late nineteenth century both as a form of therapy and a theory, based on the premise that the root of all psychological issues is from unconscious conflicts that go inside the mind, psychoanalysis suggests that these symptoms can be reduced by bringing those conflicts into the conscious awareness of the person. It is believed that every individual is uniquely the sum of every experience they have ever had in their entire life. The experience gained from certain events has shaped how they make decisions and display specific behavioural traits.

According to the behavioural personality theory, it is believed that personality is the outcome of a person’s interactions with their surroundings. This behavioural perspective or behaviourism helps in connecting those incidents and behaviour that predict how the personality of a person was being shaped. The behavioural traits of a person, their socio-cognitive, psychoanalytic, and humanistic lead to theories that explain different personalities that an individual possesses. Most behavioural theories suggest that a person’s personality emanates from the interaction that individual has with the environment. Though some personality attributes can be learnt that can help to induce personality attributes that encourage individual career management through career self-management interventions. Many behaviourists study various measurable and observable behaviours of people to explain the

nature of an individual's personality for advancing their expositions. Though a few behavioural theorists also rejected various theories that suggest that personality of an individual is a function of their feelings and thoughts which forms part of their conscious and unconscious mind. The trait theorists assert that the personality of an individual mostly comprises of various broad traits, referring to characteristics, which are stable within an individual, as it guides the course of actions of different people. This kind of trait can also help in fostering or discouraging in an individual's career management behaviours.

Area of Study

The area of the study is confined within two psycho-thriller web series on major OTT platforms like Disney Plus Hotstar, and Voot app. These two series have serial killing plots with the question of can one person be exactly the way they look from the outside or does the conscious actions of a person can be very much different from their subconscious and/or unconscious instincts. Each story tries to explore the lives of the Protagonist and the Antagonist and what drives them providing happiness and satisfaction in the true sense.

- 1. Rudra (Disney plus Hotstar):** The series is set in the Special Crime Unit of the Mumbai Police. The show is a procedural psychological crime thriller which revolves around DCP Rudraveer Singh, who is under the system's radar despite being one of its best minds at work. The show mostly focuses on the tactics used by Rudra to catch criminals and the cat and mouse chase between the cops and the psycho killers. Rudra is not a cop to play by the rules but one to lure the criminals into their own darkness in order to catch them in the act.
- 2. Asur (Voot):** It is a thriller web series that inclines dominantly towards the mythological history of the streets of Banaras and how it gets connection with a modern-day criminal named Asur. The plot involves Nikhil Nair, a forensic-expert-turned-teacher, who returns to his roots in the CBI getting into the investigation of a mysterious and suspense-filled chase against the serial killer 'Asur'. Nikhil Nair along with his mentor Dhananjay Rajpoot faces all events in the web series to unravel the true identity of the killer, who challenges them in every way possible.

Data Analysis

Rudra (Disney plus Hotstar): The series has Officer Rudraveer Singh as the Protagonist, played by Ajay Devgun, and several Antagonists, consisting of a new antagonist in each different case solved by Rudra.

Behavioural Trait of Protagonist

The behavioural trait of Rudra is being questioned from the start of the series as his drive to catch the criminal pushes him to see them suffer like how they made their victim suffer. His involvement in each case is so deep that it starts to affect his personal life. From anger management issues to family issues, Rudra is always surrounded by gloomy clouds of angst, jealousy, and a broken marriage.

Behavioural Trait of Antagonist

As the series deals with a new case in each episode, there are six antagonists all total, yet Aliyah Choksi is shown as the prominent antagonist of the series, who is obsessed with Rudra and can go to any extent to gain his attention. Aliyah is a genius science prodigy who for the fun of it kills her parents without any remorse. She lacks empathy and treats her prey as her little science project and riling up Rudra becomes her favourite source of entertainment. The other antagonist in each case showcases various psychotic behavioural traits and their source of happiness is mostly hunting their prey and watching them suffer little by little.

Asur (Voot): The series has Nikhil Nair played by Barun Sobti and Dhananjay Rajpoot played by Arshad Warsi as the main Protagonist duo, who together try to solve the cases involving the killer named Asur. The antagonist of the show though not revealed completely by the end of the series, yet the series correlates the past incident of a young boy how is highly implied to be the killer who calls himself as the Asur.

Behavioural Trait of Protagonist

The behavioural trait of Nikhil in the series is that of a person who has a perfect life, a good job, his family consisting of his wife and his daughter, yet he lives a restless life. He is shown to have left his job as a crime investigating officer to teach criminal psychology in order to provide a stable life for his wife and kid. The urge to solve crime makes him edgy and he is pulled into the Asur case like a moth drawn towards the flame. Nikhil Nair is a righteous man who wants to be justified while solving crimes and his righteousness leads him to scarifies his daughter because he was not ready to kill some innocent people to prove to the killer that in times of need even a good human being can turn evil. His moral compass as a criminal investigator made him break the last tread that was holding his married life together.

Dhananjay Rajpoot on the other hand is so involved in solving one case after another that his married life goes through a rough phase leading him and his wife living their life separately. Dhananjay does not even realise that his wife was missing and was being murdered in her own restaurant by the Asur, until the Asur himself discloses it to him that he had killed his wife to challenge/mock him of not recognizing his wife's dead body when all he loves is solving cases.

Dhananjay is someone who takes it upon himself to see that every criminal stay behind bar, even if he has to manipulate the evidence to catch the suspect. His hunger for justice at any cost leads to the falling out between him and Nikhil Nair.

Behavioural Trait of Antagonist

The Antagonist of this series calls himself as Asur and there are specific reasons why he believes himself to be an Asur in the Kaliyuga⁴. Though who the real Asur is, was yet to be discovered by the end of the series, still it is shown in flashbacks how the father⁵ of a young boy wanted him to be born on a certain day believing it to be an auspicious day. Unfortunately, he gets born a day ahead which was marked to be an ominous day and to his bad luck, his mother dies during childbirth, making his father to believe that he is an Asur. From the day he was born till his youth, he never received his father's appreciation and was always called as an Asur, leading him to believe that he truly was the Devil reincarnated. The killer is objected to believe from his childhood that he was the devil and being a priest's son, he learned from the mythology that in every age when evil comes down on earth, a saviour of mankind⁶ is born to put an end to that evil. Being always objected to hatred and being treated as the devil himself, forces the boy to believe that he really is the devil, and his true satisfaction comes from testing the good in people, to see if they are really a saviour of mankind who can put an end to his fury.

Findings and Conclusion

Going through the above-mentioned series and observing the behavioural traits of both antagonist and protagonist of those series it can be concluded that both derive a sense of happiness from the rush of chasing their targets. While the antagonist gets a high of adrenal rush and excitement from killing and torturing their prey, for the protagonist solving each new case and putting criminals behind bars is like their regular fix to their need for some adventure and thrill in their monotonous life. In most of these psycho thrillers' web series the protagonist is one who gets a high level of satisfaction from solving the case and being able to read the mind of the antagonist, it's like a drug, an obsession to them. Another common denominative in these psycho thrillers among the protagonists is the lack of stable family life, i.e., starting

⁴ According Hindu Mythology, Kaliyuga is "the age of Kali (Demon)" or "the age of darkness", which is the last of the four yugas.

⁵ A priest, who was obsessed with astrology and did rituals of the last rites of the departed soul in the Ghats of Banaras.

⁶ A reincarnation of God, like Lord Krishna is the eighth avatar of Vishnu, the Supreme Lord.

from Rudra, the protagonist Rudraveer Singh had a broken marriage and had borderline anger management issues. Similarly, Nikhil Nair from Asur had a dysfunctional family life leading him to sacrifice his only daughter to catch the main culprit along with Dhananjay Rajpoot, who also had a rocky married life and later in the show gets to know that one of the murder victims that he was investigating was his own wife. Dhananjay was so invested in solving the Jane Doe⁷ case and was hell bent in catching the Asur that he did not even realise that his wife was missing.

Another observation made while watching these psycho-thriller web series is that most psycho killers lack the sense of empathy and thus they can not relate to the feeling of remorse at the loss of their kith and kins. Both Aliyah Choksi in Rudra and the young boy in Asur kills their own family members yet they do not feel any kind of sadness or guilt in doing so. Yet it is shown that both the main Antagonists of Rudra and Asur derived a huge level of satisfaction making the Protagonist's life miserable. While Aliyah Choksi went after Rudra's wife, the one person he loved dearly, to drive him to edge and lose his cool. Similarly, the Asur killed Dhananjay Rajpoot's wife to mock him of being a high-level crime investigating officer who could not recognise his wife's dead body and also making Nikhil Nair choose between saving his own daughter or saving a few innocent people, to prove his point that in Kaliyuga everyone is evil. It is observed that the antagonists have a weird way of showcasing happiness/excitement by inflicting harm on others, especially the protagonist's family. Breaking down the psyche⁸ of the other antagonists in both shows, it is brought into view that most of these characters have their own fear/doubts that they like to release by hurting someone weaker than them. Their subconscious mind urges them to prove themselves worthy and seeing others in pain provides them that satisfaction and the euphoric feeling of it forces them into the path of killing one person after another. Lastly, it can be concluded that happiness has a very different meaning when it comes to both the Antagonist and the Protagonist of the Psycho-thriller web series. Where the things that bring happiness and joy to the antagonist is by inflicting pain to others and seeing them suffer, while the protagonist find joy and happiness in providing justice to people and protecting the innocent.

⁷ John doe or Jane doe are multiple-use placeholder names that are used when the true name of a person is unknown or is being intentionally concealed.

⁸ The mental or psychological structure of a person, especially as a motive force.

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