



Masculinity and Misogyny in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Case Study of *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of gender-based violence and feminism in contemporary Indian Bollywood cinema by analyzing Sandeep Reddy Vanga's films *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023). Despite the commercial success of both films, it has sparked significant debate regarding their representation of violence gender dynamics, and Masculinity. In *Kabir Singh*, the toxic male gaze is so evident, with a protagonist who applauds an abuser of women as his best friend where he exhibits all violent behaviors towards women due to over passionate and personal insanity. The narrative and reception of this film illustrate how society views gender- based violence, romanticizing and excusing the protagonist's actions as they stem from love and passion. In *Animal* a different genre continues in a similar layer, exploring themes of masculinity and filthy violence through its lead character, whose moral grey area (ambiguity) and violent tendencies are framed within a societal as well as familial context. By examining these films through a feminist lens, the paper critiques their portrayal of power relations and Gender-based violence, questioning the implications for audiences and societal attitudes. It argues that while Vanga's films reflect certain societal norms and tensions, they also reinforce problematic stereotypes about masculinity and the normalization of violence. In addressing these issues, this study focuses on the importance of rethinking how popular culture is consumed as a tool to reconstruct and combat gender-based violence through more complex and diverse images of women in film.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender-Based Violence, Bollywood Cinema, Sandeep Reddy Vanga *Kabir Singh*, *Animal*, Cultural Representation.

Introduction

Kabir Singh (2019) was a box-office hurricane from the day it was released and polarised the audience like no other, mostly attributed to its daring attempt at exploring complex dynamics with an immoral protagonist (Pandey, M,2024)¹. The show is based on the story of Kabir, a less-than-perfect surgeon who goes down the path of self-destruction after his love life takes an unexpected turn. The most disturbing part about Kabir is that his custom of violence, especially brutal and almost war-like behavior with Preeti, has come to be seen as some form of passion or love. The entire narrative, in fact, often describes his behaviors as inevitable due to his overwhelming emotional highs.

The glorification of Kabir falls in line with India's broader cultural ethos that often prizes aggression and dominance as the attributes of a "real man." ²The last part of the film allows Kabir to not just come full circle with his actions but also use love as a weapon or an excuse for violence.

¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/htcity/cinema/from-animal-to-kabir-singh-on-couples-day-let-s-revisit-toxic-onscreen-couples-who-set-goals-of-what-not-to-do-101723918642120.html>

² Taken the reference from the web article A Psychological Review of Kabir Singh,

<https://www.gipshospital.com/psychological-review-of-kabir-singh#gsc.tab=0>

The narrative stresses this sort of conduct as an act of devotion, often more than an average person could handle. Viewers are filled with nervous energy because of the awful display of moral values in the characterization of the central figure of the film, Kabir Singh, and the conduct enhanced within Indian society that tolerates such tendencies. The film especially glorifies those aspects of masculinity-bound behaviors that are in line with the prevailing culture and even goes ahead and supports the existing notion that men should control women as a way of showing love.

Objectives:

1. To discuss the representation of masculinity and violence in Kabir Singh and Animal.
2. Explore the effect these movies have on society in its views towards gender roles.

Methodology

This study makes use of qualitative film content analysis to analyze key scenes, dialogue, and character development in Kabir Singh and Animal with the hegemonic masculinity and symbolic violence frameworks provided by feminist and sociological perspectives. Reception by the audience is analyzed through reviews and social media discourse to understand perceptions among the wider public. Secondary sources, which would include academic literature, create contextual depth about how Indian cinema informs and reflects norms of gender and attitudes in society.

The film Animal shows the turbulent life of a man named Bhaskar, and his controversies related to power, control, and violence. It explores how these pressures shape the relationships & the identity and of a man like Bhaskar against a backdrop of familial and societal expectations. Through the story "Animal," dealing with his turbulence of emotions and the impact that his destructive behavior has had, there is an element of rough and intense portrayal of some of the darker aspects of male behavior, going against the traditional value system related to love and loyalty, especially considering the constantly changing society they live in. It provides an insight into the issues and challenges that are connected to masculinity and gender (Meng,2018).

The main narrative of 'Animal' revolves around a male lead character battling the issues of power, control, and violence. Unlike Kabir Singh where the violence is generated primarily against women in a love story, Animal explores more deeply the issues of violence as a very essence of masculinity looking at factors such as the role of the family, society, and emotions. This character, played by Ranbir Kapoor, not only possesses tendencies of violence but also embodies the sociological aspects like the concepts of izzat (Honour) and 'being a man' in society, which holds a fear of aggression towards the female gender.³

The outbursts by the protagonist are not arbitrary; he is very much connected with the patriarchal belief in the notion that women have to be 'strong' and untiring if she has to get respect back. Here, violence became the means of displaying masculinity to those around him(Hooks, Bell,2022).⁴ In the film, this hyper-masculinity is seen as not simply a personality trait but a social requirement passed on through generations and encouraged by culture.

³ This portrayal by Devansh Sharma in his article in online HINDUSTAN times newspaper critiques the harmful cycle of violence within familial relationships,

blurring the line between affection and aggression.

⁴ Understanding Patriarchy, Hooks, Bell 2022 From Mainstream Weekly which is an online portal.

The sociologist R.W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity"⁵ proves particularly useful in the explanation of animals. Hegemonic masculinity is the most ideal characteristic of manhood; it sustains the existence of manners such as toughness, suppression of emotions, and violence as the proper tool to gain control. He is the main character in *Animal*, who shows all those qualities, as he begins by trying to tame the internal conflict between being vulnerable and aggressive⁶.

The Crisis of Masculinity

It also has a sociological theme titled "**crisis of masculinity**." This concerns the growing depression among men as the aftermath of the shattering of modern society's obstacles in handling participation and accommodation by women at the workplace, the configurations of the family, and the erosion of the traditional male role (Mogel, 2013).⁷ It shakes the predominant, patriarchal image of a man, creating the feeling of displacement in males who understand that such dominance and representation are somehow being attacked. In the case of *Animal*, he continues to be tortured by the battle between old concepts of masculinity—aggression, control, and domination—and the emotional sensitivity of modern life. The violent nature of his actions, although damaging, is a means to assist him in dealing with the power dynamics that are being rearranged in his family and his society. He is part of an institution where he is meant to uphold the masculine-matriarchate dynamic⁸, which threatens his very personal connections or even his moral compass. It is very much like the failure of the greater society, where men are forced to redefine what remains of masculinity in a socially constructed sphere that does not allow for old-fashioned gender boundaries.

⁵ Hegemonic masculinity is the socially sanctioned manner of being male that represents and supports relations of domination. Hegemonic masculinity is associated with attributes such as strong physicality, emotional rigidity, and the exercise of power while detesting vulnerability or those "feminine" traits; this ideal is not acquired by most men, but rather defines a standard to which most men at least pay lip service and by which actual ideals of masculinity are understood.

⁶ Connell, R.W. 2005-Second edition

⁷ The "crisis of masculinity" is the term Mogel (2013) uses to refer to men's struggles to adapt into society and its constantly changing patterns, such as women's increasing participation in the workforce and in families, interfering with their domination. This can be seen in *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* because both male characters experience issues of identity and control and problems showing emotions, which are some issues tied to modern manhood.

The concept of "symbolic violence" from Pierre Bourdieu can also be applied to *Animal* to understand how the film prescribes gender power relations through attitudes of extreme masculinity. According to Bourdieu⁹, symbolic violence refers to the ways through which power subtly and unremarkably is accorded to maintain inequality, usually at the cultural and social levels. The violent actions of the protagonist in *Animal* are not only physical but also symbolic—they cement societal belief that men must be in control and women must be submissive. Despite not always targeting a female, violence in the film, nonetheless, propagates a patriarchal worldview wherein men must dominate through force, both in the family and society at large, (Safitri, Firdaus, Sejitowati, 2023). There are family dynamics here where symbolic violence is reinforced. The protagonist's acts are said to be those of necessity to protect family honor and discharge his position as head of the family. This sets the patriarchal notion of how men are supposed to be natural protectors and people who make decisions, whereas women are dependents who need protection. This attitude perpetuates the idea that violence, in the hands of the male autocrat, is justifiable in such a way, thereby entrenching gender inequality in both public and personal life.

⁸ Masculine matriarchate represents the connecting link between male chauvinism and female-based dominance or control within a social or familial order. In the movie *Animal*, the dynamic of this masculine matriarchate plays out through the connection between the male protagonist and his mother. While the former portrays a type of hyper-masculinity—aggressive, strong, and emotionally effusive—the latter becomes a portrayal of someone with moral authority and emotional control, not often as expected in male-based influence or authority, but rather matriarchal influence. His desire to be a masculine identity and his very attachment to motherliness bring inside conflict towards dominance and nurturing, a theme the film endorses in this tale. It molds his responses, relationships, and emotional turbulence as a reflection of the effects of these gendered roles within family contexts.

⁹ The "symbolic violence" of Pierre Bourdieu is the explanation for how cultural practices insidiously continue existing power relations. In this sense, this is exemplified in extreme forms of masculinity in *Animal* and *Kabir Singh* as ways to reconstruct traditional gender hierarchies through the use of emotional and corporal dominance.

The depiction of masculinity in these films especially in *Animal* reflects a more significant issue that relates to how media shapes the conceptions of cultural norms. Cinema reflects society's attitude toward gender, power, and identity but also can form perceptions that can influence the audiences how they conceptualize and embrace gender roles. In *Animal*, the film almost argues that hyper-masculinity is not only acceptable but necessary to survive in a world where the power of men is constantly being challenged (Gurkan, & Serttas, 2022). This kind of cultural representation troubles a sociologist. Adoration of these images of extremely macho, violent characters serves to strengthen unhealthy stereotypes regarding masculinity as understood in terms of power and control. In the repeated exposure of viewers to stories that link masculinity with aggression, those behaviors become normalized and encourage less healthy expressions of masculinity.

It is one reason behind the real-world implication of perpetuating toxic masculinity and, by extension, gender-based violence in society. The film *Animal* is a critical lens through which to examine the rise of hyper-masculinity in modern Indian cinema and society. The film preserves outdated conceptions of gender and puts out into the public unease about changing gender roles by putting up violence as one of the tenants of being a man. The subject, an emblem of the crisis that many of today's men face, whether in terms of masculinity or virility loss, struggles through the hegemonies of patriarchal society and the emotional high stakes of living in today's world.

Media Masculinity & Gender Dynamics

India, as part of this larger context, needs to look into its cinematic representations of masculinities. The media plays a major role in constituting cultural consciousness; therefore, there is an immediate need for films depicting diverse and slightly complex expressions of masculinity beyond violence and dominance as the only exchangeable commodity for glorifying manhood¹⁰. In this manner, cinema can contribute to cultural change in more evenly balanced and progressive gender relations by violating patriarchal frameworks that nourish equal portions of hyper-masculinity and gender-based violence.

A feminist analysis of the politics of gender demonstrates disturbing portrayals regarding women's roles and the normalization of male characters in both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*. Widely, the women are portrayed as objects of desire, emotional supporters, or symbols by which male protagonists' struggles are communicated rather than full-fledged characters with agency, aspirations, or even independence. It is here that the treatment of female characters unfolds a broad pattern in Indian cinema. The stories around females are often precluded to suit male-centered storylines. Here the heroine of *Kabir Singh* is finalised as nothing but a common passive, objectified female character as her whole role is about only emotional support provided to the protagonist and his character development, and sadly, her identity is nowhere to be found. Preeti speaks rarely for herself and conveys her wishes; instead, she depicts an obedient, submissive, and compliant form of femininity, framed in the context of a male

¹⁰ Exerpts is taking from the article written by Ajay Deb Verma in India times online, it gives a critical analysis of the objectification and sexualization of women in Indian cinema, focusing especially on aspects that continue to perpetuate these practices gendered stereotypes.

perspective. Acceptance of Kabir's abusive behavior both body and word dramatized to be unconditional love.¹¹

Animal, despite playing up the psychological complexity of the male protagonist, does not differ from old stereotypes that have kept debating traditional gender roles alive long after they have been thought through and dissolved in better times. The women in his life have essentially been used as catalysts to propel him on his emotional journey and, thus, not taken as full-fledged individuals with their stories, problems, and resolutions. The sidelining of women in both films indicates some deep-seated patriarchal values that are rampant in Indian society, where the female is often overshadowed and controlled by or viewed through the lens of male experiences.

Such films as Kabir Singh and Animal do very little to challenge traditional power structures and instead subtly or overtly reinforce them. It is scary, especially when it looks at the broader cultural implications of Bollywood cinema on attitudes toward gender. This is particularly important because Indian cinema, mainly the mainstream Bollywood film industry, profoundly shapes public opinion, and perceptions of gender roles on screen will leave an indelible stamp on society's understanding of masculinity and femininity and the interrelations of these two.

Submissive, obedient—an idealized model of femininity whose form is a perspective formed by the male. That she would stay with Kabir when he spoke to her that way and hit her was meant to be proof of their love.¹²

¹¹ <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/07/09/man-kabir-singh-damaging/-IN> This article online, Sagar Gilani stressed in *I Am A Man And This Is How 'Kabir Singh' Is Damaging To Me*, such films can subconsciously push young men toward normalizing harmful actions simply because they are glamorized by the main character or so called protagonist.

Toxic Masculinity and Cultural Reproduction

Portraying violence as a natural, even romantic cliché of masculinity has serious social consequences.

¹³As more films depict violent behavior as somehow legitimate anyway inescapable components of male passion, further hardening damaging gender norms legitimized as part of the male this kind of narrative could be especially damaging in a country where violence on grounds of gender is such a concern. India failed to normalize domestic violence, sexual assault, and emotional abuse from filmic representation, and movies like Kabir Singh and Animal Risk perpetuate the very problems these movies superficially talk about, by depicting them as masquerading behind the facade of love and manliness. The treatment of the act of violence in a romantic context gives the wrong message to both the masculine and feminine

(Bhardwaj, M., & Ghosh, R.2024) It means that the aggressive impulses men have are acceptable, especially fueled by emotional distress or romantic disappointment. It is a way to endorse the stereotypical masculine trend known as toxic masculinity. For women, it implies that with love comes the expectation that they will tolerate that kind of abuse, which would predispose them to mere acceptance rather than confrontation or escape. This can perpetuate and reinforce harmful stereotypes around the naturally dominant male and inherently submissive female, thus locking systems of patriarchy into being.¹⁴

¹² Amita Motwani, IDS Alumni Network-Blog titled "Gender and Sexuality in Recent Bollywood Films"

¹³ Malonda ,2022

On a more macro level, it directly influences public discourse on issues of masculinity and gender-based violence. As audiences consume these narratives, they may subconsciously come to believe that male aggression forms an inevitable component of romantic relationships, with dangerous enough implications for actual real-world dynamics of gender. The far-reaching issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in the country among Indians stem from strong cultural products that normalize such behaviors. As such, Kabir Singh and Animal do not represent films alone but cultural products that reflect and reproduce social attitudes toward gender, power, and violence.

Most importantly, these films can't exist in a vacuum. They reflect deeper social tensions about gender roles and the evolving concept of masculinity in India in general. The more women go out to work, challenge patriarchal roles, and become independent, the more some men fear the erosion of traditional masculine power. Movies like Kabir Singh and Animal feed into these fears and are wishful for a culture of more distinct and defined masculinities predicated upon dominance control and emotions. To this extent, the films of Sandeep Reddy Vanga may be seen as being symptomatic of a broader cultural gesture in which hyper-masculinity is simultaneously the site of either celebration or critique.

¹⁴ See OHCHR, 2023. Gender stereotyping: OHCHR and women's human rights and gender equality. Such representations prove to be particularly destructive in a country like India, where gender-based violence is still prevalent; and acceptance of violence in a romantic relationship will normalize abuse and limit the scope for women's responses.

On one hand, the box office performance of movies shows clearly that a large audience remains who relates to or is drawn to such representation of masculinity. At the same time, how heated the debates about these movies are echo the increasing awareness of how damaging such representations are to young, liberal consumers, most of whom belong to modern society. This is particularly alarming when society is dealing with gender-based violence and is trying to take women's rights along with gender equality in center stage, as it is largely opposed. Kabir Singh, Animal are not only symptomatic but also cause business as usual in a way that makes old- fashioned gender norms continue to chase gender equality. Therefore, from a feminist perspective, it has become imperative to question popular culture, in particular mainstream cinema, and how this kind of cinema has shaped and sustenance in society's attitudes toward gender-based violence by constantly showing hyper-masculinity.

Conclusion

Analyzing Kabir Singh and Animal, it can be noted that the film adaptation of hyper- masculinity by director Sandeep Reddy Vanga is one depicting common stereotypes in society regarding gender relations and violence. Starred for bold stories, these films are harmful to transmit certain negative stereotypes. They normalize toxic masculinity, teaching the audience about their roles in relationships. The films erase female agency and violence as romance; they enforce patriarchal power stories that repel women's independence. Such representations have a huge impact on cultural texts in India as it would be an aspirant nation for further gender equality and may even reverse its progress. Hence these hegemonic discourses challenge the notion, which is a basis to generate more balanced gender relations. Therefore, this critical study of such films remains crucial to comprehend how such movies transform societal mindset and promote women's empowerment in India.

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