

Feminist Masculinity and Challenging Traditional Power Dynamics: A Study of Made in Heaven, Paatal Lok and Aspirants

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Abstract:

The study delves into understanding how masculinity and power is represented in new media, especially in Hindi OTT serials. It looks at whether the traditional narratives are reinforced, maintained, or challenged. Feminist masculinity is the central theme that brings to light the manhood that values emotional expression, vulnerability, empathy, and a commitment to gender equity. Through feminist theory and media studies, the study highlights how OTT platforms are not just critiquing the dominant forms of masculinity but are providing an alternative model that aligns with feminist principles. Masculinity is viewed through a different lens, where it is not treated as a fixed identity. But rather an identity that is fluid, socially constructed, and evolves in response to broader cultural and ideological shifts.

Keywords: Masculinity, Feminist Masculinity, OTT Platforms, Representation, Power Dynamics, Gender Equity, Hindi OTT

Introduction:

Historically, masculinity has reinforced traditional gender norms by linking it to attributes such as dominance, control, aggression and suppression of emotional expression. These attributes form the basis of Hegemonic masculinity, a concept by R.W Connell. It operates on systematically marginalizing any alternate narratives of masculinity that do not conform to the traditional model of masculinity/ male dominance in society.

On the other hand, Feminist Masculinity is a contrasting framework that challenges the conventional paradigms of male behavior. It focuses on compassion, cooperation, vulnerability, and establishes an equitable relationship between the genders. Post the advent of new media platforms, there has been an emergence of diverse and new representations of masculinity that often reflect the changing societal norms.

Content creators today have greater creative freedom on OTT platforms, which enables them to create new and nuanced male characters. These characters are represented in a way that they break away from the traditional and stereotypical molds of masculinity.

The research tries to understand how OTT platforms are subverting the notion of toxic masculinity and providing an alternate narrative that is aimed at achieving gender equality and initiating cultural transformation within society.

The concept of masculinity emerged as a term in the late 19th and early 20th century within the psychological and sociological fields. At the time, it was associated with biological essentialism, which states that there are specific traits that are linked to men like physical strength, aggressive behavior, and leadership capabilities.

In the 1970s, scholars like Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel questioned the idea of masculinity. Stating that the idea of masculinity is not fixed or natural. It is something that is shaped by society and changes over time, and not something that people are born with. The representation of masculinity has evolved and been influenced through various aspects such as socio-political transformations, industrialization, colonialism and the emergence of the feminist movement. These transformations have collectively influenced the discourse surrounding gender.

Earlier, traditional media like print and film celebrated hyper masculinity by showing men in characters such as warriors, protectors, and breadwinners, reinforcing traditional gender norms. In the late 20th century, we noticed a shift in the global and Indian landscape where men were represented in characters that were emotionally complex and reflected deeply on their decisions. Media liberalization and the boom of digital platforms transformed the way content is consumed. While traditional TV continued to rely on stereotypical portrayals, new media platforms like OTT disrupted the narratives. In a way, challenging the long-standing trend and providing alternate portrayals. It, in a way, critiqued the notion of toxic masculinity and prevailing dominant narratives.

Review of Literature:

A notable shift can be observed in storytelling after the popularity of Over-The-Top (OTT) in India. OTT platforms offer more diverse and progressive narratives, unlike traditional platforms that uphold the stereotypical portrayals of male dominance and emotional suppression. This literature review explores how OTT platforms challenge hegemonic masculinity and present an empathetic model of manhood, promoting feminist masculinity. It carefully studies how the platform is reshaping the long-standing gender power dynamics and cultural understanding of masculinity.

The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* serves as a foundational framework for understanding the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that was introduced by Connell (1995). This model promotes the idea of female subordination and upholds the power hierarchies. Kimmel (2006) argues that such masculinity is often socially constructed through competition and rejects femininity. This kind of idea could be harmful to society.

The idea proposed by Hooks (2004) about *feminist masculinity* advocates that the model of manhood is rooted in emotional openness, mutual respect, and empathy. She says that this paves the way to gender justice and unlearns the patriarchal norms. Many scholars have observed the evolving representation of masculinity in the new media spaces. Sangra (2021) critiques men being shown in linear and reductive ways, as it persists in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in media.

However, she observes a shift in representation through OTT content, where the characters are shown in more complex portrayals and challenging traditional norms. She further states that OTT content has become instrumental in reshaping the societal understanding of manhood. In her discourse analysis of *Little Things*, *Made in Heaven*, and *Yeh Meri Family*, three Hindi web series, she finds that OTT platforms are blurring the lines of one-dimensional masculinity, promoting more relatable male identities.

As per Banaji and Mehta's (2018) economic analysis of the Indian OTT platforms, they observed that there is scope for production houses to explore themes that break the patriarchal ideologies. One of the reasons could be the democratized nature of new media. In the study by Joshi (2021) and Sharma (2022), they observed that there is a dual trend in Hindi web series. On one hand, some of the series perpetuate the stereotypes around masculinity while the others present progressive portrayals of men expressing emotional, socially aware, and traits of feminist masculinity.

However, there exist Hindi films like *Animal* (2023) that continue to glorify toxic masculinity. Chakravorty and Bera's (2024) study reveals that through cinematic narratives, the idea of patriarchy is reinforced. This kind of characterization of the male lead celebrates male chauvinistic under the disguise of heroism. They argue that such portrayals normalize the regressive masculinities.

Mehta (2022) highlights what happens behind the scenes in OTT platforms and shows. This draws attention towards progressive content that continues to follow traditional gender biases in the process of making it. She talks about how women and marginalized creators continue to face challenges in telling their stories. Her research shows that though digital platforms have made it easier to create content but that has not enabled them to remove the gender bias in storytelling and work. Biga (2023) analyzed a Turkish series, *Hükümsüz* and *Mezarlık*. This show talks about gender inequality and violence against women. It challenges traditional patriarchal ideas by focusing on other factors of influence, such as government responsibility, gender roles and the issue of femicide.

As part of digital feminism, Mufidah and Alamsyah (2023) analyzed Gita Savitri, a feminist YouTuber's critique of patriarchal norms. Using Qāsim Amīn's feminist framework, they found that content on online platforms provides counter-narratives that question dominant gender ideologies and an alternative vision to gender roles. This aligns with Ritchie and Barker's (2005) study, which explores women in marginalized sexual communities. Where the women who are from the marginalized sexual communities challenge the dominant narratives about gender power dynamics.

The overall literature review recognizes a growing body of scholarship on how digital platforms are becoming the catalysts in reshaping the narratives around masculinity. While there are a few shows that continue to reinforce the traditional gender norms, there are shows that offer more fluid and diverse representation. There is a gradual shift from Connell's *Hegemonic masculinity* to Hooks' *feminist masculinity*, where men are being shown in more nuanced and caring roles.

Methodology:

The researcher uses qualitative content analysis, grounded in feminist media theory and hegemonic masculinity theory. It aims to examine how feminist masculinity is constructed and represented in selected Hindi OTT web series. Feminist media theory helps to understand how the media content is challenging or reinforcing traditional ideologies. On the other hand, feminist masculinity and hegemonic masculinity theories help in identifying ways in which the new ideas of masculinity is being articulated. To select the episodes for analysis, purposive sampling was used.

Made in Heaven, *Paatal Lok*, and *Aspirants* are select Hindi OTT serials for analysis. These series were chosen based on the popularity of these shows. Each of the series provides a complex male character that challenges traditional patriarchy and idea of masculinity. The key episodes were selected based on internal development, interpersonal relationships, and the emotional landscape of male characters. The process involved taking notes and repeated viewing of moments that depicted emotional vulnerability or

resistance to traditional gender norms.

Made in Heaven (Amazon Prime)

- *Season 1, Episode 2 ("Star Struck Lovers")*: This episode explores how Karan struggles emotionally and psychologically to accept his sexuality in a homophobic society.
- *Season 1, Episode 9 ("A Marriage of Convenience")*: The narrative focuses on Karan's journey of confrontation with the societal structures and the rules set by society on gender and sexuality. Highlighting his strength in staying true to who he is.

Paatal Lok (Amazon Prime)

- *Season 1, Episode 3 ("A History of Violence")*: Hathi Ram's experience begins when his tough outer shell breaks making him question his sense of what is right or wrong and his job.
- *Season 1, Episode 5 ("Of Fathers and Sons")*: This episode closes on Hathi Ram's personal life, and we get a closer look at the bond he shared with his son and how he struggles with the traditional idea of being a man and a father.

Aspirants (Amazon Prime)

- *Episode 2 ("Teacher's Day")*: It shows the emotional vulnerabilities faced by the male students while navigating pressure, self-doubt and societal pressure to become successful.
- *Episode 4 ("Plan B Kya Hai?")*: Here, we see the characters deal with the uncertainties of career paths and how men support each other emotionally and move away from the portrayal of a traditional male.
- *Episode 5 ("Final Attempt")*: We see that the failure of a man is not seen as weakness, but rather it is considered as a human experience, allowing for emotional growth.

Analysis and Discussion:

Thematic analysis highlights repeated patterns, such as rejection of emotional suppression, patriarchal values that influence character development, and interpersonal conflicts. These contribute to the emerging discourse of feminist masculinity. It shows male characters embracing emotional intelligence, equity, and self-expression.

The study explores the portrayal of alternative masculinities and challenges traditional power dynamics. It can be observed that there is a clear shift in the representation of masculinity, transforming from rigid, patriarchal portrayals to a more inclusive and feminist model of masculinity. This can be better understood through themes like emotional vulnerability, rational equity, and challenging patriarchal gender norms. In the series *Made in Heaven*, Karan's journey of emotional vulnerability, self-acceptance, and emotional expression challenges the traditional views of masculinity. This kind of representation of masculinity moves away from the dominant figure typically portrayed in Indian mainstream media. The way the character navigates his sexuality and faces societal pressure is shown as a source of strength and authenticity rather than weakness. This makes the character more relatable, multidimensional, as well as offering a complex and nuanced representation of masculinity.

Karan's romantic relationship moves away from the stereotypical portrayal of a dominant male to an emotionally transparent characterization. The study sheds light on the depiction of healthy masculinity, where Karan seeks a relationship based on respect and understanding. He is open and honest in the relationship, making him more relatable and considered a part of healthy masculinity.

The evolution of Hathi Ram's character in *Pataal lok* from hard-nosed cop to more emotionally reflective individual critiques the traditional idea of masculinity. The idea that men are emotionless and detached is challenged by how his character's personal experiences reveal that masculinity involves introspection and questions one's beliefs.

At the beginning of the series, we see that due to changing relationships with his family and personal growth, he becomes emotionally distant by abiding by the traditional roles of masculinity. Eventually, he becomes caring and emotionally open.

Within the preview of UPSC exams in *Aspirants*, the male character goes through emotional struggles, anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of failure. In such a situation, the willingness to share emotions and support one another creates an environment where the character's vulnerability is accepted as strength. This kind of representation makes the message clear that emotional openness and mutual support are the true idea of masculinity.

The researcher observes that there is a shift in male relationships that challenge the traditional media's representation, where the man was always seen as a leader. There are select series that show men in supportive, respectful, and more balanced bonds.

It can be seen that Hindi OTT series challenge the traditional patriarchal ideas about how men should behave. It challenges the traditional idea of a man who has to always be dominant and in control of himself. The male characters portrayed break these traditional norms. In *Made in Heaven*, Karan pushes back against the pressure of fitting into traditional male roles. His journey to self-acceptance and freedom is seen as a strength and not a weakness. Similarly, we see that Hathi Ram in *Paatal Lok*, starts off as a strict and authoritative policeman who eventually learns to question his beliefs and act with empathy. The male characters in *Aspirants* move away from the idea that masculinity is where he is meant to compete and achieve alone. Instead, the male characters support, open up about their emotions and vulnerabilities. Overall, these series are seen questioning the traditional portrayal of man and offer a new, more balanced version of masculinity that is honest, reflective, and emotionally supportive.

Conclusion:

It can be said that OTT platforms are paving the way in transforming the representation of male characters in Indian media. In the select series *Made in Heaven*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Aspirants*, the male characters are shown in an inclusive, nuanced, and feminist representation of masculinity. They challenge the hegemonic masculinity and resist the patriarchal portrayal of gender power dynamics.

As these shows gain popularity, they are promoting an inclusive view on gender dynamics. They promote the new idea of masculinity and show new ways to move away from the old ideas of power and control. Encouraging men to better understand themselves and build more equitable relationships with one another. It is no more about being tough and emotionless, rather it is about focusing on respect and rejecting patriarchal ideologies around gender. This idea help build a healthier conversation and environment around gender.

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