

Fractured Masculinities: Crisis, Vulnerability, and the Disintegration of Male Identity in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of masculinity in crisis in contemporary Indian cinema, arguing that recent films challenge hegemonic constructions of male authority by foregrounding vulnerability, emotional fragmentation, and socio-economic instability. Drawing on R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study analyzes *Kabir Singh* (2019), *Article 15* (2019), and *Gully Boy* (2019). It argues that these films reveal a transition from dominant, assertive masculinity to fractured and conflicted identities shaped by caste, class, and modernity. By situating these films within broader socio-cultural transformations in India, the paper demonstrates that masculinity is no longer represented as stable or authoritative but as a site of negotiation and crisis. The study concludes that contemporary Indian cinema is reconfiguring male subjectivity, exposing the instability of patriarchal norms while opening up possibilities for alternative masculinities.

Keywords: Masculinity in Crisis; Indian Cinema; Hegemonic Masculinity; Gender Performativity; Vulnerability; Identity; Caste; Class

Introduction

The figure of the male protagonist has long occupied a central position in Indian cinema, functioning as a symbolic embodiment of authority, control, and moral order. From the "angry young man" of the 1970s to the hyper-masculine heroes of contemporary commercial cinema, masculinity has traditionally been represented as stable, dominant, and unassailable. However, recent shifts in Indian society—marked by economic liberalization, changing gender roles, and increasing awareness of social inequalities—have profoundly destabilized this cinematic construction of masculinity.

Contemporary Indian films increasingly depict male protagonists who are emotionally vulnerable, morally conflicted, and socially dislocated. This transformation signals what may be described as a "crisis of masculinity," wherein traditional markers of male identity no longer provide coherence or authority. Rather than embodying control and dominance, male characters are now portrayed as fragmented subjects negotiating uncertainty and instability.

This paper examines this transformation through close readings of *Kabir Singh* (2019), *Article 15* (2019), and *Gully Boy* (2019). These films, though diverse in genre and

narrative, collectively reveal a shift from hegemonic masculinity to fractured and contested forms of male identity. By situating these representations within the theoretical frameworks of masculinity studies and gender theory, the paper argues that contemporary Indian cinema is not merely reflecting but actively interrogating the crisis of masculinity in modern India.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Discontents

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as articulated by R. W. Connell, refers to the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that legitimizes male power and subordination of women (Connell 77). This ideal is characterized by attributes such as physical strength, emotional restraint, authority, and heterosexual dominance. In the context of Indian cinema, hegemonic masculinity has historically been embodied by the heroic figure who asserts control over both the narrative and the social world.

However, Connell also emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed but constantly negotiated and contested (Connell 81). The contemporary moment, marked by rapid social change, has exposed the fragility of this ideal. Economic precarity, shifting gender dynamics, and the visibility of marginalized identities have destabilized traditional notions of male authority.

This destabilization is evident in contemporary Indian films, where male protagonists often fail to embody hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they reveal its contradictions and limitations, thereby exposing masculinity as a constructed and precarious identity.

Gender Performativity and the Fragility of Masculinity

The instability of masculinity can be further understood through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate or stable identity but is constituted through repeated performances that create the illusion of coherence (Butler 25). Masculinity, therefore, is not a natural attribute but a set of behaviors that must be continuously enacted and maintained.

This perspective is crucial for analyzing contemporary Indian cinema, where male characters often struggle to sustain the performance of masculinity. Their failures, breakdowns, and contradictions reveal the performative nature of gender, exposing masculinity as inherently unstable.

In films such as *Kabir Singh*, the exaggerated performance of masculinity ultimately collapses, revealing the fragility underlying its apparent strength. Similarly, in *Gully Boy*, masculinity is redefined through alternative performances that challenge dominant norms.

Toxic Masculinity and Emotional Collapse in *Kabir Singh*

Kabir Singh presents one of the most controversial representations of masculinity in recent Indian cinema. The protagonist, Kabir, embodies an exaggerated form of hegemonic masculinity characterized by aggression, entitlement, and emotional repression. His identity is deeply invested in control—over his profession, his relationships, and his environment.

However, this performance of masculinity is fundamentally unstable. When Kabir experiences romantic loss, his inability to process emotional vulnerability leads to self-destructive behavior. His descent into alcoholism and violence reveals the fragility of his masculine identity, which cannot accommodate failure or emotional complexity.

Rather than presenting Kabir as a heroic figure, the film exposes the destructive consequences of toxic masculinity. His aggression is not a sign of strength but a symptom of insecurity, and his inability to adapt to changing circumstances underscores the limitations of hegemonic masculinity. As Michael Kimmel argues, masculinity often operates as a “homosocial enactment” driven by fear of inadequacy rather than genuine power (Kimmel 45). Kabir’s behavior exemplifies this dynamic, revealing masculinity as a performance sustained by anxiety and vulnerability.

Ethical Masculinity and Institutional Crisis in *Article 15*

In contrast to the hyper-masculine figure of Kabir, Article 15 presents a protagonist whose masculinity is defined by moral responsibility rather than dominance. The film follows a police officer confronting caste-based violence in rural India, situating masculinity within a framework of ethical engagement.

However, this representation is not without its complexities. The protagonist’s position as an upper-caste, urban outsider raises questions about privilege and authority. His attempts to challenge systemic injustice are mediated by institutional constraints, highlighting the limitations of individual agency.

The film thus presents masculinity as a site of negotiation between power and responsibility. Unlike traditional heroes who embody authority, the protagonist is marked by doubt and vulnerability. His masculinity is not defined by control but by his willingness to confront injustice, even at personal cost.

This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of masculinity in contemporary Indian cinema, where ethical engagement replaces dominance as a defining characteristic. At the same time, the film acknowledges the structural nature of social inequality, suggesting that masculinity cannot be understood in isolation from broader systems of power.

Subaltern Masculinity and Aspirational Identity in *Gully Boy*

Gully Boy offers a radically different perspective on masculinity by situating it within the context of class and marginalization. The protagonist, Murad, is a young man from a lower-income background who aspires to become a rapper. Unlike traditional cinematic heroes, Murad lacks conventional markers of masculinity such as wealth, authority, or physical dominance.

Instead, his masculinity is expressed through creativity and emotional vulnerability. His journey is not one of conquest but of self-discovery, as he navigates the constraints of his socio-economic environment. The film thus challenges the association between masculinity and power, presenting alternative forms of male identity that are grounded in expression and aspiration.

Murad's relationship with language and music becomes a means of articulating his identity, allowing him to resist the limitations imposed by his social context. This aligns with Connell's concept of multiple masculinities, which recognizes the diversity of male experiences shaped by class, culture, and social position (Connell 83).

By foregrounding subaltern masculinity, *Gully Boy* expands the representational possibilities of Indian cinema, demonstrating that masculinity can be reimagined beyond traditional norms.

Masculinity as Crisis: Structural and Cultural Dimensions

The representations of masculinity in these films must be understood within a broader socio-cultural context. The crisis of masculinity is not merely an individual phenomenon but a structural condition shaped by economic, social, and cultural transformations.

Economic liberalization has altered traditional gender roles, challenging the notion of men as primary providers. At the same time, feminist movements have questioned patriarchal norms, creating new expectations for male behavior. These changes have destabilized established models of masculinity, leading to uncertainty and anxiety.

Caste and class further complicate this dynamic, as seen in *Article 15* and *Gully Boy*. Masculinity is not a uniform experience but is shaped by intersecting social hierarchies. The crisis of masculinity, therefore, reflects broader tensions within Indian society, where traditional structures are being renegotiated.

Cinematic Aesthetics and the Visualization of Male Anxiety

The crisis of masculinity is not only articulated through narrative but also through cinematic form. Contemporary Indian films employ visual and stylistic techniques that emphasize fragmentation, isolation, and emotional intensity. In *Kabir Singh*, close-up shots and disjointed editing reflect the protagonist's psychological instability. In *Gully Boy*, urban landscapes and handheld camera work convey a sense of confinement and aspiration. In *Article 15*, stark lighting and desaturated color palettes underscore the moral bleakness of the social environment.

These aesthetic choices reinforce the thematic focus on masculinity as a site of crisis, aligning form with content to create a cohesive representation of male anxiety.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian cinema reveals a profound transformation in the representation of masculinity. No longer depicted as stable, dominant, and authoritative, masculinity emerges as fragmented, vulnerable, and contested. Through films such as *Kabir Singh*, *Article 15*, and *Gully Boy*, Indian cinema interrogates the assumptions underlying hegemonic masculinity, exposing its limitations and contradictions. This shift reflects broader socio-cultural changes in India, where traditional gender roles are being redefined in response to economic, social, and political transformations. The crisis of masculinity, rather than signaling decline, opens up possibilities for alternative forms of male identity that are more inclusive, ethical, and expressive.

By foregrounding vulnerability and complexity, contemporary Indian cinema challenges patriarchal norms and contributes to an ongoing reconfiguration of gender relations. Masculinity, in this context, is no longer a fixed identity but a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by the tensions and possibilities of modern life.

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