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## **Constructing a New Manliness: Performing Masculinity in Rowdy Rathore**

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**Abstract:**

*Mainstream popular cinema is a powerful medium to impart social values through cultural indoctrination/ interpellation. The evolving discourse of 'manliness' in Bollywood cinema is seen to present a neoconservative picture of dominant 'hypermasculinity', evocative of but vastly different from the 'Angry Young Man' trope in the 1970s. The ideals valorized as characteristic of normative masculinity are: patriarchal hegemony, a gendered division of labour, a particular kind of ideal physique, aggression and violence. Since Judith Butler, the idea of performing gender has been an accepted notion and this paper investigates how the film, Rowdy Rathore, a major commercial success in 2012, articulates the stereotypes – the set of expectations and practices – that society deems appropriate for a man to perform. The paper borrows from R. W. Connell's theory of 'Social Organization of Masculinities' to show how the different male characters in the film exhibit different masculinities – which are either hegemonic or marginalized and how even those who do not exhibit appropriate/ desirable male behaviour are complicit in the ideology. It analyses how dominance and violence are legitimized and constructed as 'natural' of the male will to power. The quest for the hypermasculine also implies the subordination of the woman – she is either an object of pleasure to be enticed, possessed or rescued. Further, it analyses the semiotics of film that work collaboratively to create the masculine image –shots, visual aspects of costume design and character personality.*

**Key words:** Masculinity, cinema, hegemony, patriarchy, violence

Mainstream, popular cinema, which is not radical or controversial, is a powerful medium to export social values through cultural interpellation. Films, through their narrative and representational conventions, enunciate particular discourses that inform the ideology, and construct the zeitgeist of a society. This paper suggests that Bollywood films increasingly tend to demonstrate patriarchal doctrines that reinforce and perpetuate the cultural values of dominant masculinity. A neo-conservative hyper masculinity is constructed through a series of images that represents the male hegemony, presenting 'male values' as desirable and predicates male power on performance.

Male will to power is a recurrent motif in Hindi cinema. The belligerent male had been the trope since Sunil Dutt played an angry Birju in the 1957 epic, *Mother India*. In 1973, Amitabh Bachchan earned the title of Hindi cinema's Angry Young Man for his portrayal of Inspector Vijay Khanna in *Zanjeer*. The popularity of the genre and the idioms it introduced into cinematic discourse continued into the 2000s, with the difference that while the early Angry Young Man films battled a corrupt social system, the vigilante role is largely absent in the heroes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century whose display of aggression, rage, rebellion and violence seem to be an assertion of their manhood rather than a panacea for social ills. This paper analyses *Rowdy Rathore*, one of the biggest commercial successes of 2012 as idiomatic of this tendency. With a worldwide gross of US\$31 million, it has emerged as one of the highest grossing films of all time in Bollywood. This is, therefore, a mass film which caters to a wide spectrum of the market and conforms to the hegemonic ideologies of the time.

In "The Sociology of Masculinity" Whitehead and Barrett define masculinity as "those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus, culturally defined as not feminine" (2004: 15-16). According to Gates, masculinity "is not a collection of attitudes possessed by a male subject from birth, but a set of expectations that society deems appropriate for a male subject to exhibit" (2006: 28). In other words, masculinity is neither natural nor universal but a construct; and the qualities associated with men are determined socially and culturally, not biologically. Post- structuralist accounts link social actions and power relations with formation of identity. Identity, according to Post- Structuralists, is always in process. Therefore, there is no definite fixed self but a series of fluid subject positions which cumulatively provide the individual sense of identity. Therefore, in becoming 'male', locally and culturally signifying practices are used to express gender (Whitehead and Barrett 2004: 20). If "identity is something that one does rather than what one is or one has" men must perform masculinity to belong or gain entry into any community of men (ibid: 29).

Popular cinema reacts to academic interpretations of masculinity as fragmented, fluid and contradictory by trying to reconfigure it as “a unified and unproblematic” (Gates 2006: 6). Even within a culture, the ideals of masculinity change and evolve over time. However, popular culture constructs a dominant type of masculinity and the discourse of Bollywood cinema is that men need to exhibit the traits associated with the “ideals of hyper masculinity” (ibid: 35). It is, therefore, necessary to examine the ways in which men’s power came to be naturalized across cultures and how values of traditional masculinity are evoked and revoked in cinema as laudable and desirable.

The film, *Rowdy Rathore*, revolves around a small-time thief, Shiva, who unexpectedly finds himself responsible for the safety and well-being of the daughter of his look-alike, ACP Vikram Rathore, who was fatally injured in his crusade against the cruel Baapji and his cohorts. The film’s opening credits with the sequence of hands pounding in rhythm has the effect of creating a binary opposition between men and women by distinguishing between them solely through their accoutrements – men wear watches, women bangles. Gender is immediately rendered as external to the self. The opposition continues in the contrast between the gentleness of the woman physician as she speaks to the child and the rough ruthlessness of the male villain.

Also, it introduces the idea of violence early in the film. The drumming and its accompanying chant stand, as explained later, for ‘beating a person’s posterior with a lathi and reducing it to pulp.’ The sociology of masculinity investigates how some aspects of male behaviour that are violent and oppressive are seen as ‘natural’ and accepted as part of reality. There is a constant assertion that the stronger man dominates the weaker and that violence necessarily plays a part in overcoming foes. Whether of the lame adherent of Vikram Rathore, who murders the villain in the opening sequence or Rathore himself who physically subdues his opponents, a man must fight and prove dominance; those who cannot, like the goons at the railway station, are seen as contemptible. “...violence becomes important in gender politics among men...a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles” (Connell 2005: 44).

In *Men and Masculinities*, Whitehead examines how “...men’s violences ...are frequently acted out and performed in a wider cultural theatre wherein what it means to be a man is inextricably connected to the perceived ability and opportunity to (re)act violently to others” (2004: 36). He goes on to observe how the violence inflicted by men when undertaking and abusing seemingly ‘legitimate’ functions for the state and other organizations shows that there is a deeper cultural matrix that legitimizes violence and abuse. ACP Vikram Rathore is introduced to the audience through a photograph crashing through the scene, thrusting itself into the audience’s imagination. The cinematic grammar glorifies the hero’s violent actions – the fight scenes picture him through low angle shots – he towers above his opponents and the audience. He uses guns, axes, scimitars, knives and a spinning wheel to slice through his opponents. The bloody wheel becomes one of the tropes of the film – shown in slow motion as he wields it either before his face when only his fierce eyes are visible or when it is placed lower in a profile shot. The persuasiveness and insidiousness of the discourse of violence is seen in the echoing mythical overtones – the wheel is reminiscent of the ‘Sudarshan chakra’ and Rathore’s stomping on Ravan’s head during the Ram Leela celebrations reinforces the legitimacy of violence in the elimination of nefarious elements. Custodial torture, homicide, encounter killings are all introduced, naturalized and legitimised with a senior police official expressing reluctant admiration after reading ACP Rathore’s confidential report, “Very impressive!” (*Rowdy Rathore*). Like the introduction, the intermission is announced through savage action – with the bloody wheel wielded by the man in the introductory photograph and his maniacal laughter. The testosterone laden hero affirms the myth of regenerative male violence and presents crude displays of masculinity.

There is a social dimension to men’s violence that pervades most cultures...It is a discourse that is particularly powerful in that it serves to legitimize male violence as voyeuristic entertainment and though forms of state security. This discourse is not simply one of verbal communication, but also, fundamentally, a set of practices, attitudes and belief systems that render men’s violence normal and, thus, inevitable. Consequently, men’s violence has assumed the status of a cultural arrangement across most societies. (Whitehead 2004: 40)

Stoic powers of endurance are also essentials of manliness. When Rathore is physically disabled, his image as the hypermasculine warrior is reinforced, particularly when he refuses to submit to treatment.

There is, however, no single pattern of masculinity. Men make individual choices from the acceptable multiplicities of masculine expression. R. W. Connell describes the relationship between masculinities as hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinity embodies the ideals of patriarchy which appropriates power, control and dominance to men and naturalizes the subordination of women. In Bollywood, the tropes of hegemonic masculinity are influenced by world action cinema. Both ACP Rathore and his double exemplify the hegemonic masculine – power-oriented, courageous, commanding, ruthless, competitive, strong and capable of facing impossible odds. They are pictures of rugged ‘He-men’ – physically and emotionally tough refusing to show weakness, betraying no feelings, coolly efficient while performing lethal tasks. Vikram Rathore embodies power – he has authority in public space as part of a coercive institution (the police) and controls the means of violence. Shiva is called “Arnold ka baap” (*Rowdy Rathore*) alluding to his strength, ruggedness and endurance – the normative male qualities. Action is emphasised visually and in dialogue – “*Jo main bolta hoon, woh main karta hoon; aur jo main nahin bolta woh toh main definitely karta hoon*” – words are dispensable; what matters is action (*Rowdy Rathore*). Rathore’s credo of action is glamorized – he is introduced as a man who wished to ‘do in one day that which would keep his memory alive for a hundred years’. This eulogy is accompanied by shots of the hero breaking cement blocks, chasing villains, earning the applause of his battalion and his superior officer.

The film semantics collaboratively work to create the ideal of manhood. The dialectics of film lies not so much in what is shot but in how it is presented. The film valorizes the hero by using freeze frames, slow motion, angled images and shots that highlight speed, stoicism and virility. There is a constant use of the closed frame with the hero placed almost rigidly in the centre. The

frames showing Vikram Rathore in profile are always low angle shots while frontal images are in close-up – he is either towering above the screen or filling it. In cinematic language, the closer or larger the subject, the more important it is. Further, climactic moments play with spectatorial expectations: fights are in slow motion – Rathore’s motions are slowed down as deliberately pick up weapons – and he is seen from different directions. When Rathore jumps from the top of a building with his self-fashioned weapon, the camera momentarily freezes action – he is posed but in motion. Sequences are accompanied by a soundtrack chant “Rathore, Rathore.” The intertextual references to the Angry Young man genre are seen in the mise-en-scene with posters of *Deewar* (“the original ‘text’ of the ‘Angry Young Man’ image” according to Mazumdar), *Sholay*, *Chor Machaye Shor* in the backdrop. The potent cultural symbol consolidates the hero’s links with history though he is no longer a champion of the people. Hyper masculinity in current Indian cinema does not just present the virtuous man who bravely answers the call to battle. He is also physically superb – his body conforms to a specific type popularized by Hollywood films of the 80s: Rathore has a muscular physique, chiselled abs, broad chest and shoulders, massive arms. Those that do not possess this kind of body structure are implicitly weak and subservient. Masculinity is offered as a spectacle with the body of the hero emphasised through exhibitionism, dress and deportment. Rathore walks with a swagger, he stands with his legs akimbo. Gender as performance is highlighted in the running metaphor of twirling moustache which is seen as a sign of masculine bravado. One essential of Shiva being baptised as Rathore is tweaking his moustache to resemble that of the latter.

The tradition of toughness is exhibited through the body, but more importantly it is seen as possible to acquire toughness – an internal quality – through remodelling the body – an external one ...through the 1940s and 50s toughness was more pronounced and demonstrated through styles of walking (such as strutting) and through acts like cigar-chomping, jaw-working, and squinting while scowling. This attempt to construct a manly masculinity internally by donning visible traits externally echoes Judith Butler’s idea of performing gender (Gates 2006: 35).

Traditional categories of manliness are also evoked through lexical choices: Rathore is equated to a lion, and describes himself as “*ek baap ki aulad*” (*Rowdy Rathore*). Costume design emphasises manliness and ruggedness – Rathore wears unbuttoned shirts or sleeveless vests. Conversely nakedness is diminishing or punishment – from the initial scenes involving the stripping of children to the scene where dramatic tension is predicated on having a man forced to strip. Homophobia, an essential of hegemonic masculinity, informs this scene because a man undressing in front of other men is feminized. Punishment for homoeroticism is swift and immediate – the killing of the homosexual. “*Police officer ki wardi bhi apni duty nibhata hai*” (*Rowdy Rathore*).

However, not all men meet the normative standards of masculinity though they enjoy its benefits. “Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front line of troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense” (Connell 2005: 41). The superior police official, whose point of view shot of Rathore moves from a straight angle to a low angled shot signifying his admiration of the junior officer’s daring, is an example of complicit masculinity. Vikram Rathore’s subordinate police officer, who shows both emotional weakness and a reluctance to use physical force to assert his rights, and 2G, the desexualized comic camp follower, who confronts goons but is physically incapable of inspiring violence, both act as the helpers of the archetypal Jungian hero and benefit from his valour.

On the other hand, there are also subordinate groups of men who are outside the privileged “circle of legitimacy” who are victims of a vocabulary of abuse (Cornell 2005: 40). The politician who cowers before the determination of Rathore, the goons who are overpowered physically and emotionally, so much so that they ask to be beaten are examples of subordinated masculinity. Subordinated males who are lazy, decadent, cowardly, manipulative exhibit all negative values of the female or homosexual stereotype. Rathore’s proud, upright stance contrasts with the almost constantly slouching or recumbent positions of Baapji and his son, his deep voice with the sinuous shrillness of the villainous duo, his restraint and Spartan lifestyle with the gluttonous, lasciviousness of his opponents. Villainous cruelty does not disrupt/ subvert the notions of hegemony. Cruelty, barbarousness, killing, drunkenness, deceitfulness and treacherousness in essence embody the wild, uncontrolled side of nature – a kind of monstrous feminine.

Barrett and Whitehead define masculinity as that which is “not feminine” and detail how masculinities are “positive inasmuch as they offer some means of identity signification for males, and as a negative, inasmuch as they are not the ‘Other’” (2004: 16). Gender stereotyping begins with creating “dualisms such as passive/assertive, strong/ weak, irrational/ rational, gentle/ forceful, emotional/ distant” which passes into everyday language (Whitehead 10). Manly masculinity had as its binary opposite, the fragile, dependent feminine. Glorification of traditional gender attitudes and a tendency to become more conservative on gender issues is the result of a deeply entrenched resistance to relinquish the benefits accrued by patriarchy. Thompson and Sabinos (1995) analysed gender in animation by comparing the behaviour variables of male and female characters. Applied to this film, we find that 100% of request for help are from women; men brag 80% more than women – the bragging done by women is about their physical attractiveness (“*rang roop*”); men show bravery 75% more than women – women typically show courage when their chastity is threatened, also their courage is predicated on the immediate rescue by the hero; women take decisions only 20% of the time and in cases pertaining to children.

Women in the film are constructed as glamorous objects of pleasure. She is ‘*naya maal*’ (new material), whose character is to be ‘straightened’ by ‘bringing her to the road’ i.e. by humbling her. Lexical choices describing women as ‘*cheez*’ or ‘*maal*’ contributes to the normalization of woman’s subordinate position/ objectification. Language, which (re)produces social life, legitimises inequalities and patriarchal ideologies.

Physically manhandling a woman is acceptable and a sign of manliness – the hero physically lifts a woman on to a table to brush her off casually in moments, smacks a young woman’s posterior as she sways by him. While even a policeman’s dress performs his duty, a police woman can become sexually aroused at masculine pheromones when on her beat. When the hero grabs the waist

of the heroine he admits to behaving like Shakti Kapoor, the notorious libertine villain of the 80s instead of Amol Palekar, the gentlemanly hero. The structural opposition or 'ideological squaring' clearly indicates how the action should be evaluated; but when performed by the hero has the effect of normalizing violation of woman's body. Love is violent – embraces must be powerful to have the woman gasp, "Not so strong, Shiva" (*Rowdy Rathore*).

The woman invites male gaze – moving her sari to reveal her waist as the camera focuses on breasts, exposed backs and hips and entices him by revealing her 'special cheez' – stroking her body down to her hips. She is the site of scopophilic pleasure – most scenes expose the heroine's back or waist and women are described as 'dangerous' or sexually desirable at different ages. Most shots of the female lead are point of view shots wherein the spectator views her through the eyes of the male protagonist. Sexual overtones are seen in both the gyrations of women and in the Michael Jackson hand- on- the- groin choreography.

Women play subordinate roles and are systematically excluded from male activities. In the case of the policewoman professional equality does not amount to parity in combat assignments. In the major fight scene, the woman is employed only when all recourses have been exhausted but even then she is quickly overpowered. Postures, expressions and actions of the female reveal the accepted cultural ideal that women are to be submissive, possessions of men to be consumed by the male and play a subordinate role in society.

Female action is permissible only when chastity is threatened. Lalitha Gopalan (2002) writes how it is the miscarriage of justice and the failure of the state that allows for "the passage of the protagonist from a sexual... victim to an avenging woman" (218). The mythic overtones of the scene when Baapji invites the officer's wife to sit on his lap and slaps his thigh legitimize woman's action. Though she reacts in anger – like Durga – she immediately breaks down in tears.

Gender division of labour gives the woman the task of child-rearing. Shiva's adoption of Vikram Rathore's daughter is only temporary till the heroine assumes responsibility of the child; similarly, when the police officer is seen supervising his children, the conclusion is that there is something amiss for these tasks must go to those best suited to execute them.

The sociology of gender holds that it is not fixed but is constructed in interactions and through texts. Institutions and social formations reflect ideological interests of a hegemonic group which (re)structures the power relations in society. The rise of hegemonic masculinity has been perceived to be the result of the threat to the sexual division of labour that favoured men, the weakening of their control over resources and loss of prime status, which were the results of feminism and modernity. This analysis of *Rowdy Rathore*, as a representative instance of popular film, reveals that the attempt to restore a dominant masculinity, reassert the fundamental difference between men and women, present men as unemotional and 'tough', valorise violence and reiterate the traditional values of masculinity is increasingly seen in Hindi cinema.

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