

Love or Control? The Cinematic Glorification of Alpha Male Toxicity in Indian Cinema

Alka Jangir

Assistant Professor Sociology

S.B.D. Govt. College Sardarshahar, Churu

alkaashaliya@gmail.com

Abstract: *Indian cinema has long played a central role in shaping social attitudes toward love, masculinity, and relationships. In recent years, films featuring emotionally volatile, aggressive male protagonists have gained significant popularity, often being celebrated as symbols of strength, passion, and dominance. This paper examines how contemporary Indian films glorify toxic masculinity under the label of the "alpha male." Using qualitative content analysis, this study focuses on Kabir Singh (2019) and Animal (2023), two commercially successful Hindi films whose protagonists display possessiveness, emotional manipulation, aggression, and violence. The research investigates how these behaviors are framed narratively and visually, and how audiences may interpret them as desirable or romantic. The findings suggest that both films normalize and glamorize toxic masculine behavior by linking male aggression with love, loyalty, pain, and heroism. This contributes to problematic representations of masculinity in Indian popular culture and reinforces harmful relationship ideals*

Keywords: Toxic masculinity, alpha male, Indian cinema, gender representation, content analysis, Kabir Singh, Animal

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema in India functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural institution that influences public attitudes and everyday social behavior. Representations of masculinity in Indian films have historically centered on dominance, protection, sacrifice, and emotional suppression. In recent years, the emergence of hyper-aggressive male protagonists has intensified this trend.

Films such as Kabir Singh and Animal portray men who are angry, possessive, emotionally unstable, and often violent. Yet instead of criticizing these behaviors, the films frequently present them as expressions of deep love, emotional pain, masculinity, or devotion. These portrayals raise concerns regarding the normalization of toxic masculinity.

The idea of the "alpha male" has become increasingly popular in online and film discourse. It often refers to a dominant, emotionally unavailable, physically powerful man who controls his surroundings and relationships. While marketed as confidence or strength, this identity frequently overlaps with toxic behavior such as aggression, entitlement, possessiveness, and lack of emotional accountability.

This study explores how Indian cinema romanticizes or glorifies such masculinity through Kabir Singh and Animal.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Contemporary Indian films increasingly present toxic male behavior as attractive, powerful, or emotionally justified. This creates concern because cinematic narratives may normalize harmful behaviors in relationships and influence audience perceptions regarding love and gender roles.

The central problem of this study is:

How do Indian films glorify toxic masculinity through the cinematic construction of the "alpha male" protagonist?



OBJECTIVES:

This research aims to:

- To analyze the representation of toxic masculinity in Kabir Singh and Animal.
- To identify cinematic techniques used to glorify aggressive male behavior.
- To study how possessiveness, violence, and emotional manipulation are framed as love or strength.
- To understand how the "alpha male" archetype is normalized through popular cinema.
- To examine the broader cultural implications of these portrayals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- How is toxic masculinity represented in Kabir Singh and Animal?
- In what ways are aggressive and controlling behaviors romanticized?
- How do these films construct the "alpha male" image?
- What messages about love and masculinity are conveyed through these portrayals?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have extensively discussed gender representation and masculinity in cinema. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how dominant forms of masculinity become socially idealized and culturally rewarded. These ideals often include aggression, authority, and emotional restraint.

Laura Mulvey's work on visual pleasure and cinema emphasizes how films construct gendered spectatorship and reinforce power relations. While much research has focused on the objectification of women, recent studies increasingly examine male representation and toxic masculinity.

Studies on Bollywood masculinity suggest that male protagonists are often framed as protectors or rebels whose violence becomes morally acceptable when justified through love, revenge, or family loyalty.

Research on *Kabir Singh* generated widespread debate over romanticization of abusive behavior. Similarly, *Animal* renewed discussion on hyper masculinity, father-son dynamics, violence, and emotional repression.

However, comparative analysis between these films specifically through the lens of "alpha male toxicity" remains limited. This study contributes to that gap.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on:

a) Hegemonic Masculinity – R.W. Connell

This theory explains how dominant masculine ideals become socially celebrated while marginalizing alternative masculinities. Traits such as control, aggression, and emotional dominance are often treated as markers of male success.

b) Representation Theory – Stuart Hall

Films do not simply reflect society; they actively construct meanings. Repeated representation of violent or possessive men as desirable can shape audience understanding of masculinity.

c) Male Gaze and Power Structures -Laura Mulvey

According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema is structured around a masculine perspective that positions men as active subjects and women as passive objects of visual pleasure. The camera, narrative, and audience are encouraged to identify with the male protagonist, while female characters are often presented as objects to be looked at, desired, or controlled.

Though usually applied to women's representation, gaze theory also helps analyze how male power is visually framed and glorified.



IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative content analysis.

Sample:

Purposive sampling was used to select:

- Kabir Singh — directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga
- Animal — directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga

These films were selected due to their commercial success, cultural impact, and debates surrounding masculinity.

UNITS OF ANALYSIS

The study examines:

- Dialogues
- Character behavior
- Costume/body language
- Romantic interactions
- Violence
- Camera framing
- Background score
- Narrative consequences

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES:

Coding categories include:

- Aggression
- Possessiveness
- Emotional manipulation
- Dominance
- Violence as love
- Glorification through cinematic treatment

Consequences or lack of accountability

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

KABIR SINGH:

The protagonist Kabir is portrayed as brilliant, passionate, emotionally intense, and self-destructive. His anger is repeatedly presented as proof of emotional depth.

Key Observations:

- Controlling behavior toward Preeti is framed as love
- Jealousy is treated as passion
- Violence is normalized
- Alcohol abuse and emotional instability are aestheticized
- Limited accountability for harmful actions

The film repeatedly associates emotional chaos with masculine authenticity. Kabir's aggression is not strongly condemned by the narrative.

ANIMAL:

The protagonist Ranvijay displays extreme violence while remaining emotionally driven by paternal validation and family loyalty.



Key Observations:

- Hyperviolence presented heroically
- Domination equated with masculinity
- Emotional repression expressed through aggression
- Women exist largely in relation to the male protagonist's emotional Journey
- Violence becomes spectacle

The cinematic style slow motion, powerful music, stylized action intensifies the glorification of the protagonist's brutality.

COMPARATIVE FINDINGS:

Both films present:

- Anger as masculinity
- Possession as love
- Violence as emotional truth
- Domination as attractiveness
- Emotional instability as depth

Differences:

- *Kabir Singh* focuses more on toxic romantic relationships.
- *Animal* expands toxicity into family, patriarchy, violence, and identity.
- Both ultimately reward rather than challenge the protagonists.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examines the representation of toxic masculinity in the films *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) through a content analysis approach. Drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, Stuart Hall's concept of representation, the research explores how these films construct and glorify dominant male protagonists. The analysis shows that toxic masculinity in these films is not merely represented it is cinatically glorified. Aggression becomes visually heroic. Possessiveness becomes romantic. Emotional unavailability becomes depth. Violence becomes proof of love and loyalty.

This creates dangerous implications because audiences, especially young viewers, may interpret harmful behavior as emotionally desirable or masculine. The popularity of these films indicates that the "alpha male" archetype continues to hold cultural power in Indian cinema. However, this also reveals anxieties around masculinity, vulnerability, emotional expression, and gender expectations.

The analysis reveals that both films portray controlling, aggressive, and emotionally volatile male characters as desirable, powerful, and worthy of audience sympathy. In *Kabir Singh*, possessiveness and emotional manipulation are often framed as expressions of intense love, while *Animal* extends this portrayal through extreme violence, dominance, and patriarchal authority. Female characters are largely positioned in passive or supportive roles, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

Role of Female Characters

The female characters in *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* play a significant role in reinforcing the narratives of hegemonic masculinity. In both films, women are largely portrayed as passive figures whose identities and actions are shaped by their relationships with the male protagonists. In *Kabir Singh*, Preeti is depicted as submissive, quiet, and emotionally dependent, with limited agency in making decisions about her own life. Similarly, in *Animal*, female characters often serve as emotional support systems or narrative tools that facilitate the development of the male protagonist's journey. Their perspectives, desires, and autonomy receive comparatively less attention than those of the male characters. This



representation aligns with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, where women function primarily as objects of male desire rather than independent subjects. Consequently, the films reinforce traditional gender hierarchies by privileging male authority and marginalizing female agency, contributing to the normalization of unequal power dynamics in romantic and family relationships.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that these films blur the line between love and control by romanticizing behaviors associated with toxic masculinity. Through cinematic techniques, narrative structures, and audience-centered hero worship, the films normalize problematic gender dynamics and contribute to the cultural acceptance of hegemonic masculine ideals. The study concludes that such representations have significant implications for audience perceptions of relationships, gender roles, and male identity in contemporary Indian society.

This study concludes that *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* significantly contribute to the glorification of toxic masculinity in Indian cinema. Both films frame aggressive male behavior through emotional suffering, romance, family loyalty, and heroism. Rather than critically interrogating these traits, the narratives often reward them with admiration, sympathy, or power. These portrayals normalize problematic relationship dynamics and reinforce patriarchal ideas of masculinity. There is a need for more responsible cinematic representation—where masculinity includes emotional maturity, accountability, respect, and vulnerability rather than domination and violence. Cinema has immense cultural influence, and therefore its portrayals of love and masculinity deserve critical examination.

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