

VICTIM BLAMING IN HINDI CINEMA - AN ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE OF MALE CHARACTERS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the underexamined portrayal of emotional abuse and victim blaming of male characters in Hindi cinema. Through a qualitative content analysis and thematic coding of selected films from 2000 to 2022 including *Tamasha*, *Kabir Singh*, *Chhichhore*, *Dear Zindagi*, and *Kalank*—the research uncovers consistent narrative strategies that romanticize suppression, invalidate male suffering, and obscure psychological trauma. Utilizing frameworks such as Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, trauma theory, and cultural studies on Indian masculinity, the analysis reveals how cinema plays a key role in silencing male vulnerability and framing emotional abuse as personal failure. These representations reinforce gendered expectations of stoicism and normalize harmful emotional patterns. By critiquing the absence of healing, empathy, and therapeutic narratives in Bollywood, the study calls for emotionally responsible storytelling and inclusive portrayals of male mental health.

Keywords: Male emotional abuse, victim blaming, Hindi cinema, hegemonic masculinity, psychological trauma, toxic resilience, gender norms, Bollywood, trauma theory, emotional representation, male vulnerability, cultural masculinity

INTRODUCTION

Emotional Abuse as a Hidden Cinematic Theme

Cinema, as a powerful medium of storytelling and cultural transmission, often mirrors societal norms, values, and power structures. Hindi cinema—widely referred to as Bollywood—occupies a pivotal role in shaping public consciousness in India and among global South Asian diasporas. It has long been analysed for its portrayal of love, heroism, social justice, and gender roles. While considerable scholarship has examined the depiction of violence, discrimination, and abuse against women in cinema, an underexplored yet significant thematic undercurrent is the portrayal of emotional abuse faced by male characters. Unlike physical violence or overt injustice, emotional abuse operates subtly in cinematic narratives—manifesting in manipulation, guilt-tripping, emotional invalidation, humiliation, isolation, or suppression of individual expression.

In Hindi cinema, male characters are often constructed within archetypes: the angry young man, the dutiful son, the brooding romantic, or the emotionally resilient hero. Beneath these constructs lie layered portrayals of psychological distress, often normalized or romanticized under the banner of love, duty, or honor. Emotional abuse—when directed at male protagonists—is seldom acknowledged as such. Instead, their emotional vulnerability is often reframed as weakness, indecisiveness, or a flaw in masculinity that must be corrected. Films such as *Tamasha*, *Dear Zindagi*, *Chhichhore*, and *Kalank* present moments of profound emotional conflict and manipulation experienced by male characters, yet these are rarely discussed through the lens of victimhood or psychological harm.

The invisibility of male emotional abuse in public discourse stems from both cultural taboos and cinematic conventions that treat men as emotionally stoic, self-sacrificing, and invulnerable. Consequently, Hindi cinema contributes to the normalization and erasure of male psychological trauma, perpetuating myths that real men do not break down, do not suffer emotionally, and if they do, they must redeem themselves by suppressing it. This hidden theme—though prevalent in numerous narratives—requires a closer critical examination grounded in gender studies, media psychology, and film theory.

Lack of Recognition of Male Vulnerability and Victimhood

Despite the increasing discourse on gender equity in media representation, male victimhood—particularly in the context of emotional abuse—remains an overlooked subject in both academic inquiry and mainstream critique. This neglect is not merely an omission; it reflects deep-rooted gendered assumptions about who can be a victim. The concept of “victim” is often feminized, thereby rendering male emotional suffering as either illegible or unworthy of empathy. In the cinematic context, male characters subjected to emotional manipulation or relational abuse are frequently portrayed not as victims, but as passive participants, flawed lovers, or emotionally unstable men in need of transformation.

Victim blaming, when directed at men, takes on unique contours. The societal scripts surrounding masculinity expect men to be emotionally unyielding and rational, thereby penalizing any deviation from this norm. When male characters in Hindi films undergo emotional turmoil—be it through rejection, betrayal, humiliation, or familial neglect—the narrative often attributes blame to their own inadequacies, decisions, or personality traits. This framing invalidates their experiences and further alienates their emotional expressions from the category of abuse.

For example, a character like Ved in *Tamasha* undergoes psychological manipulation and identity suppression from family and social systems, leading to a breakdown. Yet, his suffering is framed as a quirky deviation or mental instability, rather than as a consequence of prolonged emotional abuse. Similarly, the character of Kabir in *Kabir Singh*, though controversial, exhibits symptoms of emotional dependency, psychological trauma, and self-destructive behavior after relational abuse—but is either vilified or glorified in binaries, with little attention to the emotional manipulation involved in his arc.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem lies not only in how male emotional abuse is underrepresented but in how existing representations obscure accountability and empathy. By failing to identify and name emotional harm inflicted on male characters, Hindi cinema indirectly participates in victim blaming, reinforcing a patriarchal ideology where emotional suffering is only legitimate when performed by women, and where men are expected to endure or overcome without complaint.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Patriarchal Pressure and Toxic Masculinity, and Silence Around Male Emotions

The portrayal of male emotional abuse in Hindi cinema cannot be divorced from its broader socio-cultural context, which is heavily influenced by patriarchal ideologies and norms. In Indian society, masculinity is defined by control, strength, emotional restraint, and dominance. Boys are often socialized from an early age to suppress vulnerability, avoid emotional expression, and adopt rigid roles as providers or protectors. This toxic masculinity constructs an image of the ideal man as someone who does not cry, does not fail, and

certainly does not suffer emotional victimization. Any deviation from this image is met with ridicule, shame, or punishment—both in real life and on screen.

In this context, male emotional trauma is either trivialized or hypermasculinized. On one hand, expressions of sadness, confusion, or anxiety in men are dismissed as weakness. On the other hand, emotionally scarred male characters are portrayed as violent or aggressive, reinforcing the idea that pain must be transmuted into dominance. Hindi cinema, as a cultural product, has historically reflected and reinforced these gender codes, contributing to a cycle of emotional repression that leaves male vulnerability unacknowledged and untreated.

The silence around male emotions is further complicated by the double standards in romantic and familial relationships. In many Hindi films, men are expected to be emotionally available to women—listening, forgiving, understanding—but are rarely afforded the same empathy in return. Emotional abuse, such as manipulation, neglect, ridicule, or emotional blackmail by female characters or family members, is normalized as part of love, discipline, or tradition. The emotional labour expected from male characters is rarely interrogated, while their breakdowns are treated as temporary narrative hurdles to be overcome through self-sacrifice, not healing.

This silence has real-world consequences. India has witnessed a growing mental health crisis among young men, with rising rates of depression, suicide, and substance abuse. Yet, there is little cultural space to discuss male suffering without invoking stigma or defensiveness. By ignoring or misrepresenting emotional abuse of males, Hindi cinema inadvertently reinforces the culture of silence and emotional illiteracy that pervades Indian society.

PURPOSE

This study aims to critically examine the representation of emotional abuse of male characters in Hindi cinema, with a particular focus on how narratives construct, justify, or erase victim blaming. Through a qualitative content analysis of selected Hindi films released between 2000 and 2022, this research investigates the forms, patterns, and consequences of emotional abuse experienced by male protagonists. It further explores how these portrayals influence social perceptions of male vulnerability, masculinity, and mental health.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This topic is of significant relevance in the current socio-cultural milieu, where there is an increasing awareness of mental health issues, gender inclusivity, and emotional well-being. By bringing male victimhood into academic and cinematic discourse, the study challenges the binary framework of gender and victimization, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of how emotional abuse operates across gender lines. It also contributes to media literacy, urging audiences and filmmakers alike to recognize the emotional dimensions of male characters not merely as narrative devices, but as reflections of real psychological struggles.

The study is also timely, as recent shifts in Indian cinema—such as the growing number of films tackling mental health (*Dear Zindagi*, *Judgemental Hai Kya*), toxic relationships (*Gehraiyaan*, *Tamasha*), and family trauma (*Kapoor & Sons*)—suggest a tentative openness to more complex emotional narratives. However, without a conscious lens toward male victimhood, these efforts remain incomplete. This research intends to fill that gap by articulating a gender-balanced critique of cinematic emotional abuse, one that validates male suffering without undermining the broader struggle against patriarchal norms.

Research Objectives:

1. Analyze representations of emotional abuse of males in Hindi cinema
2. Identify forms of victim blaming and social gaslighting
3. Explore narrative and psychological consequences

Research Questions:

1. How is emotional abuse of males depicted in Hindi films?
2. What narrative strategies reinforce or dismiss male victimhood?
3. What are the cultural and psychological implications?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Representation of Gender: Studies on Masculinity in Cinema

The portrayal of gender in media—particularly in cinema—has long been a site of critical inquiry across disciplines such as gender studies, cultural studies, sociology, and media psychology. In most global and especially Indian cinematic traditions, gender representations are deeply entrenched in societal expectations and ideological frameworks. While feminist film critique has done much to interrogate the objectification and victimization of women in cinema (Mulvey, 1975; Hooks, 1992), the representation of masculinity, especially its vulnerable or emotionally complex forms, remains under-analyzed. Studies on masculinity in cinema (Kimmel, 2006; Katz, 2011) have shown how men are frequently depicted through reductive tropes—ranging from the action hero and stoic father to the emotionally unavailable lover or violent anti-hero.

In Hindi cinema, masculinity has historically been linked to ideals of strength, aggression, endurance, and emotional restraint. This trend, observable from the “angry young man” era of Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s to the macho dominance of 1990s action films, constructed men as protectors or enforcers of social order. However, more recent studies (Mehta, 2015; Dwyer, 2020) suggest that contemporary Hindi films have started incorporating male emotionality and psychological complexity—albeit often within limited or stereotypical narrative boundaries. Even where vulnerability is depicted, it is rarely positioned within a victimhood framework; instead, it is framed as a personal weakness to be overcome, not as a consequence of external emotional abuse or social conditioning. Such portrayals reinforce the belief that men must suppress pain and emerge stronger, often sidelining the psychological cost of this repression.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Definitions, Indicators, and Psychological Impact (Gender-Neutral Lens)

Emotional abuse is a form of psychological manipulation that aims to diminish the victim’s self-worth, autonomy, and emotional stability. Unlike physical abuse, it is often difficult to identify, quantify, or prove, making it a covert yet devastating form of violence. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), emotional abuse includes behaviours such as intimidation, humiliation, threats, and isolation. In clinical literature, emotional abuse is often defined through key indicators such as gaslighting, emotional invalidation, chronic criticism, silent treatment, and the use of guilt or shame as tools of control (Stark, 2007; Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

Though emotional abuse is often discussed in the context of intimate partner violence, scholars increasingly advocate for a gender-neutral lens in analysing emotional harm.

Research by Hines & Douglas (2010) and Bates (2019) reveals that men can and do experience significant levels of emotional abuse, both in romantic relationships and familial settings. Despite this, the dominant societal and academic discourse tends to marginalize male experiences by framing them as rare or exaggerated. The lack of visibility and acknowledgment, in turn, contributes to a cycle where male victims feel ashamed or confused about their experiences.

The psychological impact of emotional abuse includes symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Ali, 2011). These effects are compounded in male victims by societal expectations of stoicism, leading to internalized guilt and emotional repression. The cinematic portrayal of such abuse—particularly when normalized or trivialized—has the potential to reinforce these harmful dynamics. An academic analysis of film narratives must therefore attend not just to visible forms of conflict, but to the subtle emotional harms that underpin them.

Male Mental Health and Societal Expectations: Shame, Silence, and Emotional Repression

The intersection of gender norms and mental health is particularly fraught in the case of male emotional well-being. Societal norms across many cultures—including India—discourage men from expressing emotions, seeking help, or acknowledging vulnerability. The ideology of “boys don’t cry” is more than a cultural cliché; it operates as a powerful mechanism of emotional control, enforced through family expectations, peer groups, and media representations. Men are conditioned to internalize pain, mask anxiety with aggression, and approach trauma with denial rather than reflection (Courtenay, 2000; Mahalik et al., 2003).

A number of studies have drawn attention to the rising crisis in male mental health, particularly in South Asia. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, male suicide rates in India far exceed those of females, particularly among men aged 18–45. Researchers (Patel et al., 2012; Rane & Nadkarni, 2014) suggest that the lack of social support, stigma around help-seeking, and gendered expectations contribute to this alarming trend. Despite such evidence, public discourse around male mental health remains minimal and often superficial.

Cinema, as a cultural product and social educator, plays a critical role in either reinforcing or challenging these silences. When male emotional breakdowns are portrayed without context or are framed as personal failures, the audience internalizes a message that men who suffer are either weak or abnormal. Films like *Chhichhore* or *Tamasha* depict characters undergoing emotional stress, but the responses within the narrative often reflect confusion, ridicule, or isolation rather than support or accountability. This creates a representational gap that obscures the broader mental health challenges faced by men, and perpetuates the myth of masculine invulnerability.

FILM THEORY AND MASCULINITY STUDIES

Connell’s Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity

One of the most influential frameworks for analysing male identity in cultural texts is Raewyn Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally exalted form of masculinity that maintains dominance over women and subordinates other forms of masculinity. In film, this manifests as characters who are physically strong, emotionally controlled, authoritative, and sexually dominant. Connell’s

model helps to decode the layered dynamics of power within gender roles, offering tools to critique both overt aggression and covert emotional repression.

In Hindi cinema, hegemonic masculinity has been reflected through characters who, while emotionally complex, are ultimately expected to “man up” and resolve conflict through assertion or withdrawal rather than vulnerability. Even seemingly sensitive characters are eventually recoded to align with dominant gender norms, often through redemption arcs or reconciliations that ignore emotional damage. This dynamic has significant implications for how emotional abuse of male characters is depicted and interpreted by audiences.

Intersection with Trauma Theory

Trauma theory—originating from psychology and extended into the humanities—offers valuable insights into how traumatic experiences are represented, suppressed, or symbolized in cultural narratives. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996) and Judith Herman (1992) argue that trauma, especially psychological trauma, is often fragmented in narratives, marked by repetition, disavowal, or incoherence. When applied to male characters in Hindi cinema, trauma theory can help identify how emotional abuse is displaced or erased through plot devices such as humor, action, or romance.

The intersection of trauma theory with masculinity studies enables a more nuanced reading of male characters whose emotional distress is never verbalized, but is evident in their actions or deterioration. This framework is crucial for analyzing films that portray male protagonists spiraling into depression, addiction, or rage without ever naming the emotional abuse that precipitated their decline. The absence of accountability for such abuse not only perpetuates victim blaming but also distorts the emotional reality of men in culturally significant ways.

Cultural Studies on Indian Masculinity in Bollywood

Bollywood’s construction of masculinity has been the subject of numerous cultural studies that critique its patriarchal, casteist, and heteronormative underpinnings (Virdi, 2003; Datta, 2016). These studies argue that Hindi films often uphold traditional masculinity while marginalizing alternative masculinities, such as the sensitive, queer, or emotionally expressive male. While there has been a gradual shift in recent years—with films exploring mental health, friendship, and emotional growth—mainstream cinema still tends to valorize hypermasculine traits, particularly in romantic and familial narratives.

Researchers have noted that Bollywood films often portray emotional vulnerability in men only when it serves the development of a female character or romantic arc (Ghosh, 2018). Even when male characters are shown suffering emotionally, their pain is often individualised and decontextualized—treated as an anomaly rather than a social symptom. Thus, cultural studies on Indian masculinity highlight the structural barriers to empathetic representation of male emotional abuse, reinforcing the need for critical analysis of film narratives.

Gap in Literature (Few Studies Explore Male Emotional Abuse in Indian Media Context)

Despite growing interest in gender and media studies, there remains a significant gap in scholarly literature addressing emotional abuse of male characters in Indian cinema. Most existing studies focus on violence against women, objectification of female bodies, and patriarchal control over female autonomy. While these are undoubtedly vital areas of research, the exclusive focus on female victimhood has inadvertently contributed to a blind spot regarding male suffering and victimization.

Few studies have attempted to examine how male emotional abuse is depicted, legitimized, or trivialized in filmic narratives. Those that do often lack a theoretical grounding in masculinity studies or trauma frameworks. Additionally, the discussion of male emotional distress is often conflated with behavioral problems, toxic masculinity, or villainy—thus failing to treat it as a consequence of abuse or manipulation. There is a pressing need for intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches that treat male victimhood with the same analytical depth and empathy afforded to other marginalized identities.

Furthermore, in the Indian academic context, there is a paucity of research that links cinematic representation to broader socio-psychological outcomes for men, such as mental health, emotional illiteracy, and societal pressure. This paper aims to fill that gap by integrating film theory, psychology, gender studies, and cultural critique to examine emotional abuse of male characters in Hindi cinema. By doing so, it contributes not only to the academic discourse but also to media literacy and policy conversations around inclusive and responsible storytelling.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate emotional abuse and victim blaming of male characters in Hindi cinema. Through thematic coding and narrative interpretation, the research decodes implicit emotional dynamics across selected films released between 2000 and 2022. This method allows for a deeper exploration of symbolic meanings, narrative patterns, and character development beyond surface-level plot summaries.

The sample comprises a purposively curated set of popular and critically acclaimed Hindi films, including *Tamasha*, *Kabir Singh*, *Chhichhore*, *Dear Zindagi*, *Kalank*, *Highway*, and *Gehraiyaan*. Each film features central male characters whose emotional trajectories are marked by psychological distress rooted in relational or familial dynamics.

Thematic codes were developed inductively, guided by indicators of emotional abuse such as gaslighting, control masked as duty, and emotional invalidation. NVivo software was used to organize and analyze the codes across narrative and cinematic elements—dialogue, visual motifs, story arcs, and character transformations. The coding was supplemented by interpretive reflection through existing frameworks of psychological trauma and gender performance.

This approach enables a holistic understanding of how emotional abuse is portrayed cinematically, as well as the cultural ideologies that inform these portrayals. No human subjects were involved; the analysis is based solely on publicly available media texts.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis reveals a persistent narrative strategy in Hindi cinema: emotional trauma in male characters is either reframed as a rite of passage or diminished through aesthetic techniques. Rather than positioning emotional suffering as legitimate or empathizable, these narratives encode it as instability, romantic sacrifice, or moral weakness.

Forms of Emotional Abuse Portrayed

Across the selected films, emotional abuse unfolds through subtle yet recurring patterns—gaslighting by family or romantic partners, emotional neglect in relationships, and psychological suppression dressed as duty. These elements rarely culminate in healing; instead, they serve as vehicles for dramatic tension or transformation.

In *Tamasha*, Ved's family undermines his creative identity and emotional distress, dismissing his breakdown as a phase and praising his return to conformity. In *Kabir Singh*, Kabir's heartbreak is portrayed through obsessive behaviour and aggression, yet the underlying emotional manipulation and abandonment are never addressed directly. *Chhichhore* showcases emotional pressure and invalidation of grief in a father-son dynamic, equating heroic endurance with recovery rather than validating pain.

A recurring cinematic motif is the conflation of control with care. Romantic relationships often justify possessiveness, emotional withdrawal, or coercion as forms of love. Familial expectations demand emotional suppression for legacy or honor, thereby silencing personal truth.

Victim Blaming of Male Characters

The study identifies victim blaming as a central trope—emotional breakdowns are routinely reframed as consequences of personal failure, rather than responses to abuse or trauma. Male characters who express pain are labeled unstable, weak, or excessive. Their suffering is used as narrative spectacle but rarely explored as valid emotional experience.

Ved's creative agony is trivialized until his conformity restores social order. Kabir's psychological trauma is vilified and aestheticized, never interrogated in its emotional context. In *Kalank*, romantic and familial repression is repackaged as noble sacrifice.

Dear Zindagi presents a rare exception. The film offers a therapeutic arc, though directed toward a female protagonist. The male therapist embodies empathy and emotional intelligence, but the narrative does not permit male characters to occupy the vulnerable space of healing themselves. This absence reinforces a cultural belief that while men can offer emotional support, they are not themselves recipients of care.

Thematic Coding Examples

- **“Broken but Noble” Trope**—Protagonists endure emotional harm with stoicism, their suffering romanticized as artistic sensitivity (*Tamasha*). Pain is framed as transformative rather than tragic.
- **“Anger as Grief” Substitution**—Male characters redirect unresolved trauma into rage or addiction (*Kabir Singh*), perpetuating the narrative that emotional expression is destructive unless disciplined.
- **“Duty over Emotion”**—Characters sacrifice love and personal happiness for familial or societal expectations (*Kalank*), reinforcing masculine ideals of endurance over emotional transparency.

These themes not only shape character arcs but construct gendered emotional economies that position men as emotionally expendable.

Psychological and Narrative Consequences

Emotional breakdowns in these films are often stylized as dramatic turning points rather than journeys of introspection or healing. They are rarely validated within the story world—serving instead as moments that reassert traditional masculinity through sacrifice or control.

For instance:

- In *Tamasha*, Ved's crisis is resolved not through acknowledgment but by conforming to his family's expectations.

- *Kabir Singh* channels heartbreak into destructive behaviour, which is ultimately rewarded with narrative closure.
- *Chhichhore* uses the father's grief as a motivational tool, bypassing emotional depth or therapeutic engagement.

Support systems such as therapy, peer care, or emotional dialogue are typically absent. Family members often reinforce suppression, while friends trivialize pain. Therapy, when depicted (*Dear Zindagi*), is not extended to male characters as recipients. This consistent narrative structure reinforces the trope that men must endure alone.

Audience and Cultural Implications

These portrayals shape public imagination around male vulnerability. Audiences are offered few examples where male emotional expression is depicted as legitimate or healing. Instead, cinematic scripts glorify resilience while penalizing breakdowns—subtly teaching that empathy is not masculine and suffering must be masked.

The representation gap translates into broader cultural stigma. In Indian society, male mental health concerns such as depression and suicidal ideation remain under-discussed. Films that aestheticize emotional repression and ignore support options contribute to a climate of shame and silence.

These tropes perpetuate emotional asymmetry in gender portrayals. While female vulnerability increasingly receives narrative attention (albeit imperfectly), male suffering remains marginalized. This imbalance reinforces patriarchal expectations that men remain emotionally impervious, with vulnerability depicted either as failure or as a transitional obstacle to overcome.

Comparative Insights-Korean and Western Cinema

A notable contrast emerges when comparing Hindi cinema to Korean and Western narratives. Korean dramas like *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* and *My Mister* allow male characters emotional fragility, psychological depth, and access to therapeutic relationships. Western films such as *Good Will Hunting*, *Manchester by the Sea*, and *A Beautiful Mind* show male protagonists processing trauma, seeking help, and navigating complex emotional realities.

These stories do not romanticize stoicism; they validate emotional complexity without compromising masculine identity. Their narrative tone encourages empathy, introspection, and communal support. The contrast highlights the limitations within Bollywood's emotional grammar—a system that privileges resilience over vulnerability and silence over expression.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a cultural discomfort with male emotional transparency. Hindi cinema continues to frame male suffering within tropes of redemption, not empathy—casting trauma as character-building rather than requiring healing.

The repeated absence of support systems, emotional validation, and narrative empathy aligns with patriarchal cultural scripts. Male characters are held responsible for their emotional pain, while the abuse or manipulation they endure remains unnamed. These patterns have real-world ramifications for emotional literacy, mental health awareness, and gender equity.

By juxtaposing Bollywood portrayals with global examples, the study underscores the importance of narrative reform. Films can either reinforce stigma or foster compassion—and the current trend leans heavily toward the former.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to explore the under-researched phenomenon of emotional abuse and victim blaming of male characters in Hindi cinema, analysing 10–12 critically acclaimed films released between 2000 and 2024. Through a qualitative content analysis using thematic coding and psychological abuse indicators, it revealed a clear and consistent pattern: male emotional trauma is not only underrepresented but is often distorted, aestheticized, or dismissed entirely through problematic narrative strategies.

From the analytical findings, emotional invalidation and repression consistently emerged as central motifs in the emotional journeys of male protagonists across the selected films. These narrative patterns frequently involved family members (*Tamasha*, *Kalank*), romantic partners (*Kabir Singh*), and societal pressures (*Chhichhore*), all contributing to psychological distress that was seldom acknowledged or framed as emotional abuse. Instead of being recognized as victims of manipulation or neglect, male characters were often labelled “unstable” or subtly pushed toward self-correction through narratives of toxic resilience, self-sacrifice, or aggression.

Emotional invalidation was a recurring narrative device, while expressions of control—presented as love or duty—regularly served to suppress agency. Moreover, victim-blaming tendencies were reflected in repeated depictions of male grief being diminished, emotional breakdowns romanticized, and personal suffering reframed as heroic virtue.

These portrayals contribute to the cultural invisibility of male victimhood. The male emotional journey, when shown, is frequently stripped of empathy and support. Redemption is achieved not through healing or therapy, but by reasserting control, achieving external validation, or embracing stoic silence. This narrative erasure has real-world implications: it reinforces the patriarchal notion that emotional vulnerability is inherently “unmanly,” discouraging help-seeking behavior among men. Given the alarming male suicide statistics in India (over 70% of national suicides), this lack of emotional representation in cinema is not just a cinematic issue, but a public mental health concern.

Moreover, the audience reception of such characters often reflects and reinforces cultural biases. For instance, *Kabir Singh* was both criticized and celebrated—revealing a divided cultural stance where emotional abuse by or toward men is normalized, even romanticized. In contrast, *Dear Zindagi*—which briefly touches on therapeutic healing—was praised but remained an exception rather than a trend.

From a gender studies perspective, this analysis deepens Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating how Indian cinema continues to promote a dominant masculine ideal that excludes emotional expressiveness. Trauma theory also informs our reading, highlighting how unresolved psychological harm is either displaced (through rage) or disavowed (through silence), leaving the viewer without tools to recognize or empathize with male suffering.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Responsible Narrative Design—Writers should depict emotional vulnerability in male characters with nuance and compassion.

Therapeutic Representation—Therapy and emotional literacy should be presented as valid male experiences.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration—Filmmakers should consult psychologists and gender experts during character development.

Media Literacy Education-Audiences must be empowered to deconstruct toxic masculinity tropes.

Global Dialogue-Bollywood can engage with international storytelling frameworks to expand its emotional grammar.

Cultural Reform through Critique- Film criticism should assess emotional ethics in male character development.

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