

Examining Toxic Masculinity under the Guise of 'Romance' in Sandeep Reddy Vanga's Hindi Films

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Abstract

Cinema is a powerful medium capable of normalizing or stigmatizing societal practices and of significantly influencing cultural paradigms. This study analyzes Vanga's *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) in terms of their portrayals of masculinity and romance. It demonstrates that these films consistently romanticize dominance and aggression, presenting them as integral to male identity and passionate love. By framing controlling and violent behaviors as signs of passion and love, they reinforce patriarchal norms rather than critiquing them. While each narrative depicts a hero's emotional struggle, both ultimately justify toxic masculine traits through their resolutions. This research situates Vanga's work within broader cinematic and cultural trends, showing how blockbuster popular culture can shape gender expectations. The analysis reveals that love in these films is portrayed as a vehicle that excuses brutality and grants redemption to the abuser, a message with dangerous implications for audiences. Given the massive reach of these films, their normalization of abuse under the guise of romance risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes about gender and relationships in Indian society. The findings highlight the need for critical media literacy and more responsible storytelling to challenge these damaging tropes.

Keywords: toxic masculinity; violence; gender dynamics; Vanga's films; romance; Bollywood



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Introduction

Cinema is one of the most influential forms of artistic expression and serves as both a reflection of and a catalyst for societal norms and ideologies. Particularly in Indian cinema, romantic narratives often act as a lens through which cultural, social, and psychological constructs are articulated (Wuss, 2009). Bollywood, in particular, has a well-established history of framing the ideal man as protective, strong, and at times volatile, while women are cast in supporting roles (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Pathak & Mishra, 2025). However, these portrayals often reflect patriarchal underpinnings by positioning men as active agents and women as passive recipients of their actions (Pathak, 2025). Such narratives reinforce traditional gender roles, portraying women primarily as caregivers and emotional anchors, often relegating them to the background in favor of the male protagonist's development (Nandakumar, 2011). Scholars have noted that Bollywood's impact on youth's worldview is profound (Balabantaray, 2022), meaning that these cinematic tropes can shape viewers' ideas of love and power. Recent events illustrate how charged these portrayals can be. *Kabir Singh*

(2019) was both a box-office hit and a lightning rod for debate: critics and viewers alike noted that it appeared to romanticize stalking and abuse (Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020; Ganguly & Singh, 2021). Similarly, *Animal* (2023) shattered box-office records but was widely criticized in the media for being overtly misogynistic and glorifying male aggression. This contentious reception underlines the importance of analyzing how love and violence are intertwined in these narratives. Scholars argue that cinematic romance has long served as a cultural site for constructing normative masculinities. Kelly's analysis of sexual purity discourses in contemporary film reveals how male virtue is articulated through moral restraint (Clayburn, 2024), while Dixon's reading of *The Sheik* situates virile masculinity within the anxieties of postwar British imperial identity (Dixon, 2020). Building upon these insights, the present study explores how Bollywood romance films reframe masculine identity not through imperial conquest or moral abstinence but through emotional endurance and domestic sacrifice, reflecting India's evolving socio-cultural constructions of manhood.

This study situates Vanga's Hindi films within academic discussions of masculinity and gender. We argue that *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* Center's toxic masculinity is under the guise of romance. Our analysis is informed by Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which highlights how culture privileges a specific ideal of manhood defined by power and dominance.

Toxic masculinity, in this context, refers to socially constructed attitudes, such as aggression, entitlement, and emotional repression, that emerge from this hegemonic ideal. Hegemonic masculinity operates as a normative ideal, shaping individual behavior and institutional norms in ways that reinforce gender hierarchies (Connell, 2005; Rotundi, 2020). Kimmel (2010) further explains that boys are often socialized to equate masculinity with dominance and emotional restraint. Within film, these traits translate into male protagonists who are volatile and controlling. Drawing on these frameworks and existing critiques, this paper examines how Vanga's narratives construct masculinity in romantic and familial contexts. We try to understand: do these films challenge or reinforce toxic masculine norms and gendered power relations? Through qualitative analysis of *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*, this research explores the broader social implications of romanticized toxicity in Bollywood storytelling.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design suited to analyzing the narrative and aesthetic elements of film. Drawing from established practices in media and gender studies (Milestone & Meyer, 2020; Chakravorty & Bera, 2024), the research investigates how contemporary Hindi cinema constructs and circulates ideas of masculinity, romance, and violence. The two Hindi feature films directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023), serve as the primary data. These films are selected because they represent

the director's only Hindi-language works and exemplify a consistent ideological treatment of romantic love and male aggression under the guise of romance. Their comparison allows the study to trace the continuity and evolution of toxic masculine ideals across narratives of love and romance. Each film was viewed four times in total, two complete viewings in Hindi and two selective viewings with English subtitles to ensure linguistic precision and visual accuracy. During these viewings, key sequences depicting romantic interaction, aggression, and family conflict were transcribed verbatim. These instances were systematically coded to identify patterns of behavior, emotional expression, and visual reinforcement of power relations.

To situate these ideas within the broader discourse of popular romance studies, this study's theoretical grounding rests on Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which explains how cultural systems privilege dominant male traits, power, control, and aggression while marginalizing alternative forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity functions as a social ideal that shapes individual conduct and institutional norms, reinforcing gender hierarchies across personal and cultural domains (Connell, 2005; Rotundi, 2020). Within this framework, toxic masculinity is conceptualized as the intensified expression of these hegemonic ideals, marked by entitlement, emotional suppression, and aggression. As Kimmel (2008) argues in *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, such traits are not

innate but socially cultivated through institutional norms that equate dominance with manhood and discourage vulnerability. This framework is appropriate for the present study because it enables a critical reading of how film narratives normalize masculine aggression and emotional control as desirable traits. It provides a lens to understand how cinematic storytelling participates in reproducing patriarchal power structures and how audiences are invited to identify with these dominant masculine ideals. By applying this theoretical lens, the study moves beyond simple character analysis to explore the broader cultural meanings associated with masculinity and romance in Hindi cinema.

About the Films

Kabir Singh is a Hindi adaptation of the Telugu film *Arjun Reddy*. It follows Kabir Rajdhir Singh (Shahid Kapoor), a brilliant medical student whose life unravels after a romantic rejection. Kabir is initially portrayed as a dedicated surgeon with a promising future. However, his personality is defined by intense passion and a razor-thin temper. His obsessive love for Preeti (Kiara Advani), a first-year medical student, quickly turns possessive. In one scene, Kabir loudly declares “Woh meri bandi hai” (“She is my girl”), effectively announcing her as his possession. He then insists “Chunni dalo” (“Put on the stole”), treating cultural symbols of modesty as commands rather than personal choices. Preeti becomes a mere object of ‘cinematic gaze’ (Burge, 2020). These early moments set the tone: Kabir’s approach to love is marked by

possession and control. As the plot progresses, Kabir's inability to cope with loss becomes apparent. After Preeti's family arranges her marriage to another man, Kabir injures himself with a drug overdose and destroys family property. Eventually, he abandons his medical career to numb his pain through alcohol and drugs. The narrative centers on Kabir's intense and self-destructive response to heartbreak, framing his downward spiral as a tragic love story.

Animal is an action-drama centered on family and revenge. Ranvijay "Ronnie" Singh (Ranbir Kapoor) is the second son of Balbir Singh (Anil Kapoor), a powerful industrialist with a violent past. From childhood, Ronnie is depicted as hot-headed and reckless. When a classmate of his sister is raped, young Ronnie takes revenge by fatally shooting the culprits, an act praised by his father. As an adult, Ronnie struggles with his role in the family's patriarchal legacy. His sister Reet (Sonali Batra) faces bullying, and Ronnie threatens vengeance to "check every line" on her suitor's hand before marriage. A major turning point comes when Ronnie's father survives an assassination attempt, mortally injuring Ronnie's brother-in-law in the chaos. After this, Ronnie's love for his wife, Geetanjali (Rashmika Mandanna), and his commitment to family turn into a mission of violent retribution. The film's narrative follows Ronnie's descent into vigilantism: he battles goons, engages in shootouts, and ultimately brutally avenges all threats to his father and family. Visually, *Animal* is highly stylized: dark lighting, dramatic

music, and slow-motion action scenes signal that Ronnie's rage is being aestheticized. The story frames violence as part of familial loyalty and masculine duty. Despite different genres, one a romantic tragedy, the other an action thriller, both films explicitly explore toxic masculinity and gender dynamics. Each narrative converges on similar themes: the centrality of a domineering masculine hero, the suppression of male vulnerability, the glamorization of violence, and the relegation of women to supporting, sacrificial roles. Both *Kabir* and *Ronnie* serve as case studies of how male protagonists are allowed, even encouraged, to act on anger and desire, with the story prioritizing their perspective throughout.

Normalization of Toxicity

A critical commonality between *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* is the normalization, and at times celebration, of toxic masculine behavior. Both films construct male aggression and control as natural extensions of love, thereby reinforcing what Connell terms hegemonic masculinity, the culturally dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes men's power over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In *Kabir Singh*, Kabir's identity is deeply intertwined with his entitlement over Preeti and his compulsive need for control. His assertion, "Woh meri bandi hai" ("She is my girl"), explains the ideology of possession that defines hegemonic masculinity: the belief that intimacy legitimizes ownership. Such moments

exemplify what Michael Kimmel describes as the entitlement script of manhood, where male desire is framed as both inevitable and authoritative (Kimmel, 2010).

The narrative's visual and emotional framing of Kabir's aggression reflects what James W. Messerschmidt (2019) calls accomplished masculinity, where violence and dominance become performative acts through which men assert social legitimacy. Kabir's violent outburst in a college match, filmed in stylized slow motion and accompanied by heroic music, transforms aggression into spectacle. The cinematic framing positions his rage as a mark of devotion, inviting viewers to read violence as passion. Even when Kabir slaps Preeti, the camera lingers on his emotional collapse rather than her pain, recentering male vulnerability as a form of redemption. As Haywood & Ghail (2013) observe, mediated masculinities often hinge on affective reversals, where the male subject's violence is reframed as emotional depth. This shift from the victim's suffering to the aggressor's anguish absolves the male figure and reinstates him as the emotional center of the narrative.

Kabir's self-destructive coping, his alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicidal tendencies, are similarly normalized through the cinematic language of romance. His addictions are depicted as symptoms of heartbreak rather than irresponsibility, romanticizing his self-harm as evidence of love's intensity. The film aligns with Flood's (2016) identification of a trope that renders

emotional dysfunction acceptable when motivated by love. This framing naturalizes aggression and self-destruction as components of “real” masculinity, and pain becomes proof of authenticity.



Figure 1: The image presents two characters (Ranvijaya Singh and Kabir Singh) exhibiting a rugged aesthetic through long hair, full beards, and dark sunglasses, symbolizing intensity, authority, and rebellion, with stylistic elements reinforcing their portrayal as strong, assertive figures.

Animals extend this dynamic to a broader familial and social sphere. Ronnie’s authority over his sister Reet and his wife Geetanjali is portrayed as protective rather than coercive, echoing patriarchal norms that conflate control with care. His declaration to Reet, “Before he puts vermilion on your forehead, I will have checked every line on the groom’s palm,” exemplifies what Hearn (2015) terms, where male power is justified under the guise of

guardianship. As a husband, Ronnie expects obedience from Geetanjali, erasing her agency; the narrative never revisits her academic aspirations after marriage. The film thus embodies the cinematic trope that if one loves Ronnie, one must obey Ronnie, an idea that reinstates the heroic myth of violent masculinity, where dominance is recast as devotion (Katz, 2011).

Violence in *Animals* is also coded as a familial duty. Ronnie's retaliatory attacks, whether mutilating bullies or launching a one-person war against gangsters, are aestheticized through grand music, slow motion, and applause from family members. His violence is legitimized as "protective" masculinity, reinforcing Connell's (2005) notion that hegemonic masculinity is sustained not only through domination but also through cultural consent. The narrative's refusal to morally question his brutality transforms aggression into moral necessity, a hallmark of what Messerschmidt (2019) describes as legitimized violent masculinity. This construction of aggressive masculinity is visually reinforced in *Figure 1*, where Ranvijaya Singh and Kabir Singh appear with long hair, full beards, and dark sunglasses. The rugged styling and intense expressions frame them as dominant and rebellious figures, visually embodying the authority and emotional intensity that the films associate with masculine power and justified aggression.

In both films, toxic behaviors are reframed as passion or protection. Kabir's public humiliation of Preeti and Ronnie's surveillance of Reet's marriage prospects are presented

without irony, normalizing control as care. Secondary characters rarely challenge these behaviors, instead performing what Wetherell & Edley (1999) call discursive complicity, in which silence and compliance sustain the gender order. By the narrative's end, both men's possession of women is reaffirmed, Kabir reunites with Preeti, and Ronnie remains the unquestioned patriarch. Such outcomes risk desensitizing viewers to abuse by embedding it in familiar romantic and familial scripts. As Maas & Bonomi (2021) note, romantic narratives can "mask severe imbalances," portraying domination as love and subservience as devotion. Both films thus participate in a broader cultural discourse that rebrands coercion and control as legitimate emotional expression, reaffirming the patriarchal grammar of cinematic masculinity.

Emotional Repression and Intoxication

The protagonists of *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* also illustrate how toxic masculinity enforces emotional repression, a key feature of hegemonic masculine ideology. Both Kabir and Ronnie are deeply wounded men who cannot process pain through vulnerability or dialogue. Instead, they retreat into alcohol, drugs, and rage, performing what Michael Kimmel identifies as the "boy code" of emotional stoicism, the expectation that men must suppress tenderness to preserve authority (Kimmel, 2008). Their self-destruction thus becomes not only a symptom of heartbreak but a demonstration of masculine conformity. Connell's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity helps explain how such repression maintains gender hierarchy: by

discouraging empathy or help-seeking, men assert dominance through endurance and silence.

In *Kabir Singh*, heartbreak triggers Kabir's descent. After Preeti's marriage is arranged without his consent, he lashes out destructively, trashing the wedding venue, burning letters, and injecting himself with morphine. These acts exemplify what Messerschmidt (2019) calls *accomplished masculinity*: performing violence or self-harm to reaffirm control in moments of emotional vulnerability. Rather than depicting these behaviors as pathological, the film romanticizes them through cinematic tenderness, soft lighting, close-ups of Kabir's tear-streaked face, and melancholic music. This aestheticization aligns with Flood's (2016) observation that popular culture often rebrands male pain as a form of depth or authenticity, thereby normalizing suffering as proof of love. Kabir's addiction is portrayed as tragic yet noble; the camera caresses his grief, presenting substance abuse as an extension of passion rather than its distortion.

Kabir's self-objectifying behaviors further reveal the conflation of dominance and devotion. His renaming of the family dog as "Preeti," and his rage when the maid calls it "a dog," illustrate what Hearn (2015) terms 'affective control' - the channeling of emotional loss into symbolic possession (p. 109). By policing even language, Kabir exerts power over how grief is spoken, reasserting his authority in moments of impotence. However, the film frames

this breakdown empathetically, inviting viewers to perceive his delusion as the depth of his love. The camera lingers on his anguish rather than his pathology, reinstating what Haywood & Ghail (2013) call the *aesthetic of wounded masculinity*, where emotional dysfunction becomes heroic rather than alarming.

Similarly, in *Animal*, Ronnie's reliance on alcohol embodies masculine avoidance of vulnerability. The opening montage of Ronnie drinking in loud pubs visually establishes what Wetherell & Edley (1999) describe as *discursive stoicism*: the cultural narrative that equates silence with strength (p. 340). After witnessing violence in his youth, his sister's assault, and his father's shooting, Ronnie never verbalizes fear or grief. Instead, he "drinks it down," performing the emotional restraint that hegemonic masculinity demands. Each subsequent crisis, his friend's death, betrayal by family, is followed by a cut to Ronnie drinking, cementing alcohol as both a coping mechanism and a symbol of masculine containment. Flood (2016) and Messerschmidt (2019) both emphasize that such portrayals turn male pain into moral endurance, framing self-destruction as the only socially acceptable outlet for emotion.

In both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*, emotional repression is depicted as an intrinsic part of masculinity rather than a socially conditioned limitation. This normalization perpetuates what Connell and Messerschmidt term the *cultural legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity*: the process

through which male suffering and silence are romanticized as evidence of strength (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). By failing to imagine alternatives, men who cry, seek therapy, or communicate, the films reassert the toxic equation between love, pain, and control. Ultimately, they transform repression into a masculine ideal, teaching audiences that true manhood lies not in vulnerability but in its denial.

Violence as an Expression of Masculinity

Violence is a central motif in both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*, reflecting how Indian popular cinema equates masculinity with physical dominance and control. The films differ in tone; *Kabir Singh* is a romantic drama, and *Animal* is an action thriller, but each frames aggression as an almost inevitable attribute of male identity. As Connell observes, hegemonic masculinity ensures that men remain dominant through culturally sanctioned practices of power and aggression (Connell, 2005). Similarly, Kimmel argues that violence becomes a “proof of manhood,” a performance through which men reaffirm social hierarchies (Kimmel, 2008). Both films stage that performance through stylized brutality that blurs the boundary between critique and celebration.

In *Kabir Singh*, physical aggression is closely tied to the protagonist’s sense of honor. Kabir’s fights are shot in slow motion with swelling music, converting assault into spectacle. When he ambushes a student in the library for insulting Preeti, the camera lingers on Kabir’s

tense expression rather than the victim's fear. This visual grammar encourages viewers to share Kabir's adrenaline rather than condemn his behavior. The infamous moment when Kabir slaps Preeti exemplifies this narrative framing: the film swiftly redirects sympathy to his remorse rather than to her humiliation. As Katz (2011) notes, popular media often "translate male violence into emotional authenticity," teaching audiences to read aggression as a sign of depth rather than domination. By aestheticizing Kabir's violence as love-driven passion, the film normalizes abuse as a forgivable expression of devotion.

In *Animal*, violence similarly functions as the defining language of masculinity, but it is amplified to mythic proportions. Ronnie's aggression is portrayed as both innate and necessary, a trait that cements his identity as protector and avenger. Unlike *Kabir Singh*, where violence remains interpersonal, *Animal* transforms brutality into a grand-scale spectacle. Each act of vengeance is justified through familial duty, the defense of honor, or the safeguarding of women. Tasker (1993) describes this framing as the "heroic masculinization of violence," in which cinematic men become moralized warriors rather than perpetrators. When Ronnie slaughters enemies in a stylized battle sequence, slow-motion cinematography and percussive scoring turn carnage into choreography. The audience is invited to admire his control and endurance, not to question the ethics of his rage. Ronnie's domestic interactions reproduce the same logic of dominance. His silence and volatility function as unspoken threats that keep his

wife, Geetanjali, compliant. The film equates his possessiveness with devotion, with what Butler (1997) calls the “heteronormative melancholia of masculinity,” wherein repression and control substitute for intimacy. Because the narrative never challenges his actions, Ronnie’s brutality becomes synonymous with love. Both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* thus perpetuate what Katz (2011) terms the “tough-guise” ethos, an ideology that teaches man to express emotional pain only through aggression.

As Harrington (2021) notes, cultural scripts often valorize male aggression as “natural” strength. These films embody that script without question. By showing every violent act as



motivated by love or honor, they conflate brutality with virtue, blurring the moral line. The camera, music, and narrative rhythm aestheticize aggression until it appears virtuous, recoding domination as passion and control as care. In doing so, *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* sustain a discourse where toxic masculinity thrives under the guise of protection and love, a cinematic testament to how deeply patriarchal scripts remain embedded within popular representations of men.

Gender Dynamics and the Role of Women

In both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*, female characters are largely defined by their relationships to men, reinforcing patriarchal gender dynamics. They serve principally as enablers, victims, or nurturers, with little independent agency. This follows a common pattern in Bollywood: male heroes act, while women orbit around them, supporting or suffering (Sreekumar & Raj, 2022). Preeti in *Kabir Singh* is the quintessential devoted girlfriend. Kabir's obsession overshadows her personal life, aspirations, friends, and even opinions. We see her dancing in college at the start, but once Kabir locks onto her, her character shrinks to reacting to him. Simone de Beauvoir's (2016) insight is visible: Preeti "becomes" the silent beloved through the film, fully defined by Kabir's passions. Whenever Preeti attempts to assert herself (once shouting for Kabir to stop, or later defiantly refusing to marry him under threat), the camera quickly cuts to Kabir's anguish. The narrative never spends time on Preeti's perspective or emotions. Instead, whenever Kabir is down, she is portrayed as comforting him, serving as

an emotional anchor whose own heartbreak is always secondary to his.

By the end, she is essentially living in the space Kabir vacated: she loses her career focus and resumes “life” only when Kabir is reformed. The final images (a newborn child with the name Kabir painted on its crib) suggest that even the next generation is centered around the male identity. Preeti’s role is reduced to pure devotion, quietly forgiving Kabir’s bad behavior. Similarly, *Animal* sidelines its women. Geetanjali, Ronnie’s love interest and eventual wife, begins as an assertive, modern woman. However, once she marries Ronnie, she immediately assumes the role of sacrificial caregiver. The film tells us in passing that she had planned to study abroad, but that thread is never followed up on. Instead, she cooks for Ronnie, changes his bandages, and dutifully tends to the infants. The way the film’s soundtrack even alludes to her womb with the “big pelvis” dialogue, when Rannvijay says, “You have a big pelvis, you can accommodate healthy babies”, underscores how women’s bodies are symbolically tied to reproduction and domesticity (Chopra, 2007; Kakar, 1990).

Ronnie’s mother is present but mostly silent, serving as the emotional backbone of the family, always forgiving her husband’s violence. Ronnie’s sister exists to be protected; after she is harassed, Ronnie’s revenge is the centerpiece, while her fear and anger are depicted briefly, then ignored. This dynamic places all major female characters in reactive roles. Even

Reet, who stands up to Ronnie at one point, ends up defeated. The only woman who shows much emotion is Geetanjali, but her emotions are always about Ronnie. She does not protest his murders or even question his sanity; she simply prays for him and bandages his wounds.

Menon (2004) is of the view that the so-called “empowered woman” in Bollywood often ends up reinforcing patriarchy. That critique is vivid here: Preeti and Geetanjali might appear modern at first, but by each film’s conclusion, they have been rendered into paragons of patience and forgiveness, undermining any early hints of autonomy. This echoes Nandy’s (1983) argument that Indian popular cinema frequently resolves gender tension by reasserting patriarchal order under the guise of love and family unity. In terms of narrative importance, women exist mainly to highlight the man’s journey. Preeti’s acceptance measures Kabir’s worth; Geetanjali’s care affirms Ronnie’s worth. At no point does either film show these women achieving their own goals or challenging the system. Gendered double standards are stark: Kabir and Ronnie face no real scorn for their violence, but the women face social stigma if they stray from decorum. In *Animal*, a corollary scene shows the politically connected Bhairava insulted when Rannvijay rapes his sister’s fiancé, yet Bhairava’s outrage is presented as vindictive, not acknowledging Rannvijay’s provocation. The imbalance is clear. These portrayals lock women into subservient roles: primary carers of the hero’s feelings, not equal partners. Such depictions reinforce the patriarchal script rather than questioning it, as

Sreekumar & Raj (2022) note is common in mainstream Indian cinema.

This cinematic pattern exemplifies what Banaji (2006) calls the “domestication of female agency,” where even seemingly modern heroines are ultimately subordinated to the male protagonist’s emotional development. Both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* thus rehearse gender politics that privilege masculine redemption over female autonomy, reaffirming the cultural logic of patriarchy under the banner of romance and sacrifice.

Redemption Through Love

A final theme in both narratives is “redemption through love.” Each film suggests that his partner's enduring devotion can forgive the male protagonist’s toxic behavior. This trope, while emotionally potent, implies that abuse is ultimately justified or excused by the power of true love. As Maas & Bonomi (2021) describe, in the so-called “virgin–beast” trope, romantic fiction often “masks” a vast power imbalance: men use their “bestly power” to control a “subordinate” woman, and any harm that comes from the woman’s attempt to “tame the beast” is downplayed.

In *Kabir Singh* and *Animal*, this pattern is on full display. In *Kabir Singh*, Kabir’s extreme acts are effectively erased by Preeti’s forgiveness. After Kabir’s attempted suicide and descent into alcoholism, it is only when he promises change that Preeti decides to leave for a while.

However, when Kabir reappears at her arranged wedding, and she professes her love, the film instantly forgives all his past. We see Kabir injured on a train and lying unconscious; as Preeti cries and carries him away, the narrative allows her only a moment of agency before she surrenders. Kabir wakes up to find everything restored. His violent outbursts, slaps, threats, and even risking Preeti's arranged marriage are never seriously held against him. Instead, he is rewarded: Preeti's final acceptance of him (now a reformed man) is presented as the happy ending. The unspoken message is that if a man is remorseful and a woman forgives, love can absolve any abuse. Banaji (2006) describes this as romantic redemption arcs, a recurring trope in Hindi cinema where toxic male behavior is reimagined as evidence of deep passion rather than pathology (Banaji, 2006). Such narratives conflate suffering with sincerity, where women's endurance becomes the moral currency for male transformation.

Animals use a similar logic. Ronnie's savagery, his tens of murders, is retrospectively justified by the extraordinary circumstances, protecting the family. In the climax, Ronnie charges into a rival's lair to protect Geetanjali and their children. Despite the scale of bloodshed, the film rewards him by showing Geetanjali gently whispering to him as he lies injured on a hospital bed. She wipes his blood and coos softly. The film frames this as her unconditional love, suggesting it is what healed him. There is no scene in which she expresses anger or grief over what he did. Instead, she becomes a figure akin to a mother or a Goddess, absolving him

through her devotion. In effect, love “cures” Ronnie. The last images imply he will return to being a good man because she stood by him.

These endings use romance as a moral pardon. The protagonists essentially receive a last-minute *get-out-of-jail-free card* through the women’s forgiveness. This satisfies the romantic fantasy but carries a chilling implication: it teaches viewers that passionate love includes enduring a man’s rage. As scholars of intimate partner violence note, such depictions blur the line between affection and abuse, perpetuating the cultural myth that “good women” reform “broken men” (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Rajan, 2003). The female characters suffer harm or betrayal, but they are punished only through pathos, not narrative justice. Kabir and Ronnie are humanized by their own tears or realizations; their pain becomes more important than the damage they inflicted on others. Even bell hooks (1999), in her writings on love, argues that true love cannot arise from domination or silence (hooks, 1999). The portrayals in these films violate her criteria: love here is portrayed as unilateral sacrifice by the woman. There is no emphasis on respect or mutual growth. Instead, the female partner is shown needing to heal the man, not herself. This distortion is dangerous; it romanticizes the idea that men’s worst behaviors are forgivable if a woman loves them enough.

In both films, the male heroes stand “redeemed.” They have won back the woman’s love,

and the narrative demands that we celebrate this outcome. The trope sends a clear lesson: a man's passionate anger is romantic because it springs from love, and a woman's unconditional forgiveness is virtuous no matter how much she has suffered. It effectively rewards abusers for their bad behavior. From a social standpoint, this is deeply problematic, as it trivializes patterns of abuse and promotes the idea that love can justify violence. Such cinematic narratives normalize emotional dependency and gendered suffering as expressions of authenticity. The result is a dangerous conflation of love with endurance, a pattern that continues to reinforce patriarchal values in contemporary Hindi cinema.

Conclusion

Kabir Singh and *Animal* serve as vivid examples of how popular cinema can mirror and perpetuate toxic masculinity under the banner of romance and drama. By depicting their flawed, aggressive male protagonists as ultimately sympathetic and even heroic, these films normalize harmful behaviors. Kabir's entitlement, emotional cruelty, and reliance on alcohol are portrayed as tragic byproducts of love, rather than as choices that deserve critique. Ronnie's bloodlust and silence are framed as noble responses to trauma. In both cases, the narratives fail to call out the abuse; instead, they reward it with love and familial acceptance. These stories fall short of any genuine critique of male aggression. Instead of challenging patriarchal myths, they often reinforce them.

Critics have already noted that *Animal* and *Kabir Singh* perpetuate male chauvinism and diminish female agency (Ganguly & Singh, 2021; Chakravorty & Bera, 2024). Our analysis underscores that both films absorb toxic traits into their concept of love, suggesting that true romance is intertwined with suffering and control. They contribute to a cinematic landscape where gendered violence is excused rather than questioned. In effect, they validate the very ideologies that gender-rights activists fight against. From a cultural perspective, the popularity of these films underscores the enduring appeal of the alpha-male archetype, even as broader society calls for more equitable gender norms. By heroicizing abusive behavior, these films provoke grave ethical implications, as they risk embedding in audiences a dangerous lesson: that violence and dominance are acceptable expressions of passion. Given cinema's power to shape social attitudes (Balabantaray, 2022), such portrayals can have real-world consequences, potentially reinforcing regressive stereotypes in a society already grappling with gender inequality. These issues demand that both filmmakers and audiences exercise critical reflection. Filmmakers have a responsibility to recognize how their portrayal of love and violence shapes cultural attitudes; audiences, in turn, must question and critique the on-screen romanticization of abuse. Promoting media literacy can help viewers understand the power of cinematic messages and resist harmful stereotypes. Future storytellers should aim to depict relationships in which strength is balanced by empathy and respect, not domination. Only through such

conscious efforts can cinema move beyond these damaging tropes and contribute to a healthier vision of gender relations. In a society increasingly troubled by gender violence, the stakes of media representation are high. Ultimately, creators and critics alike must insist on narratives where love is built on equality rather than oppression.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Bollywood, based in Mumbai, represents India's Hindi-language film industry, known for its music, drama, and cultural narratives. It differs from Tollywood, which refers to Telugu-language cinema centered in Hyderabad and known for its action-oriented themes and regional storytelling. This distinction highlights the linguistic and cultural diversity of Indian cinema.