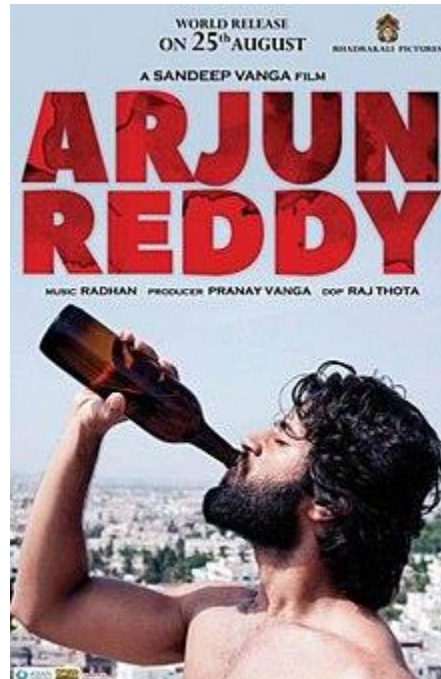# Selling Toxic Masculinity Through Regional Cinema:
A Case Study of the Film *Arjun Reddy*

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arjun_Reddy

Abstract

This article explores toxic masculinity in Indian cinema through an analysis of *Arjun Reddy*. It examines how film perpetuates patriarchal norms and reinforces gender inequality. By examining the portrayal of the protagonist and society's reactions, it reveals the impact of film representations on real-life attitudes. The study highlights the need for alternative narratives that challenge traditional gender norms and promote diversity in masculinity. It advocates a critical

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analysis of film discourse to promote a more inclusive portrayal of gender identities in Indian cinema.

Film is not an isolated art form as it inhabits a common expressive culture fed by tradition, cultural memory, and indigenous modes of symbolic representation. Hence, films and other arts are mutually implicated in the productions of meaning and pleasure, which definitely needs to be examined. (Indubala Singh - Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema).

Cinema contributes to the discourses, which canonize the ideologies that benefits the socially dominant populace in the space it is produced. It convinces the general society that the power relation is, in fact, arbitrary without any external influence acting upon to ferment it. This process of creating a power structure without the knowledge of the subordinate population is called naturalization. Without any physical force, thus, a hegemonic structure is created, as Raymond Williams (1997) explains,

It is in [the] recognition of the wholeness of the process that the concept of "hegemony" goes beyond "ideology." What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.

Looking at Indian cinema from a gender perspective, many stereotypes were created and naturalized by popular commercial cinema. While their spread a misogynistic message in the minds of Indian youth, what one fails to notice is that not just women, but men are also affected by this trope. The heroes in mainstream Indian cinema have their own grammar which plants the idea that a man must be fairer, taller, with strong voice, which can 'protect' the female counterpart(s). With most men in India lacking these qualities, it creates an inferiority complex in them and to prove that they are equally manly, they imitate everything done by film stars on silver screen such as catcalling and eve-teasing.

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In other words, looking carefully, the naturalization happened is that men who possess the qualities of a tall, fair and strong conventional macho-ness[1] have the license to be toxic or hegemonic masculine (which will be discussed in later part). This is the common discourse that has been prevailing in the Indian society for too long. Even after the rise of feminism in India and many productions of stereotype breaking cinema, the idea of being a man still helps in reasserting the gender roles[2] of masculinity.

> Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. It essentializes the character of men or imposes a false unity on a fluid and contradictory reality. Masculinity represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices. (Cornell et al., 2005)

This paper will investigate how conforming to the gender roles as prescribed by the patriarchy will contribute to the gender inequality using the film *Arjun Reddy* as case study. *Arjun Reddy* (2018) is a film directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, an Indian director and screenwriter, following the traditional cinematic grammar. The film maps the life of a surgeon **Arjun Reddy** and the complication in his love story due to his anger issues.

Arjun Reddy is introduced as an absurd character that wakes up to alcohol filled with macho-ness. Arjun's workspace is then introduced where he acts kind to the patients, excelling professionally, without conforming to the log books and other rules. Returning to his trance state at home, the film uses flashback to delve into Arjun's past.

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[1] The idea of projecting one's masculine sexuality using physical attributes such as body hairs, athletically fit physique, beard and moustache, etc., to stress that the man is more virile than others.
[2] *Gender roles* are the sets of behavior, roles and responsibilities attributed to women and men respectively by society which are reinforced at the various levels of the society through its political and educational institutions and systems, employment patterns, norms and values, and through the family.

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Arjun is modelled to be the amalgamation of both athletic alpha and the intelligent student which is the ultimate canon the general society look up to. Arjun is shown with extreme charisma, filled with qualities of an alpha male, tall, muscular, riding a Royal Enfield bike, filled with aggressive attitude on sport. He sees Preeti, a fresher, and falls in love with her at first sight. He enters the juniors' class and threatens everyone to stay away from her. He prevents her seniors from ragging and sees it to that she is comfortable. Only when Preeti enters his life, he retorted to apologize for the first time. His acts of adding an extra seat only for her symbolizes that he submits to the dynamic changes in his life. Having both angry and tender side, he is everything a woman expects from a man, as Hacker (1957) says, "a woman wants a man to be big and strong, sensitive and tender". The next day, he enters her class and makes her sit in the front bench of the class. He also decides whom she should take as a friend and takes her out to teach. Preeti is merely silent in these parts, but she feels loved and happy looking at the drawings on her hands, he drew to explain anatomy. Arjun dominates the space of Preeti, by curbing her freewill, but not to exploit but to keep her 'safe', deciding everything in her life starting from the desk position to companionship.

Later, during holi[3], Arjun informs in Preeti's hostel that none should apply colours on her. When he learns that his foes molested her, Arjun fumed with anger, takes her to their place and beats them up. This episode ends up with Arjun confessing his love for Preeti and gaining her acceptance. The character takes up the role of protector and provider in this case, not just financially but socially, but also intellectually, which is a primary quality society expects from a masculine paternal figure.

The film again travels to the past where Preeti's foot gets hurt by a broken glass. Arjun takes her to beachhouse to take care of her, doing all the chores. Preeti confirms her love for him and their relationship begins on an intimate level. Looking at Arjun in the status of a lover, in the visual narrative, Preeti was shown satisfied with his sexual performance.

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[3] An Indian festival, where people throw colours at each other as a mark of celebration

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In one sense this (lover) role strikes at the heart of the problem of masculinity. The ability to perform sexual acts has been a criterion for man's evaluation of himself from time immemorial. Virility used to be conceived as a unilateral expression of male sexuality but is regarded today in terms of the ability to evoke a full sexual response on the part of the female. Men as the dominant group feel the strains of accommodating to the changing status… and meeting the challenge presented by the sexual emancipation of women. (Hacker, 1957)

Time passes and Arjun finishes off his Master's degree. When they had to drift apart, Arjun doesn't show any emotions towards farewell. He even shows resentment towards nostalgia, stressing that he lives in the present. The rituals of the wedding of Arjun's brothers happen and Preeti calls him over to home to meet her family. As her father catches them kissing, the chance of their wedding reduces. Arjun tries again to convince Preeti's family, but her father stands stubborn in marrying her of to someone of her own caste. When Arjun is reminded of his caste identity, despite his social position as a doctor, he leaves the place denying Preeti. He gives Preeti a six-hour deadline to choose between him and her family, when she couldn't turn up in time, Arjun drugs himself and goes unconscious. The patriarchy, which acted upon his life in an indirect way, started impacting him directly which caused him to react with anger to Preeti. Despite being well off in every aspect of his gender role, he is looked down on because of his caste identity. He retorts to alcohol and sexual reliefs in other women, after Preeti leaves his life to revise his position as a man in the society as someone who is successful both professionally and personally.

Drinking issue is legitimized as an escape to heart break, which further empowers the attitude of self-destruction in young adults who go through a heartbroken phase. As Leone and Parrott (2015) describes in their article, the ability to physically consume and tolerate large amounts of alcohol without adverse reactions as being characteristic of "masculine" behavior (Peralta, 2007).

Life goes extremely downhill for Arjun, when he is forced to operate on a patient while he was drunk. Though he stabilized the patient, the case gets into the hands of Indian Medical

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Council, leaving him without defense with a criminal case on him. The lawyer who was brought to handle his case mentions that Arjun is too free-spirited to be in a democracy.

Chased out of his flat, Arjun roams without money and place to stay, in the streets to be found by Shiva. He breaks the news that his grandmother passed away which makes Arjun rethink his life and return home. He goes on a trip and when he returns, he sees Preeti pregnant. They both converse only to find out that Preeti never lived with another person, and it was Arjun's child she's bearing. He takes her home and thus concludes the film.

The whole film normalized *Toxic Masculinity* by adhering to the convention framework of manhood, where Toxic masculinity is not the argument that men are toxic by simply being themselves. It is a critique of the way men are expected to adhere to certain gender roles within society at large that fit within a traditionalist framework that forces men to limit their emotional range down to pretentious indifference, lacking temper. Arjun clearly is affected by this aspect of toxic masculinity where he is driven by anger and hasty decisions. Therefore, the normalization of toxic masculinity or in other words, giving an opportunity for the Indian society to isolate unhealthy masculinity from the complicated, multi-faceted character Arjun, adds to the pre-existing stereotypes of how a man must be.

Films like *Arjun Reddy* uphold the gender ideology, while glorifying the traditional gender norms. What one must observe is when the protagonist fulfils his traditional masculine gender role; ultimately the voice of his female counterpart is subsided. In other words, when a man adheres to the gender idea, the woman, without choices, is forced to fulfill her feminine duties such as supporting a man emotionally and physically. Thus, when the idea of masculinity is left unrevised in India, the women are affected.

This is the character which is celebrated all across India, which is remade in two other languages, forming the discourse, normalizing the patriarchal dominance. When films which advocate singular masculine idea, it adds up to the preexisting notion of 'real' man, the other

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masculine ideas are ultimately left out. The complex characterization of *Arjun Reddy* and making him relatable to general public is a way to make him acceptable.

This is visible in different stages throughout the film. First, by making Arjun a doctor, the film maker created a character that possesses amazing and infinite medical skills and knowledge, which saves lives on a day-to-day basis. He is an infallible hero who represents infallible masculinity (Jacobs 2003). Arjun performs an important job of saving lives which associates him with a traditional masculinity marked by hard skills and competence. Arjun meet his friend Shiva's sister's fiancé, who objectifies women, calling them "oily, hairy and fat". Arjun speaks against that, which is strategically done to distinguish Arjun from misogynists, to create acceptance.

One of the earliest models helps in understanding the idea behind the creation of such characters. *Direct-effects theory* by Livingston (1996) asserts that media texts contain certain representations and messages, which are directly, uncritically and passively absorbed by the audience. It creates a sense of "false consciousness", a Marxist term, which means that the dominant populace manipulates and creates an alternative fake reality which the majority consumes and believes.

Creation of characters like **Arjun Reddy** helps in naturalization of toxic masculine characteristics of Indian men. Starting from Royal Enfield to the alcohol issues, everything is a strong phallic symbol which boosts up the image of machoness, retelling that machoism is an important aspect of masculinity. Another important factor that must be taken into account is the economic perspective. Selling a character with toxic masculine characteristic promises more return than selling a stereotype breaking rational man, who advocates gender equity. Reversing this, it is evident that the film industry has constantly sold machoistic toxic and hegemonic masculine characters through popular media to make more money, without giving proper attention to the sociological perspective.

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Arjun Reddy attempts to create acceptance towards the toxic behavior of boys and men in Indian society. The careful construction of heroism without the machoism visible gained the film the status of cult classic whereas the screenplay still remains controversial among Indian film critics.

The reception of the remake of the film *Arjun Reddy* in Hindi under the title *Kabir Singh* by the same director made it clearer that the Indian society holds the toxic behavior of men high. This endangers other qualities of masculinities that don't conform to the traditional masculine values. Therefore there emerges a necessity to create alternative cinema and critically analyzing the pre-existing cinematic discourse, by which focuses on the marginalized masculinities in Indian context, which this paper stresses on.

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