

## Toxic Masculinity and Compulsive Heteronormativity in Konkona Sen's Movie, *A Death in the Gunj*

**Palistha Ranjitkar**

Khwopa College Bhaktapur  
palistha.ranjitkar@gmail.com

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gender is one of the most contested subjects in literature. Some prominent scholars like Judith Butler have argued that gender is not innate, but performative. For instance, masculinity is a construct which is always believed to resonate with a compulsive heteronormativity. The fact that men have to behave like an actual “macho; the giver ; the doer completely contrasting feminine virtues such as the emotional , passive and the receiver is prescriptive of the ways through which heteronormativity has become naturalized since the beginning of the civilization. This paper looks into the subtle details about the rooted construct of heteronormativity resembled in the movie “A death in the Gunj”(2016) . Here the protagonist Shutu faces spiritual conflict between his naturally innate virtues like kindness, sensitivity, introversion which goes quite contrary to the compartmentalized masculine virtues such as assertiveness, bravery, manhood and a pressure to maintain a proper “macho” personality. This research looks into the prominent crisis of masculinity and gender performativity that the world faces today. Is it only essential to venerate the so called masculine virtues like dominance and assertiveness? If yes , what about kindness, sensitivity and the capacity to feel emotions that are so much sidelined as feminine virtues? What is the position of man in the modern society? The movie “ A death in Gunj “ paradoxically opens up these hard questions through the characterization of Shuttu who remains unloved and forsaken and drives himself towards the annals of*

*self-destruction and suicide for the reason that he finds himself very vaguely suited to fit into the societal constructs of what makes a proper “man”. This research employs Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity to look into all these prominent gender questions. It also employs Lacan’s construct of symbolic order where language is a source of both alienation and subjectivity considering the fact that while language structures our understanding of self and reality, it alienates from the self that stemmed from the imaginary order from our authentic selves.*

**Keywords:** masculinity, Toxic masculinity, assertiveness, manhood, crisis, gender performance

## **Introduction**

*A Death in the Gunj* is a 2016 Indian English-language drama film written and directed by Konkona Sen Sharma. Set in 1979, it is a coming of age story, about a shy student Shuttu who uses a family trip in order to escape from the slanders that comes with his failed semester. During his stay, along with a bunch of relatives, Shuttu confronts several trails questioning his worth as a man, by almost all of his relatives. For instance, Nandu slams him for being afraid to drive despite being a man Vikrant, his later hero consistently shames him for being cowardly, shy, unassertive, scared and effeminate. Likewise, Mini, an English girl Shuttu uses him only as a tool to purge her selves from Vikrant’s inattentiveness as a romantic partner. Even little Tani uses Shuttu only to the point that she can play with him and he can amuse her. All of these instances hint that Shuttu’s sensitive kind and temperate nature becomes his own foe and consequently Shuttu commits suicide by the end of the movie.

When it comes to portrayal of a man in popular media, movies, TV serials, fictions and even romance stories, there is a common stereotyping trend of the body icon. For instance, a proper hero figure is the one who is bodily stout, gentlemanly, brave, energetic, risk taking, adventurous, outgoing and courageous. This inadvertently attracts the public too considering the fact that the body image of an actual man desired by many is the one that qualifies all these prerequisites. The hero is the strongest of all, the powerful of all, the most muscular of all, the problem solver and on and on. However, what about a hero character who doesn’t fulfill any of these prerequisites? How about a hero who is kind sensitive, warm hearted, humane, empathetic, but not courageous, problem solving, risk taking or strong, muscular decision taker? After all, how can a protagonist who does not fit into society’s compartmentalized picture of traditional paradigm of masculinity, the loser, the misfit, the introvert make it all along to justify his existence throughout the course of the entire narrative? Who controls the course of language of masculinity in the world? How our thought process mediated through the language that the world speaks? Why is the language of kindness and sensitivity discredited over the language of bravery, power and heroism? These are some questions that I want to foreground through this essay through the portrayal of Shuttu’s characterization in “*A Death in the Gunj*”.

## Literature Review

Various researchers have gleaned upon the topics of gender and masculinity as gender has become a barometer of any individual's identity. For instance, stereotyping has its roots everywhere and anywhere, be it in the media, popular culture or the advertisements. Stressing upon the highly overhyped concept of masculinity in popular culture, especially in the media, Kristen Barber and Tristen Bridges (2017) contemplate "Old spices smell like " man -man "campaign offers young men something they are presumably lacking- manhood embodied by the cowboy, the biker and the lumber jack"(p.41).Semantically speaking these men are being portrayed as signifiers to sell products by selling the myths of masculinity. Given that a sense of virility populates the mind of the general consumer, the traditional paradigms of masculinity have become a portal for people to sell the myths of a sense of dominance among men, masculinity and the concept conversely sell the product. All of these myths are the undercurrents of the current capitalist society. Considering the fact that the capitalists need to sell products to the middle class in order to get richer and more opulent, they feed themselves with the stories of traditional stories of masculinity. Bryant W. Scouls (2017) maintains, "To oppose capitalism, we must also simultaneously oppose white supremacy and toxic masculinity, which aid in the reproduction of the exploitative and undemocratic political economic system that dominates" (p,8). All of these instances hint towards the continuity of the tradition of keeping the traditional stories of masculinity alive to serve the purpose of the capitalist enterprise.

Toxic masculinity also has deeper roots to the other gender, the feminine. Traditionally feminine virtues come contrary to the traditionally compartmentalized virtues of masculinity. However, society is progressing the thin line of distinction between the masculine and feminine is blurring. Kristen Barber and Tristen Bridges (2017) write, "When women enter into historically 'masculine' areas like sports or the 'workplace' they shift the boundaries of femininity. And those are the moments when we get anxious about the claim that masculinity is in crisis" (p.40). This is also a radar for traditional masculinity surfacing out as an unshakable tradition that needs to be protected from being polluted by the act of females practicing it. Quoting Linda Marttinaclof , Kristopher Norris(2019) writes, " As social constructs like gender deploy their power, they become rooted as 'unquestionable' foundations for established social arrangements" (p,324). Because masculinity and gender role has become such a big construct, it is naturally expected that the concept of gender role is rigid and fixed therefore any authority that seeks to counter or challenge it needs to be suppressed.

In popular cultures also, it is important to note that the traditional "macho image " has an alternative to a new hoarde of metrosexual men. Louie .K . (2012) brings forth the instance of a herbivorous man asserting that "a herbivore man doesn't have traditional characteristics such as aggressiveness and sexual dominance. Instead, he treats women not as sex objects, but as friends" (369). The major reinforcement of this is that unlike the concept of traditional construct of a proper "macho man", an alterna-

tive concept of manhood is being embraced. For instance, a more temperate, kind and softer stance of “manhood” which is more often equated to the feminine is often being embraced. The realization that hegemonic masculinity has become too much subversive on men also owes to the fact, the roles of men as stronger, mightier and physically stout creatures have diminished because in the modern world they have mixed roles. Quoting Podles Imms, W. D. (2000) argues that “we must examine boys from the perspective that they are confused and misbehave because they no longer have masculine roles” (157). Because men can no longer succumb to their traditionally assigned gender roles, making it a battle cry becomes a pointless thing.

Giving in too traditional gender roles also comes parallel with the fact that homophobia has become another acutely stringent problem that batters man. The concept of compulsive heteronormativity shatters the need for emotional intimacy that is mandatory for men. Strayhorn, T. L., & Tillman-Kelly, D. L. (2013) contemplates, “They articulated how the persistence of racism in the larger gay community and homophobia in the Black community contributed to their understanding of self as Black gay men and impacted their sense of belonging within particular social contexts across their collegiate experience”(102). A powerful reinforcement of a prototype of a truly masculine macho man proliferating popular media comes along with James Bond movies and the portrayal of a prototype of a truly masculine heterosexual hero becomes explicit. Quoting O’ Donnel, Bellamy, M. (2018) describes Bond as a “fully incarnate, highly intelligent, powerful heterosexual male that might be considered the end product to secular humanism”(140). This extensive stress yielded for the trope of a straight heterosexual prototype for a man in popular culture also explains the implicit hatred for homosexual men.

Gender roles, for instance the traditional name and label of masculinity has often also been a barometer to explain not only the social roles of men, but also the women as a whole in question. For instance, Explaining the stance of Thai women Santasombat, Y.(2008), maintains “Hence, however proficient a female may be in matters of production, trading, profit-sharing, education or management of a household economy, she will always have a lower potential than a male on the spiritual side. She is more distant from heaven or Nirvana than the male” (138). The most common thing in most of the cultures around the world is that irrespective of the cultural spectrum or pace of empowerment in the modern society, women always have lesser agency than men. Shedding light upon the ostracization that men after civil war faced for not being able to live up to their traditional macho role Pinar, W. F. (2001) contemplates “Those who embraced women’s domestic values or spent much time in women’s sphere were dismissed by some men as emasculated”(329). The cultural construct, therefore is such a powerful force that, it takes a real craft for men to free themselves from the burden of so called “traditional masculine”.

The subversive heteronormative façade of masculinity forces men to toughen up. Consequently, they are unable to make their feelings clear to their wives or lovers.

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Geeta Ramanathan (2020) maintains, “ Even as the characters may recognize that the psychic wounds have been internalized because of the social imaginary and they willfully seek to negate them, the women particularly find that the men have greater difficulty understanding how their brokenness affects them and their relationships with women”(138-139). Because men are always expected to take care of how emotionally expressive they ought to be with women, they are always barred from opening up too much about themselves. Solomom.E.(2018) writes, “This often disturbing “talk” and attendant actions of the ritualistic heterotopia of the locker room have been normalized within our broader cultural understanding of masculinity” (139). The reinforcement is this that men in a broad cultural spectrum are unable to articulate their genuine feelings , fears and humane emotions.

This is how researchers have gleaned into various aspects of toxic masculinity manifested in the social context. Considering the fact that such generalization has become a norm masculinity has not by so far been a haven to redeem the order of the society. This nagging generalization has thus made gender functions a compulsion rather than an act that is practiced by individual choice. However, most of the researches have forgotten to take into account, the concept of masculinity in popular culture and film studies. This is why, I have ventured to fill the gap and see how the concept of masculinity is a prominent theme of discussion in popular culture and cinematic depictions.

## **Methodology**

Judith Butler sets forth the idea of gender is a performative act, it is a replica of an absent original, not eternal truth. I am going to delve into the performative role of gender manifested in Shuttu’s personality and how his gender performance impacts his place as a man in the society. I will delve into the extremes through which Shuttu suffers for the replica of an absent original. Likewise, I will also look into Lacan’s concept of the symbolic order in which the subject reaches the realm of language and babbles for the desire of the other notwithstanding with their actual preverbal routes.

## **Analysis and findings**

A Death in the Gunj (2016) is a movie that questions the construct of pre-existent narratives that come with gender., be it in terms of performance or identification. Here the central character Shuttu faces several trails considering the fact that he is not able to live up to his traditionally assigned gender role as a man. Through his silent gesticulations, temperate nature and lack of visibility to do daring masculine works such as riding a bike or venture for daring adventures like other men , the movie dramatizes the language of indifference towards Shuttu. This indifference is manifested in the concept of gender binary where men are bound to wear the façade of masculinity to prevent appearing effeminate. This essay firstly discusses the ways through which Shuttu’s failure to live up to the traditional gender roles is foregrounded. Later, it delves into the

ways through which his virtues such as kindness and compassion, highly trivialized as feminine are marginalized. Thirdly, it contemplates how this marginalization is normalized and Shuttu's punishment as a man unable to live his gender role is justified.

Shuttu's portrayal as a man who fails to live up to his assigned gender role is all pervasive throughout the movie. His character appears in direct contrast to Vikrant who portray the stereotypical masculine men. For instance, his assertive gesticulations, prowess and aggressiveness is shown as a desired virtue in the world picturized in "A Death in the Gunj". His attire, for instance, neck sized hair, leather jacket, belt speaks volume about the "angry young man" image back in the 70s. This proper "macho" image becomes the ultimate highlight while Shuttu who clings onto his dead father's old sweater becomes repulsive. Eric Blancard (2014) meditates; "The unattainable, idealized notions of 'real manhood' are counterpoised against subordinated and alternative masculinities are counterpoised against subordinated and alternative masculinities such as gay, effeminate, working class and black mass" (63). For instance, the ultimate highlight is Vikrant and Shuttu is his alter ego. What Vikrant possesses Shuttu will always lack and this sense of lack becomes the highlight of Shuttu's personality. It is also noteworthy to mention that much of Shuttu's failure is deemed as something to be shamed about and bashed. For instance in the movie when Shuttu is shamed by his cousin brother for not picking up courage to start the car. He hits Shuttu on his head when he fails to drive the car backwards. "Be glad that dad's not teaching you, you know what he did when I made a mistake"? (36:38). Considering the fact that men are supposed to be courageous and bold. They are not supposed to slouch while handling machinery. Shuttu is diffident while riding a car and Nandu bashes him. Shuttu is always the loser. On the other hand, his alter ego, a perfect epitome of a proper "macho" image, Vikrant is always the winner. Vikrant's aura is so captivating and alluring that everybody naturally gravitates towards him. Women find him more attractive; even the little girl Tani pays her heed to Vikrant and everything is in place with his mere presence. Unlike this, Shuttu's failure is a significant highlight. He is introverted and not confident enough to make. He isn't good at handling things and taking responsibilities of even menial things. For instance, when Tani is lost, it's all Shuttu's fault. He fails the university exams. He doesn't know how to ride a car prior to meeting Mini he even wasn't interested in riding a motorbike. Towards the end of the movie Shuttu grows so desperate that he cannot bear the pressure of the world and kills himself by pointing a gun at himself. All these instances hint towards Shuttu's failure as a man. In a world, where men are supposed to be the problem solvers and winners Shuttu becomes the ultimate defeated and conversely less of a man. All the instances of his failure hint towards his failure as a man who inhabit in a society where men are always supposed to be extroverted, active, dominant, successful and natural problem solvers. This sarcastic idea of the façade of masculinity is unreal because the metaphor for masculinity cannot always be rigid. It is a construct that society labels as per its liking, but never an eternal truth. Judith Butler (1997) writes, "the gender that is introduced through the simile

lacks “reality,” and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance” (xxii). For instance, “A Death in the Gunj” poses question to this false illusory façade of masculinity that society deems Vikrant has and Shuttu lacks.

The movie also depicts the way in which so many virtues that Shuttu engenders, such as kindness, love empathy for even the minute creature in the earth is trivialized. As Connell (1995) notes, “A familiar theme in patriarchal ideology is that men are rational while women are emotional. This is a deep-seated assumption in European philosophy” (p.164). In a world where only the compartmentalized virtues of men such as the rational, the giver, the brave is venerated; kindness, empathy, sensitiveness, lack of adventure, bonding with kids, learning about other people’s feelings, are sidelined as trivial female virtues. Shuttu’s gentle nature is mocked in a way to give him a texture of a feminine man. Shuttu understands people’s emotions. He plays with the Kid Tani rather than mingling with adults. He has a deep rooted compassion for people and things, for instance, he hoards a moth, cremates an insect in the soil with Tani. His temperate nature manifests when he no longer wants to play the “calling the dead game” along with everybody. “I think it causes some kind of deep pain or something”(21:15), he says to which everybody mock and dismisses with, “How can they feel pain, I mean they are dead” (21:22). As a man Shuttu’s fault was that he became overtly emotional which doesn’t fit into the box of the traditional paradigm of masculinity. Eric Blanchard (2014) writes, “These ideal types of masculinities include the “citizen warrior”; “rational economic man”, “warrior”, “civilian”, strategist; “good soldier”, “bourgeois rationalist”, “breadwinner” and “financial risk taker”(63). Contrary to this, Shuttu is too hypothetical; he keeps wearing his dead father’s sweater even though everyone believes he should leave all this “man up” and take care of his mother. Nandu notes that Shuttu “should toughen up and take care of his mother” (49:56). Owing to the fact that Shuttu will never be remembered for his virtues because traditionally men are not supposed to be emotional, passionate or sensitive bespeaks of the shallow faith on empathy wrought by our traditions.

The movie “A Death in the Gunj” not only captures the essence of ostracizing Shuttu for not being “manly” enough but also hints towards the ways through which such ostracizing is normalized. Shuttu’s plight as a man who misses his death father is never acknowledged. Infact, everybody believes that Shuttu should learn to live like a man. He never receives any emotional support from anyone, even in times when he is seriously emotionally wounded. For instance, during Kabaddi when Vikrant picks on Shuttu and scratches his face off so that he wouldn’t reach out for the boundary line, Shuttu feels wounded and cries at night. Nevertheless, this fight is trivialized when Shuttu’s aunt remarks “Boys will be boys” (48:33). Shuttu’s emotional hurt is dismissed for being too much of a basic thing that men are supposed to handle on their own. Shuttu is never a part of any active conversation in the group of those men. He is never heard of or never seen. Everybody expected Shuttu to be assertive, to confront his own responsibilities as a man and act responsively. Yet, nobody tried to understand what

Shuttu wants. Shuttu wants to be in a realm where he doesn't have to participate to live up to the expectations of other as Lacan puts it. In this realm of language Shuttu seems to have lost the count of what are the inherent qualities humans imbibe before they land at the realm of language. Lacan remarks, "Language with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry to it at a certain moment" (495). Shuttu's venture into the realm of language erodes his subjectivity of his pre – verbal phase. His sensitivity and his inherent capacity could never be understood by the living people who are accustomed to speaking the language of the symbolic order . For instance, never to be heard seen or understood, Shuttu points a gun at himself and ends his life to mark his departure from the symbolic realm where his language of sensitivity and kindness will never be acknowledged. The end scene of the movie is pertinent considering the fact that Shuttu's ghost which becomes visible along with Bryan and Nandu. He is just as dead as he was when he would be alive. Nobody pays a heed at him. He is not important at all, not after his death, never while he was alive. Even when Vikrant bullies Shuttu during Kabaddi or any other event calling him a weakling it is normalized, but silent Shuttu's introversion, disinterest in so called manly domains like fighting and driving is put into contempt. While Shuttu's loving and emotional nature is never nurtured, Vikrant's anger and aggressiveness is normalized.

A Death in the Gunj is a representative example of the hypocritical and unreal nature of masculinity which only emphasizes the daring assertive virtues of a proper "macho" image while ostracizing everything that doesn't falls into that totalizing experience. Given that gender performance is a fluid concept, just as much as an act, it oughtn't be a universal definition. Yet, the persistent pressure for men to "man up" having to grow up a decision maker and the ultimate leader is perverse. Everybody keeps talking about how hard it is to act and be a woman, however now is the time to swallow another hard pill, "How difficult is it to be a man".

## **Conclusion**

This essay discussed some of the most important tenets of the societal constructs that force "boys" to be "men" through a series of stereotyping , putting them into a compartmentalized box of compulsive " heteronormativity". Being a man is therefore equated to being the leader, the path finder, the stout, emotionally rigid, brave and agile. Culture treats boys as though being tough is their endowed virtue. However, it discards the simple concept that in the modern world, it is as much difficult to live up to the traditionally assigned gender rule as a man as it is to live like a typical "traditional woman". Without attesting these tags of universalities its high time that, we see men the way they are without pointing out a set of prerequisites they need to look into to confirm that they are actually playing their gender.

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