

“I need a father who’s a role model”: Yardsticks of Masculinities in *American Beauty*

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Abstract

The 1999 black comedy drama *American Beauty* directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball, portrays an image of contemporary society’s gender roles. The movie shows the transformation of Lester Burnham from a submissive male to a dominant one, thus trying to achieve the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (Connell, 1995) Likewise, marginalised masculinities are also dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Colonel Frank Fitts, Lester’s neighbour, with his aggression and violence towards his son, becomes an epitome of hegemonic masculinity. Lester, on the other hand, is an ignorant father, and is insouciant in the upbringing of his daughter. Parenthood according to hegemonic masculine ideals, imposes an image of toughness and apathy on the father and to always be a secondary figure in the rearing of children. This image of toughness, violence and aggression comes with men identifying and being a “man.” The toughness in men is also brought through body image, i.e., being muscularly built. Moreover, this supreme form of masculinity is homophobic and shows an inclination towards heterosexuality. Using the movie “*American Beauty*” and its characters, Lester and Colonel Fitts, the paper aims to prove the lethality of hegemonic masculinity. Exploring the aspects of homophobia, fatherhood, body image, and violence and aggression, the research studies how each factor contributes to the noxiousness of hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, *American Beauty*, Cubicle Movies, Body Image, Parenting, Homophobia, Violence, Aggression.

1. Introduction

Hegemonic masculinity is the supreme form of masculinity which encompasses stereotypical standards set by privileged white heterosexual men, built on dominance over women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance. The term was coined by Raewyn Connell, an Australian Sociologist, and was originally used in *Ockers and Disco-maniacs: Sex, Gender and Secondary Schooling*, a booklet published in 1982 by the Inner City Education Centre, Sydney, Australia

(Wedgwood, 2009). Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as “particular kinds of behaviour, particular ways of being” which are culturally dominant. These behaviours are assumed to be the general traits of masculinity and femininity. Behaviours which digress from these traits are defined as inferior and treated with hostile attitude (Kessler et al, 1985). S. Kessler, D. J. Ashenden, R. W. Connell and G. W. Dowsett explored the contribution of schools and their syllabi towards the establishment of sex-based inequalities. Schools promote stereotypical behaviour and expectations from the students based on their gender; furthermore, the syllabi exclude information about homosexuals and the discrimination against them. The authors call this attitude which is shown by the majority of boys and girls, and what is expected from them as ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and ‘emphasized femininity’ (Kessler et al, 1985).

The term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is primarily used to maintain the central focus in the critique of masculinity (Donaldson, 1993). The concept provides criteria for a man regarding physical as well as behavioural aspects. Masculinity is typically associated with personality traits such as independence and competitiveness; role behaviours such as being the primary provider and initiative-taking; and physical characteristics such as muscularity and a deep voice. Men who conform to these ideals of hegemonic masculinity further reproduce the same set of ideologies.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity feeds upon various aspects like homophobia, emphasized femininity, and gender discrimination. The 1999 movie *American Beauty* uses this concept and frames the follies of hegemonic masculinity.

American Beauty showcases the life of Lester Burnham from an after-death point-of-view narrative. Lester Burnham, a magazine executive suffers from a midlife crisis with a dull job, unhappy marriage and an insecure teenage daughter. Angela Hayes, a blonde teenager aspiring to be a model, awakens Lester’s sexual thirst and invokes his youthfulness. Inspired by his teenage neighbour who leads a carefree life, Lester takes a new path of sports, drugs, and rock music. He quits his job and takes his stand with his materialistic wife; and becomes a free-spirited man. In contrast to him, his neighbour Colonel Frank Fitts leads his family life like a platoon and is a victim of internalized homophobia. He builds the image of a privileged white heterosexual man, while suppressing his homosexuality which is revealed in the end. This ultimately forces him to kill Lester to maintain his stature as an ideal masculine man.

The script goes through the side effects of hegemonic masculinity as shown in the movie. Various scenes are segregated according to the factors they show – parenthood, homophobia, aggressive behaviour and male body image. The paper employs prior research, done on the same subject matter, to substantiate the various injuries hegemonic masculinity has inflicted on the society.

2.Purpose Of The Study

This study aims to prove how hegemonic masculinity affects man as well as society from different angles. The paper analyses the movie *American Beauty* through the eyes of hegemonic masculinity. Through this analysis, the paper investigates how hegemonic masculinity is a major factor behind body image issues, violence and aggression in men. It explores the reason

for why a muscular body and aggressive personality is favoured more as masculine. Moreover, the research also aims to understand how hegemonic masculinity has a direct impact on their notions about sexuality and the domestic life of men, affecting their ways of parenting. The dangers of these aspects are brought to light through the characters of Lester Burnham and Colonel Frank Fitts.

3.Review Of Related Studies

Hegemonic Masculinity and *American Beauty*

The purpose of this study is to analyse hegemonic masculinity with the 1999 Hollywood cubicle movie *American Beauty* by investigating the characters of Lester Burnham and Colonel Frank Fitts and the representation of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity has been linked to cinema and is studied and interpreted with the theoretical approach of RW Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity. Numerous studies on the representation of dominance over marginalised masculinities, homosexuality, homophobia, misogyny in a patriarchal society, which build up the essence of hegemonic masculinity, have been conducted. This literature review examines the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the ideals of it, as studied by various scholars: violence and aggression in men and the infectious unattainable body image of men represented through media and the impacts of these, in mainstream cinema, particularly in *American Beauty*.

Mike Donaldson (1993) states in his paper “What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?” how hegemonic masculinity works in the current society and how it is formed on the bedrock of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Hegemonic masculinity feeds upon marginalised masculinities and is threatened by the existence of homosexuality, a marginalised masculine group (**Cheng, 2007**). Queer men who practice hegemonic masculinities often come with sexual repression. Conformity as a dilemma is the major plot in cubicle movies, such as *Fight Club*, *American Beauty* and *The Matrix*. In *American Beauty*, conformity to masculine ideals drives Colonel Frank Fitts to repress his homosexuality resulting in homophobia (**Flaherty,2010**).

Factors and Impacts of Hegemonic Masculinity

Moreover, the contemporary representations of masculinity in mainstream cinema are often identified by the spectators such as the midlife crisis of Lester (**Bainbridge and Yates, 2005**) and the helplessness in men with mental issues. Confiding their illness or seeking help for mental illness is considered a weakness. Referring to this, **Emslie et al. (2005)** states that men are always expected to suppress their emotions and to be “macho.”

The tentacles of hegemonic masculinity are various, but the important ones are violence and aggression, which are considered as “macho” in men. **Heilman and Barker (2018)** note that violence and aggression in men do not completely arise from biological factors but they are nurtured through life conditions and social surroundings, and identified as manly. The other factor that considers men as “macho” is the body image of men being muscularly built. Media creates unrealistic images of men through magazines which are unattainable. Men and women both are led by these illusions of unreachable body image (**Ricciardelli et al., 2010**), and this

body image is linked with sexual conquest. Body and fitness are a source of power and domination in men. Therefore, in the paper “Picture Perfect Bodies: Visualizing Hegemonic Masculinities Produced for/by Male Fitness Spaces” **Wagner (2016)** precisely observes that the media pressurizes men to have a finesse body as an ultimatum for sexual conquest.

In *American Beauty* (1999), masculinity takes a major role; Lester Burnham reaches the ideals of masculinity and Colonel Frank Fitts represses his homosexuality, giving an insight into the contemporary American suburban life (**Karlyn, 2004**). This has increased the focus placed on gender studies and cinema in the last few decades. The rigidity of hegemonic masculinity of the previous decade is shifted, and thus, is ever changing. The representation of gender relations in this era fulfils the understanding of hegemonic masculinity during this period. In *American Beauty*, the representation of hegemonic masculinity is studied through the characters of Lester Burnham and Colonel Frank Fitts. Overall, this study delves into these characters, their masculine ideals, and the effects of it and aims to build a stronger understanding of hegemonic masculinity in the movie through the characters.

4. Discussion

4.1. Parenting

“In Hegemonic Masculinity, fathers do not have the capacity or the skill or the need to care for children, especially for babies and infants, while the relationship between female parents and young children is seen as crucial” (Donaldson, 1993) and this facet has impacted media as well. Throughout history, the media portrays the intense emotional bond between mother and children, and the relationship with father is not depicted a lot. Media influences men to hold an occupational role in the family, and women to carry on with parental or spousal roles (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). This represents that caregiving is essentially a feminine act, and it provides a strong base for the cultural supremacy of male (Freeman, 2008). Lester too was impacted from the portrayal of men in the media, holding little to no responsibility about domestic matters.

Lester Burnham fails to maintain a father-daughter bond with Jane, which he once shared during her childhood. During dinner time, Lester tries to share his office incidents with Jane, but that was purely to vent out his frustrations and not to bond with her. Responding to this, she points out that Lester cannot suddenly act like her “best friend,” after being a silent figure for months. However, being a part of the hegemonically masculine society, Jane’s expectations from her father are also high. She wants her father to be a “role model” adhering to the typical image of a father. She reveals this in a conversation with her neighbour and boyfriend, Ricky Fitts: “I need a father who’s a role model, not some horny geek boy...”

“Notions of fathering that are acceptable to men concern the exercise of impartial discipline, from an emotional distance and removed from favouritism and partiality” (Donaldson, 1993). Using aggressive methods of violence is the most common way of parenting in many households. Instead of verbal confrontation, Colonel Frank Fitts uses force and anger on his son Ricky. As an ex-military, the Colonel is aware of exercising violence. The Colonel has

taught his son to be respectful to him and his way of parenting is akin to military training. For instance, he wants Ricky to use violence and fight him back, but out of respect Ricky doesn’t. Ricky calls his father ‘Sir’ and speaks boldly and loudly like receiving orders from higher officials hinting at an absence of intimate relationship between Colonel Fitts and his son Ricky. “Men’s sense of themselves is threatened by intimacy. Discovering the affection, autonomy, and agency of babies and children, disconcerted by an unusual inability to cope, men are compelled to re-evaluate their attitude to themselves” (Donaldson, 1993).

However, the above method of parenting seems to be futile. Instead of being a disciplined son, Ricky learns to be a professional liar. In front of his family, he maintains his façade of an honest boy earning from petty but not dishonourable jobs like bartending or as a waiter, whereas, clandestinely, he continues his drug business. Furthermore, Colonel wants Ricky to be an ideal man and thus was satisfied to know that his son has a girlfriend; that he is heterosexual and not gay. Privileged white heterosexual male is defined as an ideal man and the Colonel is pleased that his son is following those ideals.

4.2. Body Image

Men’s bodies are always portrayed in media and magazines in an unrealistic way. It frames unapproachable examples of body ideals due to which both men and women conform to the “appearance-oriented cultural trap” (Ricciardelli et al, 2010). As a result of this, they have preconceived notions about their own body as well as its purpose. “Men are told that their bodies are to be finessed for sexual conquest.” Various benefit packages are advertised which provokes men even more to build up their body (Wagner, 2016).

In the movie, Angela Hayes, Jane’s friend, is aware of Lester’s obsession with her. During a stay over at Jane’s place, the two girls discuss Jane’s parents. For Angela, Lester’s obsession with her is not an “embarrassment” rather she loves it – as she is being admired for her beauty. Angela admits to Jane that she would have a physical relationship with Lester, given he develops his body into a more muscular form.

For a hegemonically masculine man, a muscular body represents dominance and control over other men and women. Towards the end of the movie, Angela seems very intimidated by Lester who is sitting on the kitchen counter. Angela enquires whether Lester’s been working out or not; Lester’s smooth reply with his muscles bulging out alarms Angela, who stammers and leaves the kitchen. A robust body is the centre of fitness and power which contributes in the evolution of a “socially dominant man” who exerts control over their “social, romantic and professional world” (Wagner, 2016 and Aras, 2018).

For women, the ideal body type is shown as a thin figure, and for men it is a bulging and well-defined body (Wagner, 2016). It is notable that hegemonic masculinity strives to create a boundary between femininity and masculinity. “In opposition to femininity’s gendered traits of compassion, gentility, dependence, and passivity, hegemonic masculinity seeks to capitalize on hyper-masculine bodily performances of aggression, independence, confidence,

and emotion-free logic” (Wagner, 2016). Thus, muscularity is taken as an obvious sign of masculinity.

4.3. Heterosexuality and Homophobia

An effective way to present oneself as hegemonically masculine is to adhere to the notions of “stoic emotional display” and to have an aggressive attitude towards “feminine” matters, such as women, homosexuals and nerds (Cheng, 2007). Donaldson (1993) comments, “Conformity to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, pushes heterosexual men to homophobia and rewards them for it, in the form of social support and reduced anxiety about their own manliness.”

The gay couple, Jim and Jim, have been presented in the movies as a contrast to the other two "dysfunctional families," that is, the Burnhams and the Fitts. The homosexual couple desire to live amongst their neighbours with a "sense of sameness and conformity." Though out of the closet, their characters have been neutralized with no sexual appeal as such. They are projected as wearing suits as that of professionals, and address each other as "partners," instead of affectionate terms like "husband" or "lover." In a way, "their characters are desexualized repressions of queer identity," and are no danger or offense to the heteronormative standards (Flaherty, 2010).

Jim and Jim are also a contrast to Colonel Frank Fitts’ "deep seated internalized homophobia." The Colonel's military background has played a great part in suppressing his queer identity. For military services, self-denial of one's sexuality is more significant than refusal from others. It is evident in the case of the Colonel who fails to define his own sexuality and respect it. The Colonel always addresses his name by tagging US Marine Corps to it; implying how his job is entangled with his identity as a person, even after his retirement (Flaherty, 2010).

His dread for homosexuals is quite evident as he greets the neighbour homosexual couples. Colonel’s facial expression takes a complete change after realising that by “partners,” the couple didn’t mean business partners, but lovers. He not only despises them, but also makes sure that his son shares the same homophobic ideologies like him. To maintain his cover of a good and obedient son, Ricky Fitts conveys in an aggressive tone, his hatred for homosexuality – giving his father the pleasure of witnessing a homophobic son.

Below is the conversation between Colonel and Ricky, regarding the neighbour gay couples -

Colonel: *How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?*

Ricky: *That's the whole thing, Dad. They don't feel like it's anything to be ashamed of.*

The Colonel looks at Ricky sharply.

Colonel: *Well, it is.*

A beat, as Ricky continues his calculations, before he realizes a response is expected from him.

Ricky: *Yeah, you're right.*

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The Colonel 's eyes flash angrily.

Colonel: *Don't placate me like I'm your mother, boy.*

Ricky sighs, then looks at his father.

Ricky: *Forgive me, sir, for speaking so bluntly, but those fags make me want to puke my fucking guts out.*

The Colonel is taken aback but quickly covers.

Colonel: *Me too, son. Me too.*

Colonel Frank Fitts is suffering from internalized homophobia. When he mistakes Ricky and Lester engaging in sexual activities, he is furious of Ricky being a homosexual. Confronting Ricky about the wad of money in his hand, the Colonel believes that Ricky is a sex worker and Lester paid him which infuriates him to call his son names for being a homosexual.

Colonel: *Where'd you get that?*

Ricky: *From my job.*

Colonel: *Don't lie to me. I saw you with him.*

Ricky: (incredulous) *You were watching me?*

Colonel: *What did he make you do?*

Ricky: (laughs) *Dad, you don't really think... Me and Mr. Burnham?*

Colonel: (furious) *Don't you laugh at me! (then)*

Colonel: (CONTINUED) *I will not sit back and watch my only son become a cocksucker!*

Ricky: *Jesus, what is with you-*

The Colonel BACKHANDS Ricky so hard it sends the boy

Sprawling.

Colonel: *I swear to God, I will throw you out of this house and never look at you again.*

Ricky: (taken aback) *You mean that?*

Colonel: *Damn straight I do. I'd rather you were dead than be a fucking faggot.*

Colonel Frank Fitts represses his homosexuality and exhibits hatred towards the LGBTQ + community to maintain the stature of being a perfect man, that is a heterosexual man. Putting out a heteronormative behaviour, the Colonel throws his son out of the home. Ricky doesn't deny his father's accusation of him being a homosexual, and rather uses this opportunity to escape from his father's clutches. Ricky uses this opportunity to provoke his father even more by associating various sexual imageries with himself. This disturbs Colonel deeply as he watches his son confessing.

Alan Ball confirmed that initially he wrote a past to the Colonel, but removed it while editing the movie. Colonel Frank Fitts had a relationship with his fellow colleague in Vietnam but saw him dying in the war. It is clear that, Colonel Fitts recognizes himself as a homosexual man, and doesn't deny his sexuality. However, to meet the ideals of a hegemonic society, he develops a homophobic attitude within himself to suppress his true sexuality.

As an ideal man, Colonel Frank Fitts lives up to the heterosexual masculine ideals. In the climax scene, Colonel Frank Fitts is drawn towards Lester and being in a vulnerable state, he kisses Lester only to find out that he embarrassed himself. Lester opposes his advancement in having a physical relationship with him. Now that Colonel's secret about his sexuality is out, he feels perturbed. Ideals of hegemonic masculinity expects men to react rather than think. Out of the fear of being exposed, Colonel shoots Lester instead of talking it out. He is willing to murder a man rather than let out the secret of his sexuality, revealing the role of deep-rooted toxic masculinity in men's mental health.

4.4. Violence and Aggression

Understanding and communicating your feelings and showing affection is considered feminine and "gay"; masculinity doesn't allow a healthy way of expressing emotions unless it is through violence and aggression. Men are taught and brought up from a young age to conceal their weaknesses or any emotions except anger, toughness and to discard feminine behaviours (Heilman and Barker, 2018).

Colonel Fitts is a repressed man who is a "mirror of present-day realities in patriarchies" (Nair and K V, 2020); the only outlet of his emotions is through violence and anger. Instead of confronting Ricky for breaking into his office and stealing the Nazi Plate, he physically abuses him and uses violent and brutal language. Colonel encourages Ricky to man up and fight back, instead of talking it through with his son.

Ricky's lip is bleeding, but he maintains a steady gaze at his father during this violence.

COLONEL: (unnerved) *How!? How?! C'mon, get up! Fight back, you little pussy!*

RICKY: *No, sir. I won't fight you.*

The Colonel grabs him by the collar.

COLONEL: *How did you get in there?*

RICKY: *I picked the lock, sir.*

COLONEL: *What were you looking for? Money? Are you on dope again?*

RICKY: *No, sir. I wanted to show my girlfriend your Nazi plate.*

Men are taught to act masculine by being inconsiderate and by acting on their rage. It is expected that they suppress their weakness but express their anger. After Ricky refuses to fight, and asks his father to have faith in him, Colonel for a moment feels sympathy for his son. However, Colonel quickly suppresses his love for Ricky by withdrawing his affection and tightens himself to “be a man” (de Visser and McDonnell, 2013 and Heilman and Barker, 2018).

RICKY: *Sir, I'm sorry.*

COLONEL: *You can't just go around doing whatever You feel like, you can't--there are rules In life--*

RICKY: *Yes, sir.*

COLONEL: *You need structure, you need discipline--*

RICKY: (simultaneous) *Discipline. Yes, sir, thank you for trying to teach me. Don't give up on me, Dad.*

The Colonel stands, still breathing heavily. Tenderness fills his face, and he reaches out to touch Ricky's cheek.

COLONEL: *Oh, Ricky...*

But something keeps him from doing it.

COLONEL: (CONTINUED) *You stay out of there.*

Young boys are oriented to adopt a dominant and aggressive personality so as to fit into the societal ideals; however, this leaves a psychological impact on them (de Visser and McDonnell, 2013). “Traditional gender role socialization serves to uphold patriarchal codes by requiring that males adopt dominant and aggressive behaviours and function in the public sphere, while requiring that females adopt adaptive and nurturing behaviours and function in the private sphere of the family” (Levant et al, 2003). Gender roles are not something constant, or a biological phenomenon; it keeps varying according to societal ideals.

5. Conclusion

The paper discusses the effects of hegemonic masculinity on men and society. Hegemonic masculinity sets standards which are unattainable, toxic and life threatening.

In the movie, the standards set to be an ideal man, creates life threatening changes in the lives of Lester Burnham and Colonel Frank Fitts. Colonel Frank Fitts’s toxic masculinity has severely affected his wife who is near catatonic. Barbara Fitts is always numb and devoid of feelings, often unaware of her surroundings and drifting away from reality. Ricky, the victim of Colonel’s parenting methods, develops dual identities, one as an ideal son and the other as a drug dealer. Colonel 's secret sexuality has cost Lester his life when he was on the verge of finding happiness and accepting his love for his family. Lester Burnham, dealing with midlife crisis, flowers beautifully discovering his masculinity through drugs, music, and rebellious attitude. Masculinity is subjective and thus has various effects on different people. Discovery

of masculine ideals freed Lester from his dull life whereas Colonel Frank Fitts is crippled under the ideals of suppressing his homosexuality. The toxicity of hegemonically masculine ideals is visible through the murder of Lester Burnham by Colonel Frank Fitts.

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