



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REIMAGINING MYTHIC MASCULINITIES: BHIMA IN M. T. VASUDEVAN NAIR'S *BHIMA: LONE WARRIOR*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the concept of mythic masculinities in M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (translated as *Bhima: Lone Warrior*), a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Bhima's perspective. While traditional epics such as Vyasa's *Mahabharata* celebrate the hegemonic, warrior-oriented masculinity tied to caste and power hierarchies, Nair reimagines Bhima as a deeply human figure negotiating between strength and vulnerability. This study primarily explores Bhima's embodiment of hegemonic and complicit masculinities through body, language, actions, and emotionality, using R. W. Connell's framework of multiple masculinities—hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized. It also focuses on John Beynon's phases of warrior masculinity to emphasize how Bhima oscillates between conformity to and resistance against epic ideals. By stripping away Bhima's divine aura, Nair highlights the internal crises and contradictions of masculinity, showing it as fluid, relational, and historically contingent. This reinterpretation challenges the rigid mythic framework that has long confined masculinity in the Indian context to a singular warrior model, and instead situates Bhima as a site where gender norms are both upheld and problematized. Through qualitative content analysis and textual interpretation in this study, Bhima's traits and actions are categorised into hegemonic and complicit masculinities, while foregrounding the narrative strategies that humanise his character. Thus, the article contributes to the underexplored field of masculinity studies in Eastern literary traditions, foregrounding how mythic retellings can reframe the politics of gender and power in contemporary discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Masculinity is not a widely studied area of research in the Eastern context as compared to the Western analyses of gender and masculine/feminine notions. The Indian or Vedic concept of masculinity has been a linear one, with the focus only on the hegemonic type. We have "the oral tradition, which includes folktales, myths, folk songs, popular sayings, and proverbs," which gives an understanding of the popular perception of masculinity in the Indian situation (Chowdhry 5). However, it is considered that "masculinity in early India has not really been researched" (Sahgal 4). For instance, epic like "the *Mahabharata* celebrates king's heroism" (Sahgal 13). Hence, the notion of 'warrior masculinity' from the Indian context and the hegemonic idea of Western theorists appeared similar to each other. All other types were considered as masculinities on the margin. Birth, religion and caste had a major role in placing certain masculinities at the centre and others on the margins. It can be considered that power was the underlying notion that ruled the concept of masculinity in the epics. Men

were given the reins of power according to their positions in society. The upper castes, like the brahmins and kshatriyas, formed the top ranks, followed by others. Men of the lowest ranks exercised their power over women of the household, and weak males or homosexuals were placed even lower.

The hegemonic masculinity was by and large caste-oriented. The early Indian texts reserved most of the epithets that defined heroic men for those who hailed from the upper caste. We have seen about that in a text like the *Mahabharata*, fighting in the battlefield was the caste duty of kshatriyas. In other aspects of human existence as well masculinity subsumed caste attributes. Shudras, for instance, could not have hoped to qualify for the brahmanical definition of manhood. (Sahgal 15)

Vyasa's *Mahabharata* gives a flourishing account of the hierarchical system based on caste and gender prevalent in ancient times. The Pandavas in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* are considered the epitome of manhood with their godly powers,

asthras (weapons), paternal origins, and so on. They are characters viewed with awe and godly affection who have saved the world from evil and helped restore a new era. These mythical characters have unending stories of their valour and brotherhood. *Randamoozham* is MT's (as the author is popularly known) third novel, which is focused on the *Mahabharata* character, Bhima, who is the second among the Pandava brothers. M. T. Vasudevan Nair is a major Malayalam writer hailing from the district of Pallakad, Kerala. He is also a film director, scriptwriter, and screenwriter. The novel was translated into English from Malayalam by Gita Krishnankutty as *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. The character of Bhima is an important one among the Pandavas. All the brothers are considered manly and used to define masculinity in a traditional sense. Nair, in his work, has tried to strip the godly features from them to a certain extent and relate them more with the human world. MT tries to create a heart-to-heart narration from the viewpoint of Bhima, his perspectives, and the reasons behind all that happens in the epic. MT gives a new outlook to the character of Bhima and projects him as a normal human being with all the confusions, restrictions, and conflicts faced by him. Bhima transcends from a godly character to a realistic human one.

The epics can be considered to celebrate only one aspect of mythic masculinity, namely, the warrior one. The retellings, especially the one under discussion (*Bhima: Lone Warrior*), try to bring into light the various aspects of mythic masculinities other than the warrior one. For understanding this further, Connell's idea of multiple masculinities and how the masculinities are divided based on power relations is considered and studied.

To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so. There is a gender politics within masculinity. (Connell 37)

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a close reading of Nair's text, using R.W. Connell's framework of multiple masculinities and John Beynon's phases of warrior masculinity as analytical lenses, highlighting concepts related to physicality, language, actions, emotions, etc. Through qualitative content analysis and textual interpretation in this study, Bhima's traits and actions are categorised into hegemonic and complicit masculinities, while foregrounding the narrative strategies that humanise his character. Thus, this close reading of the text undertakes an attempt to inquire into 'mythic masculinity' that works in the retelling of M. T. Vasudevan Nair. The study problematizes the different strains in the epic personality of Bhima and seeks to ask certain pertinent questions, such as, can mythic masculinity be confined to a single type, for example, the warrior type? How does power act as the denominator in establishing hierarchies or priorities among masculinities? These questions lead to the crisis faced by men who find themselves unable to match the societal canons. It shows how men in the Eastern contemporary sense are trapped in the context of masculinity and are regulated to perform in a specific manner.

BHIMA AND HIS MASCULINITY

India has been a caste driven society where humans were differentiated based on caste and gender (Deshpande 2010). History shows a time when kings, kshatriyas and brahmins held tremendous powers on the basis of caste, but the common people were ignored (Subedi 2016). For instance, the epics usually present the stories of great warriors and kings who possessed divine powers. The other common characters were mere tools to nurture the greatness of these male central characters. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* was also not different in this respect. The texts and theories at that time were formed and propagated to please the hegemonic patriarchal norms and conditions. Hence, gender was a concept taken for granted in the epics, especially that of masculinity, which celebrated only powerful divine kings. The possibilities of other masculinities or the absurdity of confining the notion of masculinity as portrayed by the epics came much later.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY TYPE: It can be considered that warrior masculinity in the Indian context is similar to that of hegemonic masculinity. But a clear explanation of what constitutes Indian masculinity and where the warrior one is specifically placed is not given, and needs more research into the topic. As the name suggests, the basic idea behind it is to be a warrior or participant in war. When we look into history till today, war becomes an important concept in understanding masculinity in Western as well as Eastern concepts.

Body: R. W. Connell spoke extensively on the relationship between the notion of masculinity and the male body. The concept of the male body becomes important when analysing the concept of masculinity, especially that of a hegemonic and complicit nature. The body also becomes a factor in determining the power difference in the other two masculinities (subordinated and marginalised) as well. However, in subordinated and marginalised masculinities, the body becomes a matter of weakness where people would be discriminated against based on bodily differences (for example, colour and muscles). MT's Bhima experiences both the extreme emotions related to the body: that is, feeling powerful and weak at the same time. In Bhima's case, his body becomes his powerful tool. He considers himself strong and respects others who have a strong body. He compares himself to that of an elephant with a massive body that has run amok (Nair 270). In order to calm himself and to vent out his anger, Bhima symbolically tries to calm the elephant. This scene portrays the use of force and excessive strength, which are considered masculine features. One of the main aspects of hegemonic relations is the domination of others, since "the male body is connotative of power and strength, celebrated as manly spectacle" (Beynon 65).

Thus, the human body becomes an important concept in masculinity with the idea of muscles and strength. Bodies are trained differently for boys and girls, even in the modern scenario. It is expressed in *Gendering Bodies* as "the systemic production of masculinities or femininities on bodies via training (or lack of training) in sport" (Crawley 109). This can be applied to the past Indian situation as well. Boys, especially princes, are given extreme training with weapons from a young age to become future warriors. MT provides various instances of training and exhibition of skills by the Pandavas in the novel. Males were expected to build a firm body from

childhood itself, whereas women were expected to have a soft one. MT's Bhima feels confident about the strength of his body, but feels subordinated to others, especially Arjuna, when it comes to the beauty of his body.

Language: Language, actions, and emotionality are the other factors which have a huge command on the idea of hegemonic masculinity, along with the above-discussed concept of body or physicality. The first sub-point of language can be observed in two ways: language showing reason and language showing aggressive emotions, both of which are thought of as masculine characteristics. The language expounding reason is considered an important argument since men are believed to be more rational than women, who are emotional. This idea is "a deep-seated assumption in European philosophy. It is one of the leading ideas in sex role theory, in the form of the instrumental/expressive dichotomy" (Connell 164). The third sub-point of emotionality would be discussed later, along with Beynon's five phases. Where rationality and knowledge were concerned, Bhima admired people without differentiation based on caste, colour or gender. He respected the old mahout who "had learnt from the great sages of all the texts that dealt with elephants and the treatment of diseases that they were susceptible to" (Nair 32). He also respected women like Kunti, who expressed rational judgments upon which the Pandavas could make valuable decisions. Some of the typical warrior nature of language includes shouting, roaring, yelling and commanding. By reproducing the dominant norms associated with masculine language, Bhima engages himself in the reality of a manly life. By doing so, he is following the "reiterating function of language that is primarily carrying and reproducing dominant norms and creating the effect of sovereign, disengaged subjects by the continual process of calling them into social existence" (White 160). Warriors are expected to act more and less by talking with limited use of language. This is depicted throughout the novel when Bhima engages in various duels and battles and feels that "words would be as futile" (Nair 104).

However, sometimes actions require the acclaim of the voice to make an event complete. Bhima states he felt that "someone had lent force to my voice when I roared a war cry, sent strength coursing through my arms when they had grown tired" on the verge of defeat in various situations (Nair 331). Here, voice (language) and strength (for action) work together. Expressing the aggressive emotions through language is thus very important for Bhima. Thus, language becomes an important factor in the performativity of gender. Butler mentions the French feminist theorist Monique Wittig's idea that "there are historically contingent structures characterised as heterosexual and compulsory that distribute the rights of full and authoritative speech to males and deny them to females" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 147). The repetitive use of language in the specified ways creates gender differences and a hierarchical relationship between the two elements. Other than the man/woman set, speech is different among men as well, where men of various ranks are expected to use language accordingly.

Actions: The second subpoint of actions can be classified into two: killing or being aggressive, and virility or fatherhood. In the novel, Bhima recounted that "kshatriyas did not have to decide whether the kill was just or unjust. The dharma of battle was to kill" (Nair 106). Getting killed on the battlefield during fighting was considered normal. Fathering children and being

active in a physical relationship with a woman are considered manly actions. Two things the warriors are justified in doing without any opposition from society are "patriotism and lusting after women" (Beynon 68). This is one of the reasons given by warriors for having many relations with women through marriages as well as outside marriage, and having many children. Bhima's first encounter with a woman makes him question himself as a man. He fears being like his father, Pandu, who couldn't father children.

But I was not aroused. She finally drew away from the cold granite statue that I was with a faint gasp, a suppressed shudder. She glanced at me, then turned and walked away, melting into the darkness beyond the open door. Gazing at the smoking stone lamps in the distance, I asked myself, 'Has the tradition of Pandu continued into this generation as well and given birth to a giant without virility?' (Nair 81).

These gendered body actions become ways of distinguishing what is appropriate in the binary understanding of male and female sexes. Butler considers gender "as a *corporeal style*, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "*performative*" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler *Gender Trouble*, 177).

Warrior masculinity and Beynon's five phases: John Beynon (by studying R. R. Donald's analysis of filmic masculinity), through his work *Masculinities and Culture*, looked into the idea of masculinity, war and how "the warrior is depicted" in war movies (Beynon 66). Sandra Wilson analyses the war and soldier depiction in the 1950s Japanese war movies, which "openly presented individual military figures as heroes. Their heroism lay not necessarily in opposing or avoiding war, but often in the outstanding performance of their military duties. In fact, cinematic war heroes of the 1950s in many ways embodied the qualities that ideal military men had represented during the war" (Wilson 544). This analysis of war films can be taken to understand how warrior masculinity is understood in the real world and popularised through different media.

Five phases have been identified with warrior masculinity in the case of films by Donald and mentioned by Beynon: induction, being tough, emotionless, absent women and homophobia (Beynon 66). These phases are explored in Nair's novel, and Bhima, as well as the other male characters, are depicted handling these phases in various situations in the novel. The present session mainly discusses Bhima's involvement and understanding of these issues.

1) Initiation into warrior masculinity: Induction is the first phase. Beynon explains that here the soldiers or warriors are "instructed in appropriate warrior behaviour, they must follow orders unquestioningly, even if these are degrading. Only when they have successfully passed all the induction tests will they be finally admitted. . . . They have been dehumanized and turned into efficient 'killing machines'" (Beynon 66-67). This involves physical as well as psychological training. This fighting spirit instilled in boys from a young age makes them more aggressive and stereotyped into the gender role. The Pandavas and Kauravas are shown to go through vigorous battle training from childhood onwards. Both groups were competitive in nature, especially Duryodhana and Bhima, who were born on the same date, and one of them was predicted to

annihilate the whole race. Duryodhana felt that Bhima was “born to kill the Kauravas” (Nair 33) and tried to pick fights with him always. This speaks about the moulding of the boys into fearless fighting machines at a young age. “Princes are required to learn four kinds of warfare, waged with chariots, elephants, horses and foot soldiers. One could become a rathaveeran, a warrior who had mastered fighting from a chariot, only after becoming adept at waging war from a chariot drawn by a single horse” (Nair 30)

2) Toughness: Being tough is the second phase. This is a strong quality seen in men especially warriors where masculinity is defined “in terms of being tough and selfless, having courage, guts and endurance, a lack of squeamishness, a high resistance to pain and discomfort and tight control in emotional matters” (Beynon 67). A similar observation was made by the five-year-old Bhima when he was analysing the possibility of his brother becoming the king. War for Bhima is, as Beynon has explained, “an exclusively male experience” (Beynon 67). He further elaborates on the topic that,

‘Hard men’ must have physical toughness and the ability to employ violence, but they must also have skill, endurance, perseverance and control. Masculinity has to be earned by obeying orders and doing brave things. If a man does something considered cowardly, he must follow the masculine formula for redemption by engaging in an act of heroism in which he is either killed or regains his reputation. This is a world in which real men never back down. (Beynon 67-68).

Bhima undertook the idea of ‘hard men’ mainly from his grandfather as he was exposed to the “soota ballads [which] included heroic stories of how Bhishma had waged war against the kingdom of Kashi in a chariot drawn by a single horse and brought back [his] grandmothers, Ambika and Ambalika, as brides for Vichitravirya” (Nair 30). From a layman’s perspective, what Bhishma did was cruel as he kidnapped three women as future wives for his brother. The third one, Amba, whose marriage was already fixed, is believed to have committed suicide because of the shame she had to face. Even in this unfair situation, when Amba asked Bhishma to marry her, he hung onto his vow of celibacy. Here, Bhishma is shown to follow the masculine formula of keeping one’s word even at the sake of one’s life and becomes celebrated as the hero of control and perseverance even when he is cursed. Bhima, following his footsteps, tends to internalise these values.

3) Idea of emotionality: Being emotionless is considered the third phase (which is also the third subpoint, along with language and actions from earlier discussion). The warrior is pictured to be “hugely stoical, quiet, dignified and self-controlled, an uncommunicative man who does not play around with words. He is the upholder of what Mellen (1978) terms an invulnerable ‘unfeeling masculinity’ in a brutal environment in which the slightest weakness is picked upon and exploited” (Beynon 68). This is the basic notion in which the boys are brought up around the world, especially in India. The primary example for this factor is the case where boys crying is considered a shameful act. A man caught crying in the Indian situation, especially in the olden times, was considered to be effeminate in nature. This is the reason why Bhima doesn’t show weakness even upon Abhimanyu’s death and says, “My eyes filled. No, the mighty Bhima could not weep” (Nair 301).

Here Butler emphasizes the concept of “‘act’ in the face of loss, . . . [where the] grief limits the will, and this ‘affront’ sometimes leads people to insist upon immediate forms of activism, not only to take revenge, but to reassert the mastery or agency of the ‘I’” (Dumm and Butler 99). This feeling acts as the pushing force in the case of Arjuna when his son is dead. This justifies the whole act of killing Jayadratha even when the codes of dharma have been violated at some point by Arjuna and Krishna. Beynon explains that, “revenge is held to be more effective than conventional grieving, which is considered unmanly and bad for morale” (Beynon 68). From childhood onwards, Bhima has developed an understanding of revenge and overcoming his fears.

4) Battlefield as a masculine space: The fourth is an absent woman. Battlefield is considered an arena out of bounds for the woman “defined through the absence of women and the suppression of the feminine in men” (Beynon 67). It is a complete male space with the involvement of features like physicality and reason, both of which are considered to be less in women. Physical strength is considered a strong factor in projecting an individual’s masculinity. Even in the battlefield as well as outside it, “the bodily sense of masculinity is central to the social process. A key part of the moment of engagement, then, is developing a particular experience of the body and a particular physical sensibility” (Connell 123). Men felt more masculine with a strong and fit body with muscles. Bhima also believed in the same understanding that men are more masculine with strong bodies.

5) Being strictly heterosexual: Being “strictly heterosexual” suggests that “a manly code of conduct must be adhered to and to deviate is to invite the insults of being a woman, poof, faggot, queer or queen” (Beynon 67). This is shown in the situation where Krishna narrates a story about a kshatriya woman, Vidula, advising her sons that “love without motive or courage was useful only to a she-donkey” (Nair 272).

COMPLICIT MASCULINITY TYPE: Hegemonic masculinity, in its complete meaning, is often not practical to accomplish. Hegemony in its entirety means controlling and subjugating with the use of violence if the need arises. Bhima shows a complicit nature of masculinity at times, which is regarded as “slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 79). Bhima can be observed to fit into this category because of three major reasons portrayed in the myth narrative by M. T. Vasudevan Nair. The first is the fact that he belongs to the male hegemonic category by birth and rights. The second is that at certain moments, he doesn’t feel the norms of hegemonic masculinity are right, but doesn’t question them. He just goes with the flow. The third point is that he also exhibits subordination features. Complicity is explained as,

Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troop of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense. . . . Marriage, fatherhood and community life often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority. A great many men who draw the patriarchal dividend also respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, do their accustomed share of the housework, bring home the family wage, and can easily convince themselves that feminists must be bra burning extremists. (Connell 79-80)

CONCLUSION

Prominence was thus given to only one type of masculinity, namely 'warrior masculinity', in the Indian epics. If we look into the characterisation in major epics, they are usually powerful male godly heroes who have the aim to save the world. Masculinity also has fixed attributes, which are represented by these mythic characters like the Pandavas and Kauravas, which can be put under the umbrella term of 'mythic masculinities'. It holds the underlying realisations of masculinity which have been popularly followed when the epics were created, transferred through generations and written down. This is linked with the hegemonic masculinity type. Thus, the received picture of Bhima and his masculinity provided to us by certain agencies like religion, media etc. is different from MT's Bhima and his mythic masculinity. Nothing in this world remains static and even "Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation. Its ebb and flow is a key element of the picture of masculinity" (Connell 78). As society changes, notions of masculinity also change. The mythic retelling of Bhima's version also tries to portray this change that happens in society. MT has depicted this change by giving a new approach to Bhima. The novel emphasizes the contemporary concept of multiple masculinities as the nature of 'mythic masculinities' rather than the popular version of Bhima as an exclusively hegemonic warrior character. By breaking the stereotypes with regard to mythic masculinity, MT looks into the role of power in deciphering masculinities. He gives it a new approach as the role of power in differentiating masculinities is considered from the standpoint of an evidently hegemonic position (Bhima). However, with the internal hegemony experienced by Bhima, he represents other types of masculinities as well which are often hidden by the dominant warrior nature in him. MT depicts this fluid nature of mythic masculinity and tries to bring the gender varieties that are often placed at the margins. This fluid nature sometimes leads to the crisis that develops in masculinity when men are unable to live up to the standards set by society. It shows how men are trapped in the context of masculinity and are regulated to perform in a specific manner. It often creates a mental strain on the male population to rise to the gender standards set by society, and also to change as time demands. For instance, when we take the Western context, the macho nature of man was considered popular till the 1950s, and then a shift happened. From the 1970s, the more popular version was the mixing of the expressive nature (which was considered a feminine function till then) with the instrumental function or macho framework. It was often difficult for men to maintain the high and changing standards set by society. In the Eastern context also, men are evaluated through the eyes of the collective mindset of the society. This often leads to "Feelings of self-contempt, guilt, shame, and regret [that] have been associated with violations of *internalized* "ought" self-guides" (Ford et al. 204).

Studies based on mythic masculinities open up a new panorama of understanding gender and its workings in society. By redefining the earlier accepted versions of gender, myth narratives bring into focus, often, the neglected elements that have been consciously or unconsciously ignored in the past. Even in the present, the masculinity of mythic characters has been limited to the hegemonic patriarchal kind or the warrior sort.

Hence, confining masculinity into a single type must change. This aids in analysing masculinity and femininity from a different perspective, which helps to widen the scope of gender studies in the Indian or Eastern context. Thus, the article helps to bring out a revitalised approach in the developing area of research on masculinity.

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KEY POINTS

- The article analyses the concept of mythic masculinities in M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (translated as *Bhima: Lone Warrior*), a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Bhima's perspective. This study primarily explores Bhima's embodiment of masculinities using R. W. Connell's framework of multiple masculinities and John Beynon's phases of warrior masculinity. The paper situates Bhima as a site where gender norms are both upheld and problematized.

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