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## **THE NON-MESOMORPHIC MALE BODY: PROBLEMATIZING REPRESENTATIONS OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN POPULAR CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

Representations of the body have a major role in maintaining the hierarchical dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. Since the male body is the primary signifier of masculinity, the “right” representation of the image of the male body plays a crucial role in maintaining the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. Emphasis on muscular hard-bodied males displaying signs of aggression, dominance, and power has dominated popular culture for a long time. However, recent developments have indicated a shift in the representation of masculinity. The central concern of this paper will be the exploration of the emergence of the new male body; a delicate, non-mesomorphic male body that has taken the spotlight in popular culture. It is a complex and radical representation where the male body is no longer a towering mass of muscles and tough exterior, but rather a soft, often androgynous, and vulnerable representation. Citing examples in popular culture (cinema, sports, music) wherein the traditional notion of “masculinity” gets distorted and desensitized, it will attempt to reconstitute the “normativity” of hegemonic masculinity. What happens when the male body no longer endorses the traditional physical traits appropriated under the hegemonic regime? Does non-mesomorphic masculinity subvert the “impenetrable” ideal of hegemonic masculinity, and how does this subversion compromise the position of hegemonic masculinity? These are some of the questions this paper will attempt to examine and argue.

### **Keywords**

Male Body, Hegemonic Masculinity, Popular Culture, Cinema, Media, Sports, Globalization.

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### **I**

In his book, *Masculinity and Culture*, author John Beynon declares that the term “‘masculinity’ is composed of many masculinities” since it is “always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location . . .” (1). As a social and cultural construct, masculinity becomes diverse, vulnerable and is constantly redefined. However, despite this fluidity, hegemonic masculinity has been considered the dominant form of masculinity throughout history. Sociologist R.W. Connell, in her ground-breaking book *Masculinities*, defines hegemonic masculinity as follows:

The concept of ‘hegemony’ deriving from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. 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) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (77)

Thus, according to Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to the “masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations . . .” (76). This social ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity not only allows men dominance over women but also over men who do not fall under the radar of the “normative” ideal. Sociologist Michael Kimmel expresses a similar sentiment wherein he writes:

One definition of manhood continues to remain the standard against which other forms of manhood are measured and evaluated. Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting. (124)

Based on these statements, we can derive that as a dominant ideology, hegemonic masculinity represents a specific type of masculinity. In terms of physical attributes, hegemonic masculinity capitalizes on hyper-masculine bodies, muscular or mesomorphic, strong, well-toned, and athletic bodies. Since the male body is one of the primary signifiers of masculinity,

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the examination of the function of the male body, and its representation becomes highly pertinent.

Representations of the male body in popular culture such as cinema, television, music, and sports among others facilitate in maintaining the hierarchical dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. They are, in fact, deeply involved in embodying hegemonic forms of masculinity. In a world of consumer capitalism where the human body becomes an increasingly visible commodity on display, it often becomes the marker for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Traditionally, these representations are expected to adhere to the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. Subsequently, male bodies are often depicted as strong, taut, and muscular bodies.

Since its inception, traditional mediums such as cinema and television have continued to reinforce the notion of hegemonic representation of the male body through its content. They consistently present images of muscular men thereby influencing how men perceive their bodies. The display of mesomorphic male bodies on the television screen and cinema theatres is consistently and religiously consumed by the public. As part of media culture and consumer culture, the muscular physique is marketed as the ideal image of the male body. Needless to say, it helps maintain the status quo of the “normativity” of hegemonic masculinity.

Film genres such as the Western, action, and noir depend heavily on the depiction of hard-bodied men to sustain and reinforce the hegemonic concept of masculinity. The Western or cowboy movies as we commonly like to call them are by definition the epitome of hegemonic masculine representation. In their depiction of men displaying brute force, violence, and sexual dominance over women, they reaffirm hegemonic masculinity. The frontier men and cowboys are often represented as hard-bodied, fully covered, tough-looking men in cowboy boots and spurs, drinking, gambling, and gunslinging. Such depictions build perceptions of the male body, thereby stereotyping gender roles and body image. Hollywood actors like John Wayne, Steve McQueen, and Clint Eastwood remain icons for their timeless portrayal of the quintessential American frontier men. Their screen image of the male body as rough looking, scruffy, broad-shouldered, muscled man who spits and walks into a saloon with a cowboy strut is deeply etched into the psyche of the audience as the definition of manliness. Similarly, actors belonging to Hollywood’s Golden Age like Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, and Cary Grant among others set the model of hegemonic masculinity high through their portrayal of strong men on screen. Their debonair attitude, tanned face, strong jaw, and body image not only contribute to the representation of the classic American masculine man but also helped ensure the status quo of hegemonic white masculinity.

The development of any new image of the male body that does not adhere to the traditional norm of hegemonic masculinity becomes a threat to hegemonic masculinity. However, cinema also has the power to challenge limiting masculine norms in ways that support the representation of alternate masculinity. The position of hegemonic masculinity becomes problematic with the depiction of male characters played by American actor Woody Allen in many of his films wherein his hero lacks all the physical traits expected of a quintessential male hero. His characters are fragile-bodied and sickly. Prone to nervous breakdown, depression, diseased with an extraordinary lack of confidence in his physical prowess, Allen’s heroes are humorously a foil to the traditional hegemonic American hero.

Timothée Chalamet is another young male actor who is single-handedly changing the face of masculinity in today’s cinematic world. As a leading male actor, there is nothing conventional about the way he looks, acts, and portrays characters in his movies. With a waif-

like body, Chalamet's screen portrayal of male heroes is far from the hypermasculine heroes portrayed by the likes of screen giants of the 40s and 50s like Gregory Peck, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, and more contemporary actors like Daniel Craig and Brad Pitt among others. Chalamet's body is the perfect example of a non-mesomorphic male body. It is a softer kind of masculinity, androgynous, almost gender-fluid. There is a languid quality in the manner in which he plays his male characters. They are vulnerable. Chalamet's popularity and recognition on a global scale go on to prove that maybe it is possible to break the mold of the "timeless" muscular and aggressive kind of screen hero.

## II

Elements of mass appeal, live audience, and global and media presence make sports intrinsically part of popular culture. Sports and sports media play a crucial role in disseminating notions of hegemonic masculinity. The arena provides a massive space both literally and figuratively where gender and the politics of gender in sports are constantly negotiated and problematized. For instance, sports like figure skating help construct shifting norms of masculinity. Demands and expectations of artistry, aesthetics, and graceful athleticism put figure skating in an ambiguous position. Debates on whether figure skating be perceived as a "masculine" or "feminine" sport continues. Part of the reason for this ambiguity and indecisiveness may be due to the reasons that figure skating as a sport involves twirling bodily movements, delicate hand gestures, and emotive facial expressions. It demands gracefulness, a quality entirely dismissed in "normative" masculinity. The flamboyant display of sequins and crystals on costumes and tight spandex that hugs the outline of the male skater's body can be seen as a discernible feminization and at the same time eroticization of the male body. Oftentimes, the facial expression of the male skater breaks into an explosion of profound grief as he skates to classical music on thin ice. This burst of emotion may be construed as effeminate, perhaps a crack in his masculinity, thus making him vulnerable.

Authors Michelle H.S. Ho and Wesley Lim write that "figure skating is often perceived as 'feminine' and male skaters frequently occupy an ambiguous position, especially for Asian athletes in a historically White-dominated sport"(2). For these athletes, the "feminine" reputation of figure skating along with the Western imperialist view of feminizing Asian men makes it doubly challenging. However, for two-time Olympic champion male skater Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan, it gives a platform to break the barrier of hegemonic masculinity and create new masculinity on ice. With an excellent slim figure, almost waif-like, Hanyu represents a body image that is far from the attributes associated with the masculine athleticism of sports and that of hegemonic masculinity. Hanyu is often clad in flowy, pastel-colored, and sequined costumes, where he skates elegantly to classical music, with every bit of athleticism the sport demands, thereby displaying "soft" masculinity. But he is also clad in darker colors in many of his performances where he skates to rock music displaying a different kind of masculinity. From his choice of music, choreography, and costumes, Hanyu uses his body to break the image of hegemonic masculinity.

## III

In the present age of the internet and social media, it has become easy to reinforce or challenge the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. In a globalized world, it becomes easier still to internalize media representations of society's hegemonic depiction of masculine traits or accept new masculinities. Technology and this interconnectedness of the world beyond borders is one of the main reasons for the ground-breaking development of the visible representation of new masculinity from East Asia, particularly South Korea. The rise in

popularity of Korean pop music in the pop culture scene of the West at an unprecedented rate provides a ripe opportunity to study and explore the representation of masculinity, and more particularly the male body.

Historically, the masculinity of Western culture has been equated to “macho”, and that of the Eastern culture as “feminine”, in tune with the imperialist attitude of the West that has persisted for a long time. Through their music, fashion, and body image, BTS as musicians and performers among many others from the South Korean entertainment industry have broken through the tough exterior of hegemonic masculinity and confronted the “normative” masculinity of the West. Although Western imperialist attitude persists and insists on feminizing and stereotyping them for their smooth skin, aesthetics, and lean bodies; it may very well be for these same reasons that they seem to fulfill the desire and fantasy of the global audience. Professor Kam Louie writes:

Yet, these pretty young men are what women throughout Asia seem to fancy, and although the nature of that fancy could simply be a matter of young girls liking pretty things, there may be other ways to view this major social phenomenon, and we may need to reorient our perspectives on masculinity. (936-937)

Based on their success and presence on the global platform, it may well be said that it is no longer just “women throughout Asia”, but a transnational “fancy”. Author Christopher Pullen writes:

A shift in the appropriating of the gaze related to the physical form, in many ways ‘equalising’ the imagined desirability of the male body to that of the female body, to mainstream audiences, offered new ways of seeing and consuming the male body. (15-16)

Highlighting both statements, we may say that popular culture of East Asia in the context of music has indeed “offered new ways of seeing and consuming the male body.” Male Asian artists like BTS represent a non-threatening body image. They are not macho, not in the sense that Western masculinity dictates. The traditional masculine traits of machismo and toughness are absent from their label. Rather, they seem to embrace their global appeal, success, and recognition giving them the tool to challenge hegemonic masculinity.

This representation of a lean, non-mesomorphic, gender-fluid male body and its phenomenal integration into the present-day Western market has confronted the long-standing stereotype of the burly, muscular male body. Interestingly, the rise of the new male body and its global attention is slowly changing the way the world views the male body. This image of the new male body not only subverts but challenges traditional masculine sexuality. It broadens the scope of masculinity thereby breaking the patriarchal hegemonic wall. With the growing acknowledgment, appreciation, and acceptance by a global audience, media personalities have heralded a new image of the male body and a new idea of masculinity. This paper concludes by stating that popular culture in the context of cinema, sports, and music provides a space for the development of profound changes in the way the world perceives masculinity in this day and age. It challenges the “normative” stereotypes embedded within the patriarchal and imperialist framework. Finally, the paper concludes by stating that this shift in the representation of the male body, from the hypermasculine to the non-mesomorphic male body challenges the long-standing status quo of the traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity, thereby making possible the creation of new masculinities.

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