

Article

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Exploring the Interplay of Height and Masculinity in *Main, Meri Patni Aur Woh*



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Abstract

Identifying the increasingly subversive depiction of masculinity in Bollywood movies over the past decade, this paper discusses the prescience of *MMPAW* in achieving the same as early as the opening years of the new millennia. It draws attention to the movie's unique engagement with the notion of height and how it affects the operation of masculinity in society.

Keywords

Masculinity, height deficiency, sizeism, Bollywood.

Introduction

Be it the devotionals or the family dramas, the social construct of masculinity and the gendered hierarchies it engenders has informed Indian cinema since its inception. The term 'masculinity' is traditionally characterised by aggression, an exhibition of heightened sexual appetite, stunted emotional growth, an excessive display of a well-build body and

stoicism (often to prevent being perceived as weak, thus less 'manly'; recall, "*mard ko kabhi dard nahi hota*" or never does a man feel pain), and of course, dominance (Coles 2017). A man's attainment of social respect predominantly relies on his adherence to such tenets. In discussing masculinity, this paper turns its gaze towards Bollywood, which has

undergone a prodigious transformation over the last decade in its engagement with this social norm.

Since the 1970s, precisely after the rise of the angry young man figure and continuing in the metrosexual hero of the twenty-first century (Gehlawat 2012), Bollywood has been mired in depicting masculinity at best unrealistic, at worst toxic. While such films remain significant blockbusters, the prominence of actors like Ayushmann Khurrana has been a game changer. From *Vicky Donor* (Sircar 2012) to his latest *Doctor G* (Kashyap 2022), Khurrana has built a niche for himself in foregrounding male fragility (Chakraborty 2018; Pothukuchi 2017; Sharma 2019), drawing widespread scholarly attention. While Ruchita Sujai Chowdhary pins down this change as a function of Bollywood's recent dalliance with stories of the commoner and the concomitant need for cinematic verisimilitude (Chowdhary 2021), others like Baidurya Chakrabarti understand it as a result of India's neoliberal turn and its obsession with wokeness (Chakrabarti 2020).

However, the attribute of height, which shares a common dominance base with masculinity, is often overlooked in existing studies. This neglect persists despite the fact that short men frequently report height dissatisfaction and insecurity (O'Gorman et al. 2019). It is this critical lacuna that this paper addresses. In Bollywood, one observes that while it is common to see a Jaya Bachchan mounting atop a stool to assist her husband in popular films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Johar 2001), the opposite is seldom portrayed. Often cinematographic tricks are employed to make shorter heroes appear as tall as the heroines they are paired with, hinting at a height-based norm in gendered relationships in Indian society. Thus, it is curious that in a stroke of prescience, the almost forgotten 2005 slice-of-life Bollywood film *Main, Meri Patni Aur Woh* (Arora 2005, hereafter *MMPAW*) concerned itself with the significance of height in directing the enactment of masculinity. This paper discusses the myriad struggles, vulnerabilities, and strategies that the height-deficient male protagonist employs to construct and sustain his masculinity against the backdrop of marriage.

Framing *MMPAW*

MMPAW portrays the predicaments of a short, non-descript, middle-class man, Mithilesh Shukla (Rajpal Yadav), working at the library of Lucknow University, in reconciling with the idea of having a wife who is taller than him. Hyperconscious of his shortness, he grows increasingly insecure and obsessed with the possibility that his wife Veena (Rituparna Sengupta) might be having an extramarital affair with any man who is around (all of whom are taller than him), particularly with her childhood friend/neighbour, Aakash (Kay Kay Menon), who exhibits the masculinity that Mithilesh seems to lack. Nevertheless, after a series of misunderstandings between the couple, the movie ends with a happy conjugal reconciliation through the easy trope of expecting parenthood which necessarily connotes virility (hence masculinity), ultimately assuaging his insecurity.

Recently, the concept of 'short kings' associated with the display of strength of character and 'regality' by short men has been introduced globally to contest Sizeism, under which they are otherwise characterised as inherently resentful and having questionable leadership qualities (Matei 2019). Nonetheless, the depiction of short men in Bollywood has remained limited to flat, minor characters deployed for comic relief and/or as villains (for instance, consider Chhota Don in *Partner* (Dhawan 2007)¹). Although *Zero* (Rai 2018) had a short male protagonist, it was only a special case of dwarfism, and the hero's travails were swiftly gleaned over by the sweet intervention of luck. Instead of doing a contrapuntal reading of such movies, this paper attempts a content analysis of *MMPAW* for two reasons. First, the film positions the experience of height deficiency in the face of a gendered relationship (i.e., marriage) as the incitement point of a sustained exploration of the protagonist's insecurity about his masculinity, thus bringing out the contextual nature of the masculine performance. Secondly, as *MMPAW*'s protagonist does not exhibit the typical macho attributes, his compensatory struggles to establish his masculinity successfully fleshes out the muted versions of hetero-

patriarchal control in society, wherein his masculinity is negotiated at the cost of his wife's agency. The following sections examine the dismantling and renunciation of specific modes of masculine performance even as others rush to take their place.

Dismantling Pre-negotiated Norms of Masculinity

The initial portrayal of the five-feet-two-inches tall Mithilesh is far from the customary depiction of masculinity. For instance, he is shown to be gentle to his neighbours and sensitive enough to empathise with the travails a bride's family bears. Despite being a bachelor, his residential place is not in disarray but observably well-sorted, thereby hinting at an association between his height and his non-masculine disposition, in contrast to his taller male colleagues and relatives. This is in keeping with the 'multiple masculinity' concept that considers the hierarchised plurality of masculine performances. The currently most honoured way of 'being a man' overrides other subordinated masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 831-832). Mithilesh, however, can negotiate his subordinate masculinity confidently through the masculine trope of responsibility and generational hierarchy. For instance, at the university, he walks past tall students self-assuredly while fixing his tie (a symbol of his diligence). He is not perturbed at being addressed as 'Chhote Babu' (or Small Sir, connoting his short stature) by both his juniors and superiors since he maintains an official repute of intense perfectionism, which gives him his characteristic poise, evident in his restrained tone of giving orders to juniors. Again, at his ancestral home, he is revered for fulfilling his duty of marrying off his three siblings, wherein his younger, taller brothers show him obedience. Although his taller maternal uncle seems to have his way with him, it does not disconcert Mithilesh since such a power dimension is deemed an inherent part of the traditional Indian generational hierarchy where reverence is a positive correlate of seniority. Therefore, as he is able to compensate for the lack of his appearance-based masculinity with the fulfilment of duty and responsibility, he remains content with his 'subordinate' masculinity. However, this is

challenged when the issue of Mithilesh's marriage unfolds.

The importance of women in constructing masculinity has been variously discussed by scholars (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848), making marriage an essential point of investigation² in studying masculinity. Women refusing to date/marry short men is a common phenomenon in India and is a result of their trying to adhere to the social norm that the man in a heterosexual couple needs to be taller than the woman, which in turn makes men self-conscious about their height³ (Ray 2016), invariably affecting the modality of their masculinity-performance. In the beginning, Mithilesh is shown to believe that marriage is more about mutual understanding and value-based compatibility between the couple, and others' opinions should not matter. However, as his height-related insecurity increases, he becomes increasingly concerned about societal judgment.

At first, Mithilesh's unmarried status is instituted as a self of his independent reluctance towards getting married. Only when upon his family's insistence that he decides to meet Veena, then his prospective bride, and his uncle reminds Mithilesh that he need not worry about being forced into this marriage as she might reject him that he begins to feel diffident. When Veena's relatives, receiving them at the bus depot, do not assume him to be the prospective groom until his uncle ascertains it, Mithilesh becomes insecure about his general appearance and, in particular, height. This insecurity further increases when the smiling faces of Veena's family receiving him at her house appear to him as jeering faces—his discomfort peaks when he first realises that Veena is conspicuously taller than him. Even Mithilesh's uncle is troubled by this and states with certainty that he will be rejected. Adhering to societal expectations, his uncle asserts, "Which woman would want a husband shorter than herself?" After that, haunted by a feeling of masculine inadequacy, although he and Veena get along well, Mithilesh does not dare to confess the feelings he has started developing for Veena, obsessed with others' opinions and thus fearing rejection. This shows how Mithilesh's height-based insecurity prevents him

from sustaining his beliefs around the couple-centric foundation of marriage. However, Veena herself consents to the match. As a result, Mithilesh's self-doubt vanishes, and he begins confidently communicating with her.

However, when Veena visits his ancestral home, Mithilesh overhears servants commenting on their height disparity, saying, "*langoor ke haath mein angoor laga hai*" (or grapes in the hand of a monkey), indicating he does not deserve her. Once again, this institutes self-doubt in him. Meanwhile, his colleague, Saleem, visibly taller, sturdier and hence more masculine, seems to get over-friendly with Veena, making him insecure until Veena mentions her intentions of adhering to the traditional roles of a wife (like cooking), partially restoring his masculine confidence by reminding him of his dominant hierarchical position in the heteropatriarchal system apropos Veena. However, Mithilesh's height-based masculine insecurity soon returns when he notices that the front seat of Mithilesh's scooter is naturally in a far lowered position than the back seat. This was useful for him as, due to that setting; his short "legs could touch the ground"⁴. However, hyperconscious of their height difference, Mithilesh lies to Veena, saying the scooter is semi-dysfunctional and avoids riding it with her. Unlike his previous indifferent gait amongst the university students, when he enters the campus with Veena, his stature-induced diffidence makes him feel others are doubting his competence of being her husband. The extent of his self-doubt is evident when the Vikram Auto driver comments, "You have *got* such a beautiful bride" (italics mine), and Mithilesh picks on the passivity indicated in 'got' and retorts that he did not simply 'get' but 'married her', presenting himself having more agency and hence more masculine. This is in keeping with studies that show how in trying to conform to societal expectations, men experience masculine gender role stress (MGRS), wherein they suffer from adverse psychological effects like insecurity, low self-esteem and increased anger (Gallagher and Parrott 2011, 570), which in Mithilesh's case gives rise to a dismantling of the masculinity that he had negotiated prior to his marriage.

Renegotiating Masculinity

Although the trope of suspicious husbands has been common in Bollywood (e.g., *Chalte Chalte* (Mirza 2003), *Shaadi Ke Side Effects* (Chaudhary 2014)), in *MMPAW*, it has been employed to underscore Mithilesh's height-based insecurity regarding his masculinity. Be it gawking street loafers, an overfriendly milkman, vegetable vendor, Vikram Auto driver, or his close colleague Saleem—all seem to him as threats to his masculinity. Scholars have observed how men suffering from MGRS negotiate their masculinity by asserting dominance over women (Gallagher and Parrott 2011, 570)—the same precipitates in this film. In order to maintain his masculine stoicism, Mithilesh hides his vulnerability from Veena and engages in a series of falsehoods to nip his masculine rivals. For instance, under various pretexts, Mithilesh evades the Vikram driver and manipulates Veena into tying a *rakhi* to Saleem, thus ritualistically precluding any possibility of an illicit relationship between the two. He dismisses the milkman and avoids the vegetable vendor, taking Veena to shop in the mall, thereby exhibiting his economic power, often regarded as an exhibition of masculinity in conjugal relationships (Rich 2015, 390). He even makes an excuse not to let her have kebabs before other men but takes her to a less crowded area instead. It is perhaps not coincidental that such a negotiation of masculinity is accompanied by restricting his wife's freedom, bestowing him with an enhanced sense of patriarchal control and hence masculinity. However, the same is accomplished through the not-so-masculine tool of manipulation. Subsequently, Mithilesh employs a plethora of ingenious ploys to renegotiate his masculinity. For instance, he adds height-lending soles to his shoes and has the front seat of his scooter unnaturally raised, against the mechanic's advice. Although this makes it difficult for him to drive the scooter, with practice, he manages and grows more confident about appearing taller than Veena while travelling and walking. Once again, this highlights the gendered context in which his masculinity is negotiated. Although, previously, Mithilesh had no problem in being referred to as 'Chhote Babu', now he corrects

the mechanic habituated in addressing him so and mentions his preference of being addressed as Shuklaji, thus doing away with the connotation of shortness (thus non-masculinity) from his name and associating his self-identity with the more reverential 'ji'. Despite previously acting out the role of a provincial resident of a small city, Mithilesh adopts metrosexual means of conquering an alternative mode of masculinity by indulging in grooming, wherein he has his hair trimmed and treated, gets a facial, steam-treatment, and massage, and comes out of the saloon confidently, symbolised by his authoritative tone in which he asks the saloon-keeper to change the song "*Hans chugega dana, kauwa moti khayega*" (or, the swan will now nibble grains while crows enjoy pearls, reminding him unworthiness). This shows that he tries out innovative ploys to reconcile his height deficiency.

However, Mithilesh's attempts at renegotiating his masculinity get deconstructed upon the arrival of Aakash, who comes to stay near his living quarters. Much taller and more humorous than him, Aakash veritably challenges Mithilesh's masculinity. The upsurge of his insecurity manifests in his momentarily charging at Veena for delaying in taking his call. Later, when the trio congregate on the terrace, and Aakash offers to make the drinks, Mithilesh *whispers* the instruction of diluting his share with soda and water. This is in line with the percolation of the gendered habitus into the gastronomical sphere — masculinity being determined by what men are ready to have (Sobal 2005, 135-140) — wherein Mithilesh's lowered voice shows both his shame as a man and an attempt to maintain his masculine exhibition before Veena. Aakash gradually deconstructs many sources from which Mithilesh drew his masculinity. For instance, his financial status and educational qualifications are far better than Mithilesh's, explicitly pointed out by his uncle, which not only upturns the 'economic masculinity' Mithilesh had previously displayed before Veena (by taking her to the mall) but also his status at his ancestral home. Mithilesh had been enjoying the power of naming newborn children in his family. However, Aakash usurps even this right from him when he visits Mithilesh's family. Aakash's

towering presence at the university as his superior and his ability to mesmerise the women around him (comprising Mithilesh's boss' wife, his sister-in-law, and Veena) adds to the blow. In an effort to hold to his hitherto-established masculinity, Mithilesh tries to retaliate. Once again, this is accomplished by imposing restrictions on Veena's freedom by manipulating her into staying at his ancestral home (away from Aakash) for a few days. He reads self-help books like *The Portrait of a Complete Man* (observe how the word 'portrait' connotes the visual field of the body once more) and consults a godman, asking for herbs that will enhance his height.

Interestingly, he locates the solution to his insecurity not by demanding faithfulness from his wife but through the increase of his height, showing both Mithilesh's felt culpability in being so deficient that it is almost justified for his wife to seek other men and how the negotiation of his masculinity is crucially fulcrumed at his height-deficiency. Later when Veena is away, he has drinks with Aakash. In an attempt to establish his masculinity, he says he, too, will have whiskey "on the rocks", like Aakash. His attempts to copy Aakash is further demonstrated by his asking for a cigarette on seeing him smoke and copying even his bodily posture to rise higher in the hierarchy of multiple masculinity. Mithilesh is shown swigging down drought after drought, announcing, "Mine is finished...no no, you finish yours, and then we will make another round," trying to show he is more masculine. This is in keeping with the tendency of men lacking the economic upper hand trying to establish their masculinity in society by relying on traditional modes of masculinity like "swag", referring to the "confidence, brashness, bravado, charisma" projected through their appearance, style and disposition which "has value even in the absence of earning power" (Rich 2015,402). However, the night unfolds in a way as to completely demoralises Mithilesh from negotiating his masculine performance any further.

After talking about his mother, Akash says, "Our tuning is perfect. She is my best friend", and one is not sure if he is referring to his mother or Veena. When Mithilesh suggests that Akash get married, he says the easiest thing to do in India is marriage, which

often results in a lifetime of adjustments. He says: “Why you chose someone, whether you are worthy of them or not, is all that is very important. Many people expend their entire life with this wrong decision. Not everyone is as *lucky* as you, Mithilesh Babu.” Once again, this makes Mithilesh doubt whether it is just ‘luck’ that made him Veena’s husband. He tries to overcome it by pointing out that Akash has been unable to keep up with his pace of alcohol consumption to reinstitute his masculinity. However, Akash says that maybe he is going unnecessarily fast. Hereafter, Mithilesh dwindles the winding stairwell of self-destructive thoughts wherein he imagines Aakash replacing him in Veena’s life. After watching *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (Bhansali 1999) in the theatre, he identifies with the husband, who decides to hand over his wife to her lover and walks down the path of renouncing his masculinity, again highlighting the context-specific performative nature of masculinity.

After that, Mithilesh does not charge the godman for betrayal in ‘manly’ aggression but raises the ethical concern of giving rise to false hopes in him and tells himself he is unworthy of Veena. At the car showroom, when the manager mistakes Aakash as Veena’s husband, Mithilesh does not mind and later lets him sit beside Veena in the car, taking the back seat, unlike a typical masculinity-exhibiting husband. Hitherto, Veena’s insistence on keeping Mithilesh out of the kitchen works towards sustaining his masculinity, which he breaks to cook for Veena once he suspects she wants to divorce him, further relinquishing his masculinity symbolically. Utterly vanquished, the university students push past him, and as he has his scooter seat lowered again, the mechanic comments, “If you do not keep the seat at a height compatible with you, you are sure to lose balance”, paralleling with Mithilesh’s conception of his conjugal life. Thus, Mithilesh fails to overcome the masculine insecurity generated by his height deficiency apropos his tall wife. It is only when his masculinity is re-established in terms of virility and

dominion over Veena’s body after they have children following their reconciliation that the other male characters cease to be potential threats to Mithilesh’s masculinity.

Conclusion

This paper offers an analysis of the unique contribution of *MMPAW* to Bollywood in subverting masculinity through the particular lens of height. It heavily draws from the Western scholarship. The increase in Indian research on the intersection of height and masculinity will provide a more insightful framework for the study. As evident in the paper, masculinity has been treated in a constructivist sense, not an essentialist spirit. Despite existing scholarship on the enactment of masculinity by female bodies, the decision to discuss masculinity only in the context of men has been a conscious choice. Note that the paper functions within the gender binary of male/female because the characters of *MMPAW* identify themselves that way, and identification plays an important role in gender performance, insecurities, and aspirations. Eschewing from the usual Bollywood depiction of masculinity, *MMPAW* explores the emotional terrain of masculine subjectivity, thus forming a nuanced addition to existing sociological enquiries in gender studies by analysing the relation of masculine power to insecurities with particular attention to the height and its import in heterosexual relationships like marriage capturing the dynamic performance of masculinity and its self-understanding to the individual in the face of its dismantling and subsequent renegotiation.

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Notes

1. Interestingly, it is once again Rajpal Yadav who is cast to play into the sizeist trope despite it being filmed two years after *MMPAW*.
2. Study conducted on male homosexual couples showed the absence of a correlation between height and perceived masculinity (Moskowitz and Hart 2011), justifying the emphasis of this paper on heterosexual relationships.
3. See this video, where Adriana Lima upholds this: <https://youtu.be/FDIR7G1mRDs>.
4. This can also be taken as a reference to the idiom of remaining grounded that gains significance later when he raises his seat, which is associated with the hope of negotiating his masculinity before Veena — something that seems increasingly unrealistic to him.

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