

Exploring the Facets of Toxic Masculinity and Family Dynamics in the Movie *Joji*

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Abstract— The Malayalam film *Joji*, directed by Dileesh Pothan, presents a gripping narrative steeped in themes of familial conflict and moral ambiguity. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the film explores the complexities of male relationships, particularly the damaging effects of toxic masculinity and the absence of maternal influence. The film centres on Joji, whose struggle for identity and autonomy is shaped by his authoritarian father's rigid expectations of masculinity. This study analyses how these expectations manifest as violence, manipulation, and moral decay, ultimately leading to tragic outcomes. Through character development and familial interactions, *Joji* critiques the traditional ideals of masculinity that prioritize power over empathy. As Joji navigates his envy and jealousy towards his father and brothers, the narrative unfolds a dark tale where death becomes a means of liberation from oppressive familial structures. This paper argues that *Joji* serves as a profound critique of patriarchal authority, illuminating how these themes interweave to shape the dynamics of evil within the family.

Key terms: toxic masculinity, family dynamics, evil, gender relationships

INTRODUCTION

The Malayalam film *Joji*, directed by Dileesh Pothan, presents a gripping narrative steeped in themes of familial conflict and moral ambiguity. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the film explores the complexities of male relationships, particularly the damaging effects of toxic masculinity and the absence of maternal influence. The paper entitled “Exploring the facets of toxic masculinity and family dynamics in the movie *Joji*” argues that *Joji* serves as a profound critique of patriarchal authority, illuminating how these themes interweave to shape the dynamics of evil within the family. The operative terms in the title are toxic masculinity and family dynamics and each of these shall be discussed in detail through this paper. The film is replete with symbols that serve as the means to subtly reveal the intricate complexities of the relation between each character within the film. The central crux of the plot is how Joji, the titular character navigates his aggression, aversion, jealousy and animosity towards his father and brothers. The narrative unfolds a dark tale where death becomes a means of liberation from oppressive familial structures. The movie centres around Joji Panachel, who is the youngest son of the patriarch Panachel Kuttapan. The other characters in the movie are his eldest son Jomon, whose wife left him on account of his drunkenness, Jaison -the second son who handles all the official works of Kuttapan, Jaison's wife Bincy (the only female figure in the movie), Popy-grandson of Kuttapan, Felix (cousin/brother of Kuttapan) and the priest Fr Kevin.

The Panachel family is a typical example of a dysfunctional family and one may discern this to be the root cause for the uncanny family dynamics and toxicity inherent within the household. Lucy Kganyago Mphaphuli mentions in the chapter on “The Impact of Dysfunctional Families on the Mental Health of Children” that:

Dysfunctional families are characterised by multiple conflicts, tense relationships, chaos, neglect, abuse, poor communication, lack of empathy and secrecy to an extent that the emotional and physical needs of the family members are not met, especially children.... Life in a

dysfunctional family is a turbulence of uncertainty and instability as well as an unsafe space for family members. Instead of expressing their concerns and resolving issues in a positive manner, members in some dysfunctional families normalise their situation and get accustomed to condoning unacceptable behaviour such as abuse, victimisation and conflict, and they sweep issue under the carpet. (3)

The movie presents all the above-mentioned characteristics through the employment of visual and auditory symbolism and also through the setting of the movie. The movie has the Covid-19 pandemic as the eerie backdrop for presenting not only the repressed feelings of the family members but also revealing the sense of alienation or distancing amongst the inmates of the house.

Kuttapan, the dominating patriarch figure in the movie, is a widower who single handedly manages the finances of the wealthy household, in spite of having three grown up sons. Kuttapan shows no warmth towards any of his family members and this causes a terribly suffocating environment within the household. The movie starts off by introducing Popy, Kuttapan's grandson who goes up to the main gate to collect a parcel which was actually an air gun he ordered online by stealthily using his grandfather's net banking account. This air gun ,later on ,serves as a device that is used by Joji to get rid of his eldest brother Jomon, who turns out to be a potential danger for Joji's new found freedom and power. The subtle background score is reflective of the mistrust and miscreant behaviour that is evident in all the principal figures in the movie. The movie presents the complexities of family relationship in the movie by limiting the physical presence of the only female character, Bincy. Bincy is presented as the docile woman of the household, who during the first phase of the movie, is pictured either within the kitchen preparing meals or washing and drying clothes. A point to be noted is that Kuttapan is never presented as talking to Bincy while all the other members converse with her in one way or the other. The patriarchal disruptive power within the household is revealed through the character Bincy who is toiling all day with no extra support system. It is after Kuttapan's death that the family members sit together at the dining table to discuss about the division of the property and it is then that Bincy comments that each of them got a space to voice their comments and opinions openly only after the death Kuttapan.

Kuttapan, one notes is presented as an authoritarian patriarch who can also be considered as a typical representative of hegemonic masculinity. The term "hegemonic characteristics" was introduced by R.W Connell, according to whom,

"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)

The domineering father figure is a stark contrast to his sons who are forced into obedience and submissiveness on account of his financial autonomy. The film presents a nuanced critique of patriarchal dominance and its consequences on familial relationships. The absence of a mother figure results in violent, oppressive ruthless behaviour especially in Joji who constantly bears the brunt of abusive comments from his father. Kuttapan's over dominating presence results in toxic masculinity which in turn debilitates not only Joji's identity but also aggravates the lack of confidence in his brother Jaison too. Toxic masculinity arises from the patriarchal societal norms and Kuttapan's toxic masculinity can be considered to be the strong force behind Joji's covert scheming and lack of empathy towards his father and siblings. It adversely affects his mental stability and turns him into a psychopath soon after his father's death. Joji is presented as a young man either spending his day in bed (with the IELTS online class playing on his laptop) or sitting near the dried-up pond on the outskirts of his father's property. Joji loiters aimlessly and his father has extreme contempt for the youngster. Joji is unable to resist his father's authoritative power as he is financially dependent upon him.

Things take a different turn when Kuttapan suffers from a stroke and he remains bedridden only to recover slowly after a surgery. The period when Kuttapan is at the hospital, the subtle conversations between Bincy and Joji reveal that they were all secretly hoping for the patriarch

to never return alive. The slow recovery of Kuttapan makes Joji all the more frustrated inwards but before his nephew Popy and sister-in-law, he remains as a son who has genuine empathy for the bedridden father. It is only when the patriarch shows no signs of any compassion towards his sons, in spite of being partially paralysed, Joji decides to slowly kill him by switching the tablets. He was able to carry out his plans with the silent approval of Bincy. The movie portrays how, each time, Joji carries away the tablet container with new found confidence and when he hears the screams of Bincy announcing the death of Kuttapan, Joji remains callous and unaffected by the sound. One notices how the weak Joji gradually evolves into a strong, self-confident and assertive man soon after his tormenter is no more. Gupta S.B et al. have stated that, “Many of the behavioural problems portrayed by Joji, including defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression, antisociality, and self-harm is related to psychosocial factors of his dysfunctional family.” (106)

When cornered by his brother Jaison about the death of their elder brother Jomon, Joji deftly manipulates the truth and tries blackmailing Jaison. The root cause for all this can be attributed to the toxic masculinity of Kuttapan, the strong, masculine power source of the family. Toxic masculinity creates negative impact upon the psyche of people who are under its impact and Joji’s character is obtusely struck by the overbearing Kuttapan. Recent studies have asserted this as is evinced in the article quoted below:

With toxic masculinity, men also experience a social identity crisis. In addition, toxic masculinity can also negatively affect individuals' mental and emotional aspects. Individuals can be selfish, lack empathy, and can behave violently. (Seravin et al.279)

The family dynamics in the movie throws light upon the dysfunctional family of the Panachels. As mentioned earlier, the absent mother figure and the dominative, ruthless father figure have resulted in a cracked familial atmosphere. There seems to be no sort of direct communication amongst the inmates of the house. This makes the inmates vulnerable to emotional deficiency and makes them all the more susceptible to mental instability, a growing sense of abandonment, constant identity crisis and fear of the power agency.

Kuttapan assumes the role of a dictator ruling over his household. His general attitude towards all his sons is that of physical overpowering and verbal attack. This overpowering harrowing behaviour makes his sons (especially Joji) eagerly anticipate his demise so that they may get their much-awaited liberation and financial independence.

“A dictator parent who disregards the desires or sentiments of the other family members rules a dominant-submissive household. While being demanding, the dominant parent offers little in the way of affection, assistance, or constructive criticism. The children frequently experience harsh repercussions for their errors and failings, such as scolding and spanking (Makhanya)

These “harsh repercussions” in turn make Joji antagonistic to his father even though he is bedridden. Joji and his brother Jaison find it very difficult to assert themselves and their needs in the presence of their father, but when Kuttapan is at the hospital, Joji asserts himself as a person capable of deciding things on his own. He sells his horse at a reasonable price and uses the cash to affirm his role in the family especially when his brothers discuss about financial constraints. In addition to this, one notices that Bincy is the silent witness to Joji’s plan of slowly killing his father by switching the medication. The discontent and frustration of the family members is presented through their repressed voiceless acts of frustration and internalisation of pain.

The film presents a few symbols that are representative of the power vested by the father figure, Panachel Kuttapan. They are his gold chain, gold ring, wrist watch, his vehicles (the car and pick-up truck), his cash wallet and above all his mansion and the large property he owns. Joji, gets hold of all these power props soon after the death of Kuttapan. The whole household undergoes a transformed atmosphere after Kuttapan is off screen. To put it in other words, after the death of Kuttapan, the power dynamics within the family undergoes a seismic shift. Bincy is no longer in the kitchen, in fact, she too has become the woman of the household with a servant to do the

chores thereby providing her with ample time to indulge in self-care routines and also engage in subtle discussions with Joji. Dr Navya V.K argues in her paper that, “the criminality displayed by Joji can be seen as his attempt to assert his power and agency both of which he could not claim in the presence of the hegemonic masculine father figure Kuttapan.” (a568)

Joji’s oppressive violence as presented so far, stems from the destructive presence of the father figure. The family dynamics of the Panachel family throws light on the brewing discontent that runs within the family. Joji’s actions stem from his jealousy towards his brothers especially because he is labelled as a loser by his father. The constant insults showered upon him by his father drives him towards adopting death as a means to escape paternal domination. One notes the Freudian concept of Thanatos or death drive in Joji’s behaviour. “Thanatos manifests in behaviors such as aggression, risk-taking, and a compulsion to repeat past traumas, which Freud believed were ways for individuals to unconsciously move towards an inorganic state, or non-existence.” (Murphy) Joji thus uses death as a means to relieve himself from the oppressive presence of his father. The disintegration of the family structure begins with the death of the father and is intensified with the murder of the next potential obstacle, Jomon, the eldest brother who becomes the elder most member after the demise of Kuttapan.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the paper analyses how the impact of Kuttapan’s toxic masculinity manifests as violence, manipulation, and moral decay which ultimately leads to tragic outcomes in the lives of his sons. Through character development and familial interactions, *Joji* critiques the traditional ideals of masculinity that prioritize power over empathy. The movie unravels the dark sides of human nature through the intricate power clashes and struggles within the family circle. All the characters within the frame of the movie carry within themselves repressed dreams, anxieties, fear and lack of trust. The crime is justified in a veiled manner. The dysfunctional family environment accentuates the augmentation of iniquitous motives within the frustrated members thereby crossing the boundaries of justice, ethics and morality.

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