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The interrelation between masculinity, violence and patriarchy in TV Series Dexter

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ABSTRACT

While the concept of masculinity is explained by pointing out that masculinity is also constructed and performed like femininity and that it is a construct of patriarchy. Textual analysis is done to unfold a better understanding of masculinity in Dexter. Harry's code and Dexter's relationship with the antagonists and female characters are discussed. Dexter challenges the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Harry's code taught him how to perform the role of a heterosexual man. Though Dexter questions the validity of the code time and again, he cannot function without it. Violence is used as a site to project masculinity, and Dexter and the antagonists too operate their masculinity by using violence. Masculinity and violence are linked in Dexter. Dexter's relationship with the female characters in the series sheds some light on the type of masculinity he is harbouring. Dexter is able to share a happy and healthy relation with women as long as they are damaged and dependent on him owing to their subjugated and subordinate condition; the moment they become independent, his relationship with women become strained. Hegemonic masculinity induces the idea of subjugation of women.

Keywords: Masculinity, Harry's Code, TV Series, Homosociality, Violence.

Introduction

Television series have become the ultimate medium of entertainment; they entertain audiences by presenting them with such themes or issues related to society as domestic relationship, crime, suspense, thriller, terrorism and politics. Television series is open to interpretations; that is it can serve as a text open to analysis. This paper will discuss and analyse the TV series *Dexter* as a readerly text and also open to interpretations at cultural and social levels. *Dexter* has been adapted from the renowned novel series *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay. *Dexter* falls into the genres of crime fiction and detective fiction – hard-boiled and whodunit detective genre. This paper will go in length to discuss and analyse on masculinity in its relation to violence. What is masculinity? Is it a fixed term? Philippa Gates defines it as:

There is a cultural assumption that the qualities associated with each gender –for example, power with masculinity and emotionality with femininity – are biologically determined; but this ignores the influence of culture on the social subject. (28)

Masculinity is not an unchanging concept: it is constantly expanding and reinventing itself. Who is Dexter? Dexter is a vigilante detective, a serial killer and a blood splatter analyst for the Miami Metro Police. Is he a victim of masculinity? Does he revel in being a masculine subject? Dexter's masculinity is clear cut heterosexual masculinity, and the show also highlights the intrinsic relation between violence and masculinity.

Masculinity and patriarchy function at many levels in *Dexter* and Harry's code will be discussed elaborately in this paper to discuss how it contributes in shaping Dexter's manhood.

Discussion

As said earlier, Dexter is a serial killer cum vigilante detective at night and a blood spatter analyst for Miami Metro which is his official occupation. Dexter's charm as a protagonist also rests on his portrayal as a typical urban heterosexual man who works for a living despite his strange blood thirsty nature as a serial killer; and he attempts to fit into society notwithstanding his shortcomings as an unemotional human being. He claims to be a psychopath because he feels disconnected from the emotional connection that a normal human being enjoys, and he says, "I am neither man nor beast. I am something new entirely" (*Dexter*, Season 1.04). But Dexter is not different from the stereotypical heterosexual male as he tries to be a part of the larger heteronormative society and he willingly follows his foster father, Harry Morgan's instruction. He trains himself to fit into the normal society and manages to disguise as a perfect brother, co-worker, boyfriend, and later husband and a father. Helen Mayer Hacker states in her article "The New Burdens of Masculinity", "the ideal man is considered by men as being, among other things, a good provider, the ultimate source of knowledge and authority, and strong in character do that he may give a feeling of security, not only financially but emotionally, to his wife and children" (227). Dexter is drawn into roles which will eventually define his masculinity. Initially, Debra was his only family and he perfectly and genuinely plays the role of a protective elder brother. This protective nature is part of the larger picture of masculinity. In order to fend his masculine self, he has to perform what is expected from a man.

Dexter's killer instinct can be attributed to his masculinity. He feels that by killing all these criminals and offenders he is keeping the city clean. He upholds order in society, but the irony is that he is a criminal too. The guy who works as a blood spatter analyst for the Miami Metro Police, who also occasionally brings doughnut for his colleagues, is also a notorious serial killer whose true identity remains hidden behind his façade of a sweet, gentle, kind and harmless man. He is a complex character with a dual life but this duality adheres to the making up of his masculinity.

Dexter's foster father Harry Morgan domesticates Dexter to channel his instincts for a better purpose. The series does not promote patriarchy or masculinity (masculinity is based on and deeply rooted in patriarchy) in itself but it unfolds how patriarchy or masculinity functions and affects the individual who practices it. Harry Morgan is the epitome of a perfect man – an ideal husband, a caring and loving father, and a respectable police officer – but he is a questionable figure because, as the series unfolds, Dexter discovers Harry's infidelity to his wife Dorris Morgan and that Harry had a fling with Dexter's biological mother Laura Moser who was also a C.I. (Confidential Informant) of Harry. Laura Moser was brutally murdered during one of the undercover operations done by Harry Morgan. So, Harry is flawed in many ways. He is also indirectly responsible for Dexter's traumatic childhood. Where are Harry's masculinity and authority when it comes to Laura Moser? He did not only fail to protect her but also put Dexter and his brother Brian's future at stake, he exposed them to a gruesome future where both of them become serial killers. Harry has failed as a patriarchal figure. Though he taught Dexter to defend his "Dark Passenger" by targeting those whom law has failed to punish yet, but after seeing Dexter's first victim who had been mutilated and butchered, Harry could not live with himself and in the end he committed suicide. He has failed as a father and a patriarch. Despite his failure, Harry Morgan appears throughout the series as a projection of Dexter's mind. Dexter constantly looks for validation and approval from Harry Morgan. Here, Dexter can be seen as an extension of Harry Morgan who tries to win back what Harry Morgan had failed to accomplish: authority, power that is typical of masculinity. Harry's untimely death has wounded the normative patriarchal family and Dexter subconsciously tries to heal what Harry has injured. By revering and following Harry's code, Dexter keeps alive the patriarch that Harry was. R.W. Connell emphasizes in his book *Masculinities* that:

Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition. This holds regardless of the changing content of the demarcation in different societies and periods of history. Masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation. (43-44)

Dexter's masculinity is derived from femininity. For instance, Dexter works under the supervision of a female, Lieutenant Maria Laguerta, who is the head of Miami Metro Police Department. And Dexter's foster sister, Debra Morgan, also works as a detective in the same department. So, even though it is a men's world, women have succeeded in penetrating the masculine environment. Debra looks up to Dexter but there are times when she proves to be better than him. And Dexter has to constantly prove that he is the superior one. Dexter does not admit defeat, he tries to prove himself that he is the powerful and the invincible one.

Therefore, Harry's code does not only cover Dexter's persona as a serial killer but also tames him to fit into the changing world where the patriarchal masculinity is at a critical juncture. Dexter's homicidal tendency of killing law offenders and criminals too can be attributed to the patriarchal nature to sustain order in the chaotic society. Harry's code justifies Dexter's homicidal instinct as a form of aggression that needs proper control and channeling. His thirst for killing is insatiable and he has to kill in order to feel that he is the alpha male. So, the idea of masculinity is deeply entrenched in *Dexter*.

But, time and again, Dexter questions the validity of the code. By contesting the credibility of the code, Dexter is also questioning the idea of masculinity and patriarchy. Harry's code was delineated to protect Dexter from the glare of law and order and society because Harry thought Dexter was incapable of human emotions and relationships. Harry, the patriarchal head, has figured what Dexter would be like and what Dexter should do without realizing the capability of Dexter. Harry's control over Dexter is very strong, and his presence in Dexter's life even after his death is constant. Dexter, despite revolting against Harry's code, is back to square one: he too realizes his need for the code for his survival and maintaining his individuality.

One of the key points of the code is to blend in and thus Dexter maintains a heterosexual relationship with Rita to pose as a normal human being. He even likes the idea of being a family man because it sounds innocuous and wholesome. The idea of a harmless family man poses a problem with his nocturnal homicidal life. He was reluctant to be a father; as his voice-over echoes, "What do I have to offer a child? Just me. Demented daddy Dexter" (*Dexter*, Episode 3.12). First, most serial killers live a solitary life without family. Second, family comes with a responsibility and to Dexter taking a life is much easier than giving life to someone. In spite of his new responsibility as a husband and father, Dexter is not ready to part with his old life: he keeps his apartment even after his marriage. His apartment is his sacred sanctuary where he kept the trophies (blood slides) collected from his victims. The blood slide is a constant reminder of what he is capable of – control, power and invincibility, which also serves as part of his masculinity.

But family life is also an integral part to his survival which he has to perform. Dexter has to act and perform certain roles assigned to him to fit in. Dexter is performing and internalizing what the normative patriarchal society expects from him. Harry's code is the patriarchal guidebook to masculinity. Harry's code is sanctioned to him and it represents the unofficial social code to Dexter but in many incidents, it gets in Dexter's way. Philippa Gates states, "The substitution of a personal moral code of one sanctioned by society is a crucial stage in the development of the American hero as it sets up the opportunity for a conflict between the hero and the society at large" (33-34). For instance, when Dexter thought that he had found a friend in Miguel Prado as someone who understood him like Harry did, Harry appeared and warned him not to share his secrets but Dexter thought, "When Harry saw me for what I truly was. He was repulsed. It destroyed my brother, consumed Lila. But not Miguel Prado. Somehow he looks at me and he's proud" (*Dexter*, Episode 3.05). Dexter in the end realizes that Miguel Prado had been using him. The code authorized to him by Harry and his own personal freedom get into conflict here but Harry's posthumous hold over Dexter cannot be released easily. By constantly seeking validation for his existence from others, other than Harry and himself, Dexter tries to affirm his place in the society which is strictly gendered and codified. And it seems Dexter struggles to live up to the expectations of masculinity, being born as a man, more than anything else.

Further, violence plays an integral part in *Dexter*. It is mainly through violence and crime that the notion of hegemonic masculinity is depicted in *Dexter*. Violence seems to have been used as a trope for such detective narratives which have always been a male oriented genre. It almost becomes the essence of a detective, the epitome of masculinity, the desirable man. Violence is central to the construction of not only the masculine figure but also of hegemonic masculinity. In order to maintain hegemonic masculinity,

homosociality is a must. But what are hegemonic masculinity and homosociality? R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt in their article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" state that:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities was not assumed to be normal in statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (832)

Sharon S. Bird in her work "Welcome to the Men's Club: Homosociality and Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity", describes homosociality as:

homosocial interaction, among heterosexual men, contributes to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by suppressing meanings associated with identities that fit hegemonic ideals while suppressing meanings associated with nonhegemonic masculinity identities. (121)

Further, she emphasizes that homosociality works on three aspects – emotional detachment, competition among heterosexual men and finally objectification of the women sexually (121). Does Dexter maintain homosociality to safeguard hegemonic masculinity? This will be best explained with his association with the main antagonists – Brian Mosby/Rudy, Miguel Prado, Jordan Chase and Daniel Vogel – as these characters engage in violence like Dexter. These men and Dexter live in a society where crime, criminals and violence enact and persist on many levels and they too participate in criminal acts willingly without remorse. These men would make the best companion for Dexter but instead of complying with their standards and values Dexter chooses a different path for himself. While these men are homosocial, Dexter refuses to socialize with them. Dexter's relationship with these violent men proves self-reflexivity for Dexter. He identifies himself as an unfeeling monster but these men problematize his position as a monster. Violence dominates *Dexter* and most of it is conducted through/by quintessential men.

Dexter's violence that is his homicidal tendency, is legitimized by the fact that he was taught to commit violence by his police officer foster father Harry Morgan, and he kills serial killers and offenders whom the state has failed to punish. And these make him different from Brian Mosby, Miguel Prado, Jordan Chase and Daniel Vogel. These men are emotionally detached from others, they are competitive and they are misogynists. Dexter is given the opportunity to be homosocial with these men. Even if Dexter tries to attain a homosocial relation with Rudy and Miguel Prado it culminates only in failure. The homosocial relation that Dexter shares with Jordan Chase and Oliver Saxon is their thirst for violence; they are all serial killers, but their idea of violence is an eye opener for Dexter; but he will not resort to their type of violence even if he claims to be a monster. Dexter is an ambiguous protagonist but a sense of moral righteousness prevails in him. Dexter does not harm innocent children or people.

The violence perpetrated by these antagonists is beyond moral repair and all of these antagonists are misogynists as all these men seem to be often dictated and governed by certain patriarchal ethos in their values while dealing especially with women. However, Dexter does not fall along the same line as these men. He is governed by ambiguous thought processes and behaviour which often lie beyond the sociological and cultural parameters of masculinity or femininity. His attitude toward women or the female sex is different as compared to the rest of the men who more or less adhere to conventional notions. And to exactly put into words and explain Dexter's attitude towards women is one of the most difficult part of the larger analysis. If one remembers few glimpses of Dexter's childhood and adolescence, definitely he has undergone changes, his attitude and behaviour has shown some variance. The antagonists express their masculine selves more prominently through the violence and crime they perpetrate. Dexter will never inhabit the hypermasculine world these men live in and thereby refuses to be homosocial with them. *Dexter* manages to highlight bad masculinity and good masculinity. Dexter projects good masculinity because his violence has a sense of justice. Violence begets violence in *Dexter* and Dexter bonds with these men in brutality and violence but the violence of these men is morally wrong, inadmissible and insupportable. And the show constantly demarcates and distinguishes Dexter's violence from these men. In short, Dexter condemns their idea of masculinity. So, homosociality is not necessary to maintain a hegemonic masculinity. Though all the antagonists share a similar

notion of masculinity, but their sense of masculinity is subordinate to Dexter's and Dexter's masculinity projects the ideal hegemonic masculinity. The other common thing that links these men with Dexter, other than violence, is women.

Dexter lives in a society where women have managed to penetrate and succeed in jobs/ professions established by patriarchy. Miguel Prado killed his rival and opponent Ellen Wolf because she was getting in his way in Season 3, Episode 9. Miguel is also a man thriving in the changing world. Maybe Jordan Chase too feels threatened by women and by inflicting violence against them he is voicing his authority and masculinity in some way. Miguel Prado and Jordan Chase show sign of inferiority complex – the fear of losing their autonomy, control and power. Their masculinity is constantly being targeted. Does not Dexter feel threatened by women? Is this ideal hegemonic masculinity that Dexter has constructed in lieu of his combat with other men questioned by his association with strong female characters?

Women characters too play a major role in unfolding the concept of masculinity in *Dexter*. All the major female characters in *Dexter*, from Rita Bennett to Hannah McKay, find Dexter appealing and admirable. And as the show proceeds, stronger female characters emerge. Dexter's relationship with these women – Debra Morgan, Rita Bennett, Lumen Pierce and Hannah McKay – gives insight to the perception of masculinity that Dexter embodies. Dexter agreed to a relationship with Rita Bennett because he thinks she too is "damaged" like him and that she would not ask too much from him. This idea of finding a partner who is not superior but somehow an equal, or even inferior, explains Dexter's need to have dominance over Rita in their relationship. She is shown to be completely disinterested in sex but as their relationship grows she gradually gathers her self-esteem and confidence and Dexter in some way is the one behind Rita's new found self-confidence. Eventually their relationship progresses into marriage. Though Dexter veils his dark side from Rita, he is not free from marital obligations. It is a responsibility which he cannot abandon, and Rita helps Dexter in realizing the very constructed social importance of family. Rita ultimately dies in the hands of one of the serial killers, Trinity. Dexter has helped her build a family and a life with him but like her ex-husband, Paul, Dexter has failed as a husband, he could not protect his wife because he was busy fending and feeding his dark passenger. As Harry emphasizes, "Dexter there's a reason serial killers don't have children. You can't be a killer and a dad. Haven't you learnt anything? Her mother is dead because of you" (*Dexter*, Episode 5.09). Here, the concept of masculinity is contested at the domestic level. The real question being, are men expected to be always the protector and giver? Is he not a man if he fails to function within and reciprocate the normative standards of society? Does his position as a male subject put him into a vulnerable situation when it comes to protecting his family? Philippa Gates puts it that:

men in today's society are expected to exhibit, to some degree, the question associated with traditional masculinity – strength, heroism, virility and violence – and yet also the qualities previously associated with femininity – emotional vulnerability, parental affection, and romantic tendencies – to be acceptable to the contemporary society. These qualities are sufficiently contradictory as to fulfilling them, in any consistent way, impossible. However, the reality is that masculinity is not homogeneous and consists of an array of multiple masculinities differentiated by class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and other social determinants. (28-29)

Dexter problematizes the concept of masculinity. When it comes to his sister Debra Morgan, Dexter is exceptionally loving, caring and soft. She is in many ways an equal and serves as a foil to Dexter. She is emotionally dependent on him but she is a hardworking detective. Harry Morgan did not spend much time with his daughter and Debra holds a grudge against both Dexter and Harry because Dexter has taken away all the attention. Initially, she is shown to depend on Dexter when it comes to work too. But as the series progresses, she shows more tact and skill in handling cases, criminals and crime scenes. She gets promoted from a detective to a lieutenant. She grows up as a character. There is an element of incest in Debra when she admits to be in love with Dexter before knowing what he really is. It is partly due to the fact that Dexter is projected as a perfect heterosexual masculine figure, and this might have initiated Debra's attraction toward him. But when she finds out about him she loathes Dexter and ends up being the understanding and responsible one. Debra is the strongest female character in the series. Debra pursues justice through a morally

correct and proper channel while Dexter seeks it through a darker course. She is like a moral compass to Dexter. She and Dexter usually hunt the same killer. While Debra wants to bring justice to society by putting these offenders and serial killers behind bars, Dexter wants to kill them to satiate his dark passenger.

She treasures her brother more than anything, and she killed Maria LaGuerta to protect Dexter. Time and again Debra protects Dexter. Dexter, in order to redeem the emotional and mental injury he has inflicted on Debra, directs Debra to catch Oliver Saxon instead of killing Saxon himself. But she gets shot which renders her brain dead. Ultimately Dexter kills Debra by disposing her body into the sea like his other victims. While Debra emerges to be a strong character, she has to die because she challenges Dexter's masculine worth. Dexter is not a misogynist but he cannot handle or be with strong righteous women who turn out to be equal or superior to him. When it comes to Lumen and Hannah McKay, it is the same. Dexter helped Lumen to avenge the sadistic men who brutally tortured her. He helps her regain her identity and he even saw a future with her. But once she is recovered she chooses to leave him.

Dexter can only be with the type of woman who is damaged inside out. But once the woman recuperates from her trauma she proves to be incompatible for him. This is the case with Hannah McKay: she is also a killer, a woman striving to live in a men's world. But she is someone who is extremely compatible to Dexter as she is his equal, but Dexter leaves her fearing that he would harm her. Hannah McKay is not only Dexter's equal but she was not damaged like Rita, Lumen or even Debra. She is somehow superior to Dexter. Dexter ceases to have a lasting heterosexual relationship with these women. As long as they are damaged or "damsels in distress" they are subjugated figures and Dexter is able to share a healthy relationship with them owing to their subordinate state. The moment they do not need to be protected Dexter is not required. Dexter's inability to have an enduring relationship with these women questions the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Lisa M. Cuklanz in her book *Prime Time: Television, Masculinity and Sexual Violence* states that, "Hegemonic masculinity is a construct that takes into account feminist critiques of traditional masculinity, incorporating them into a new hybrid version but leaving the traditional version intact and simply overlaying new traits" (18). The traditional version includes subjugation of women which makes them dependent on men emotionally. Dexter maintains this hegemonic masculinity when he is faced by subordinate men but when he is confronted by strong women characters he is unable to maintain relations with them.

Conclusion

Dexter's masculinity can be read at two levels: his relationship with violence and men, and his relationship with female characters. He is a character trapped in hegemonic masculinity and when confronted with strong female characters his masculinity ceases to function.

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