

From Idealism to Inner Turmoil: A Psychological Evolution of Masculinity in Indian Cinema through Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor

Theme: The Angry Young Men of Indian Cinema: Echoes of Rage, Romance and Redemption

Sub-theme

- Reimagining the Angry Hero across Changing Decades
- Urban Isolation and the Crisis of Masculine Identity

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Abstract

Indian cinema has consistently reflected the evolving psychological, social, and cultural realities of masculinity. From the optimistic idealism of the post-independence era to the emotional fragmentation characteristic of contemporary society, cinematic representations of men have undergone a profound transformation. This chapter examines this psychological evolution through a comparative analysis of the protagonists portrayed by Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor. While Raj Kapoor's characters embody moral resilience, social responsibility, and emotionally regulated responses to adversity, Ranbir Kapoor's characters reveal increasing experiences of identity conflict, emotional dysregulation, alienation, and psychological vulnerability. Drawing upon established psychological theories, including Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Gross's Process Model of Emotional Regulation, Connell's theory of Hegemonic Masculinity, the Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis, and existential perspectives on identity, the chapter explores how masculinity has shifted from a socially embedded construct to an intensely individualised psychological experience. Through detailed analyses of selected films, the chapter demonstrates that anger, emotional expression, and masculine identity have progressively transitioned from collective struggles against external social injustice to deeply personal conflicts involving selfhood, emotional regulation, and existential uncertainty. Ultimately, the chapter argues that Indian cinema not only reflects changing cultural understandings of masculinity but also serves as a valuable psychological text through which evolving emotional realities of men can be understood.

Keywords: Masculinity, Emotional Regulation, Identity Crisis, Indian Cinema, Raj Kapoor, Ranbir Kapoor, Attachment Theory, Alienation, Psychological Evolution

1. Introduction

Cinema has long functioned as one of the most influential cultural institutions for representing human emotions, social identities, and psychological experiences. Beyond entertainment, films provide a powerful medium through which societies negotiate changing values, collective anxieties, and evolving understandings of gender. In India, where cinema occupies a central place in popular culture, male protagonists have historically reflected dominant ideals of masculinity while simultaneously responding to shifting social, political, and economic realities. Consequently, the psychological construction of masculinity portrayed on screen offers valuable insights into broader transformations occurring within Indian society.

The representation of masculinity in Indian cinema has undergone a remarkable evolution over the past seven decades. During the post-independence period, male protagonists were largely portrayed as morally upright individuals whose struggles emerged from poverty, social inequality, and institutional injustice. Their anger was directed outward, serving as a response to collective social problems rather than personal psychological distress. Emotional vulnerability was acknowledged but remained integrated within broader narratives of hope, resilience, ethical responsibility, and social reform. Such portrayals reflected the optimism of a newly independent nation striving toward justice, equality, and national reconstruction.

However, rapid urbanization, globalization, technological advancement, neoliberal economic policies, and changing family structures have significantly altered contemporary experiences of identity and interpersonal relationships. These transformations have also reshaped cinematic representations of men. Contemporary protagonists increasingly confront internal conflicts rather than external obstacles. Instead of battling social injustice alone, they struggle with identity confusion, emotional instability, fractured relationships, loneliness, existential uncertainty, and psychological alienation. Their anger frequently becomes internalized, manifesting as emotional withdrawal, impulsive behaviour, aggression, depression, or self-destructive tendencies. As a result, masculinity is no longer represented as a stable social identity but as a dynamic psychological process marked by vulnerability, uncertainty, and continuous negotiation.

This transformation is particularly evident when comparing the cinematic worlds of Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor. Raj Kapoor's protagonists represent the ethical idealism of post-independence India, where emotional expression remains closely connected to collective responsibility and moral purpose. In contrast, Ranbir Kapoor's characters symbolize the psychological complexities of contemporary society, where identity is fragmented and emotional regulation becomes increasingly difficult. Although separated by several decades, both actors portray men confronting adversity; however, the nature, source, and psychological meaning of their struggles differ substantially.

The present chapter examines this transition through the lens of psychological theory. Rather than treating cinema solely as artistic expression, it approaches films as cultural narratives that reveal changing patterns of emotional regulation, identity formation, attachment, alienation, and masculine behaviour. By integrating concepts from developmental psychology, clinical psychology, social psychology, and gender studies, the chapter seeks to explain how representations of masculinity have evolved from socially grounded idealism to inward psychological turmoil.

Furthermore, the chapter argues that this evolution is not merely cinematic but reflects broader cultural changes in the understanding of male emotional life. The shift from externally directed conflict to internal psychological struggle mirrors changing expectations of masculinity in contemporary India, where men increasingly negotiate tensions between traditional gender norms and emerging demands for emotional authenticity. In doing so, Indian cinema provides an important psychological archive through which changing constructions of male identity, vulnerability, and emotional wellbeing can be critically understood.

The discussion begins by outlining the major psychological concepts that provide the theoretical foundation for the chapter. These concepts establish the analytical framework through which the selected films are interpreted and compared, allowing for a deeper understanding of the psychological transformation of masculinity across different historical periods.

2. Conceptual Framework: Key Psychological Terms

A meaningful examination of masculinity in Indian cinema requires an understanding of the psychological processes that shape human emotions, identity, interpersonal relationships, and behavioural responses. Although films are works of artistic expression, they also function as cultural texts that reflect changing psychological realities within society. The transformation from Raj Kapoor's morally grounded protagonists to Ranbir Kapoor's psychologically conflicted characters cannot be understood solely through cinematic techniques; rather, it must be interpreted through established psychological theories that explain how individuals experience anger, regulate emotions, construct identities, and negotiate relationships across different socio-cultural contexts.

The present chapter adopts an interdisciplinary psychological perspective by integrating concepts from developmental psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology, psychodynamic theory, and gender studies. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how masculinity has evolved from a socially embedded moral identity to a more fragmented and internally conflicted psychological experience. Each concept discussed below serves as an analytical lens through which the selected films are interpreted.

2.1 Frustration, Aggression, and the Direction of Anger

Among the earliest psychological explanations of aggressive behaviour is the Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis proposed by Dollard and colleagues (1939), which suggests that frustration arising from blocked goals often generates aggressive impulses. Although later theoretical developments have refined this proposition, the model remains useful for understanding the changing nature of anger portrayed in Indian cinema. The expression of anger differs considerably across generations because the sources of frustration themselves have changed alongside broader social transformations.

In Raj Kapoor's films, frustration primarily originates from external socio-economic conditions such as poverty, class discrimination, injustice, and unequal opportunities. His protagonists encounter numerous obstacles that challenge their dignity and aspirations; however, these frustrations rarely culminate in uncontrolled violence. Instead, anger is redirected into socially constructive actions, moral resistance, and personal resilience. Freud's concept of sublimation further explains this process; whereby socially unacceptable impulses are transformed into behaviours that are culturally valued and ethically meaningful. Consequently, anger functions not as a destructive emotion but as a catalyst for social reform and moral responsibility.

In contrast, the protagonists portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor experience frustration within the self rather than primarily within society. Their struggles emerge from identity confusion, emotional isolation, failed relationships, and the inability to reconcile personal aspirations with social expectations. Berkowitz's (1989) Cognitive Neo association Theory expands the classical frustration–aggression model by proposing that frustration activates networks of negative emotions, increasing the likelihood of dysregulated emotional responses. Consequently, anger in contemporary cinema is frequently internalized and expressed through emotional withdrawal, impulsive behaviour, psychological breakdowns, or self-destructive tendencies rather than collective social action.

This transition illustrates an important psychological shift. Whereas classical cinema depicts anger as a response to structural inequality, contemporary cinema increasingly portrays anger as an expression of unresolved emotional conflicts, reflecting changing understandings of masculinity and mental health.

2.2 Identity Crisis and the Fragmented Self

Identity formation constitutes one of the central developmental tasks across the lifespan. Erik Erikson (1968) conceptualised identity as a coherent sense of self that emerges through the successful negotiation of psychosocial challenges. Individuals who fail to establish a stable identity often experience role confusion, uncertainty, and psychological distress. This theoretical perspective provides a valuable framework for understanding the changing portrayal of masculinity in Indian cinema.

Raj Kapoor's protagonists generally possess a coherent and integrated sense of identity. Although they encounter poverty, discrimination, and moral dilemmas, their values remain relatively stable. Their personal identities are closely connected with community, family, and ethical responsibility, enabling them to navigate adversity without experiencing profound fragmentation of the self.

The psychological landscape changes considerably in the films of Ranbir Kapoor. His protagonists frequently struggle to distinguish between their authentic selves and the identities imposed by society. Anthony Giddens' (1991) concept of the reflexive project of the self suggests that identity in late modern societies is no longer inherited but continuously constructed through self-reflection and social negotiation. This perpetual process often generates uncertainty and emotional instability.

The distinction between the true self and the false self, proposed by Winnicott (1960), becomes especially relevant in understanding characters such as Ved in *Tamasha*. These individuals perform socially acceptable identities while suppressing their authentic emotions and aspirations. The resulting incongruence contributes to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological fragmentation. Thus, contemporary masculinity is portrayed not as a fixed social identity but as an ongoing psychological struggle to achieve authenticity in an increasingly complex social environment.

2.3 Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional experiences to achieve adaptive functioning. Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotional Regulation emphasises that psychological well-being depends not on the absence of emotions but on the ability to regulate them effectively. This concept is particularly relevant when examining changing representations of masculinity in Indian cinema.

Raj Kapoor's protagonists typically demonstrate adaptive emotional regulation strategies. Feelings of anger, disappointment, and sadness are acknowledged rather than denied and are expressed in socially appropriate ways. Cognitive reappraisal, moral reflection, humour, empathy, and interpersonal relationships enable these characters to maintain emotional equilibrium despite significant adversity. Emotional vulnerability therefore, coexists with resilience, reflecting a culturally accepted model of masculine emotional expression.

By contrast, Ranbir Kapoor's characters frequently exhibit emotional dysregulation. Their emotions fluctuate rapidly, remain unresolved, and often culminate in impulsive behaviour or emotional collapse. Rather than processing difficult emotions through reflection or social support, these protagonists suppress emotional experiences until they become overwhelming. Such portrayals resemble contemporary psychological descriptions of affect dysregulation observed across various mood and personality disorders, where difficulties in emotional control significantly impair interpersonal functioning and self-concept.

3. Raj Kapoor: Idealism, Moral Conflict, and Suppressed Anger

The cinematic world of Raj Kapoor occupies a distinctive position in the history of Indian cinema because it emerged during a period of profound national transformation. The decades following India's independence were characterised by optimism, social reconstruction, economic inequality, and the collective aspiration to build a just society. These historical realities profoundly influenced cinematic narratives, particularly the representation of masculinity. Unlike contemporary portrayals that frequently emphasise psychological fragmentation and emotional isolation, Raj Kapoor's protagonists embody resilience, moral conviction, and social responsibility. Their emotional struggles are deeply intertwined with broader concerns of poverty, justice, and ethical conduct rather than solely with personal psychological conflicts.

From a psychological perspective, Raj Kapoor's films portray masculinity as a socially integrated identity in which individual emotions remain connected to collective values. Although his characters experience disappointment, rejection, frustration, and hardship, these emotions rarely result in emotional disintegration or destructive aggression. Instead, emotional distress is processed through moral reflection, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and a strong commitment to social justice. Consequently, Raj Kapoor's cinema presents masculinity as an adaptive psychological construct in which vulnerability and strength coexist without contradiction.

The following discussion examines the emotional architecture of Raj Kapoor's protagonists and analyses selected scenes to demonstrate how classical Indian cinema conceptualized anger, identity, attachment, and emotional regulation within the socio-cultural context of post-independence India.

3.1 Emotional Structure of the Raj Kapoor Protagonist

Raj Kapoor's protagonists are consistently portrayed as ordinary individuals confronting extraordinary social challenges. They emerge from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and navigate environments marked by poverty, class inequality, unemployment, and moral corruption. However, despite these adversities, their psychological responses remain remarkably balanced. Rather than allowing frustration to develop into destructive aggression, they transform emotional suffering into perseverance, ethical action, and hope. This capacity reflects a psychologically mature form of emotional functioning in which personal hardship strengthens rather than weakens moral identity.

The Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939) provides an important framework for understanding these characters. Their aspirations are repeatedly obstructed by structural inequalities, creating significant emotional frustration. Yet, unlike many contemporary protagonists, they rarely respond with impulsive violence. Instead, their anger is expressed through dialogue, social criticism, humour, or moral resistance. Freud's concept of sublimation further explains this process; whereby aggressive impulses are redirected toward socially meaningful and culturally valued behaviour. Consequently, anger becomes a motivating force for social transformation rather than personal destruction.

Another defining characteristic of Raj Kapoor's protagonists is their coherent sense of identity. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development suggests that a stable identity enables individuals to withstand external pressures without experiencing psychological fragmentation. Throughout Raj Kapoor's films, the protagonists maintain a clear moral compass despite repeated failures and temptations. Their self-worth is derived not from wealth, social status, or external validation but from deeply internalised ethical principles. As a result, temporary setbacks do not fundamentally threaten their sense of self.

Emotional regulation also distinguishes these characters from later cinematic representations. Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation suggests that psychologically healthy individuals manage emotions through cognitive reappraisal, reflection, and adaptive coping strategies. Raj Kapoor's protagonists repeatedly

demonstrate these abilities. Feelings of disappointment, betrayal, or sadness are acknowledged openly rather than denied or suppressed. However, these emotions are expressed in socially constructive ways that preserve interpersonal relationships and reinforce moral responsibility. Emotional openness therefore becomes a sign of psychological strength rather than weakness.

Attachment relationships further contribute to the emotional stability of these characters. Whether through family bonds, friendships, or romantic relationships, interpersonal connections provide emotional security during periods of adversity. These relationships function as protective factors that reinforce resilience and prevent emotional disintegration. Love is consistently portrayed as a source of hope, ethical guidance, and psychological healing rather than emotional chaos.

Collectively, these characteristics establish Raj Kapoor's protagonists as representations of a form of masculinity grounded in emotional maturity, moral integrity, and social connectedness. Their struggles are undeniably painful, yet they remain psychologically integrated because their identities are anchored in values that transcend individual suffering.

3.2 Scene Analysis I: *Awara* (1951) – The Courtroom Confession

One of the most psychologically significant moments in Raj Kapoor's cinematic career occurs during the courtroom confession in *Awara* (1951). This scene serves not merely as a legal confrontation but as a profound exploration of identity, social inequality, parental rejection, and the psychological consequences of structural injustice. The courtroom becomes a symbolic space where personal suffering is transformed into a broader critique of social systems, making the sequence one of the earliest cinematic representations of the relationship between individual psychology and societal conditions.

The protagonist's emotional outburst reflects years of accumulated frustration arising from poverty, social stigma, and exclusion. According to the Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis, repeated obstruction of fundamental needs generates emotional tension that seeks expression. However, rather than responding with physical violence, the protagonist channels his anger through articulate reasoning and moral argument. His emotional expression remains controlled despite its intensity, illustrating a sophisticated form of emotional regulation. Anger functions as an instrument of social criticism rather than personal revenge.

The revelation that the presiding judge is also the protagonist's estranged father introduces an additional layer of psychological complexity. Bowlby's Attachment Theory suggests that early parental relationships profoundly influence identity development and emotional security. The experience of paternal rejection disrupts the protagonist's sense of belonging and contributes to feelings of shame and inadequacy. Nevertheless, unlike many contemporary cinematic characters, this attachment disruption does not culminate in identity collapse. Instead, it strengthens his determination to seek justice and recognition within society.

Erikson's concept of identity formation is equally relevant to this scene. The protagonist struggles against an identity imposed upon him by society that of a criminal and instead asserts an identity shaped by circumstances beyond his control. This conflict between externally imposed labels and internal self-understanding illustrates the enduring psychological tension between social categorization and personal identity.

The courtroom confession ultimately transcends individual biography. Raj Kapoor transforms personal pain into a universal commentary on social responsibility, suggesting that criminality cannot be understood independently of the social conditions that produce it. Masculinity, therefore, is portrayed not through domination or aggression but through moral courage, emotional honesty, and the willingness to confront injustice with dignity.

Excellent. We are now moving into the analytical heart of your chapter. In book chapters, the discussion should not simply describe scenes but interpret them using theory while maintaining a continuous narrative. The following sections have been rewritten accordingly.

3.3 Scene Analysis II: *Shree 420* (1955) – Love, Morality, and Emotional Regulation

Among Raj Kapoor's most memorable cinematic moments is the rain sequence featuring the song "*Pyar Hua Ikrar Hua*" in *Shree 420* (1955). Although often celebrated for its aesthetic beauty and romantic symbolism, the scene also offers valuable insights into the psychological construction of masculinity in classical Indian cinema. Rather than functioning solely as a romantic interlude, the sequence illustrates how intimacy, emotional expression, and interpersonal attachment contribute to psychological resilience and moral decision-making. The emotional significance of the scene extends beyond romance, revealing how secure relationships can regulate emotional distress and reinforce an individual's ethical identity.

The protagonist enters the relationship after experiencing considerable social and economic uncertainty. His encounters with poverty, temptation, and moral compromise create internal conflict regarding the values he wishes to uphold. However, unlike contemporary cinematic representations in which romantic relationships often intensify emotional instability, the relationship portrayed in *Shree 420* provides emotional grounding. Love becomes a stabilizing psychological resource that helps the protagonist maintain coherence between his personal values and his behaviour.

Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation offers an effective framework for interpreting this sequence. Rather than suppressing difficult emotions or responding impulsively to frustration, the protagonist regulates his emotional experiences through emotional openness, cognitive reflection, and supportive interpersonal interaction. Feelings of insecurity and uncertainty are shared rather than concealed, allowing emotional distress to be processed in an adaptive manner. The ability to express vulnerability without compromising self-esteem represents a psychologically mature model of emotional regulation that remains relatively uncommon in many contemporary portrayals of masculinity.

Attachment Theory further enriches this interpretation. Bowlby (1969) argued that secure attachment relationships provide individuals with a psychological "safe base" from which they can confront life's challenges. In this scene, the romantic relationship functions precisely in this manner. Emotional closeness enhances rather than weakens the protagonist's psychological functioning, enabling him to resist corruption and reaffirm his commitment to honesty and social responsibility. Love therefore becomes both an emotional and moral anchor that protects the integrity of the self.

From the perspective of masculinity, this sequence challenges stereotypes that equate emotional expression with weakness. Raj Kapoor presents tenderness, affection, and vulnerability as qualities that coexist with courage and responsibility. Masculinity is defined not through emotional suppression but through the capacity to remain emotionally authentic while fulfilling social and moral obligations. Such representations anticipate contemporary psychological perspectives, which increasingly recognize emotional openness as an indicator of resilience rather than fragility.

Consequently, *Shree 420* portrays love not merely as a narrative device but as an adaptive psychological process that strengthens identity, facilitates emotional regulation, and promotes ethical behaviour. The scene illustrates that emotional intimacy can serve as a protective factor against social adversity, reinforcing the broader psychological framework that characterizes Raj Kapoor's cinematic protagonists.

3.4 Raj Kapoor and the Psychological Construction of Masculinity

Taken together, Raj Kapoor's films present a distinctive model of masculinity that differs substantially from many contemporary cinematic representations. His protagonists are neither emotionally detached nor psychologically invulnerable. Instead, they experience disappointment, rejection, loneliness, temptation, and moral conflict while maintaining an integrated sense of self. Their strength lies not in the absence of emotional pain but in their capacity to transform suffering into compassion, resilience, and ethical action.

From Erikson's perspective, these characters demonstrate relatively successful identity formation. Their personal values remain stable despite external adversity, enabling them to preserve psychological coherence throughout periods of social and economic hardship. Identity is grounded in moral conviction and collective responsibility rather than in material success or external approval. Consequently, setbacks challenge behaviour without fundamentally threatening selfhood.

The expression of anger within Raj Kapoor's cinema further illustrates this integrated psychological structure. The protagonists undoubtedly experience frustration arising from poverty, injustice, and discrimination; however, these emotions are channelled into constructive forms of resistance. Freud's concept of sublimation explains how potentially destructive impulses are transformed into socially meaningful actions. Anger therefore functions as a catalyst for reform rather than violence, emphasizing responsibility over retaliation.

Relationships also occupy a central position within Raj Kapoor's psychological portrayal of masculinity. Secure interpersonal bonds provide emotional stability and reinforce adaptive coping strategies during periods of adversity. Romantic love, friendship, and family relationships consistently contribute to emotional resilience, illustrating Bowlby's proposition that supportive attachment relationships promote psychological well-being throughout adulthood.

Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity offers an additional perspective. Although Raj Kapoor's protagonists fulfil culturally valued masculine roles such as responsibility, courage, and perseverance, they simultaneously challenge rigid gender stereotypes by expressing empathy, tenderness, and emotional vulnerability. Their masculinity is therefore neither authoritarian nor emotionally restrictive. Instead, it integrates strength with compassion, suggesting that emotional openness enhances rather than diminishes masculine identity.

Collectively, Raj Kapoor's cinema reflects a historical moment in which masculinity remained firmly connected to community, morality, and social responsibility. Emotional struggles were understood primarily as responses to external social realities rather than indicators of internal psychological fragmentation. Consequently, his protagonists embody a form of masculinity characterized by resilience, ethical integrity, and emotional balance, establishing an important foundation for understanding the profound transformation that emerges in later generations of Indian cinema.

4. From Social Idealism to Psychological Fragmentation: A Cinematic Transition

The evolution of Indian cinema from the 1950s to the twenty-first century reflects broader transformations in Indian society, including urbanization, globalization, economic liberalization, technological advancement, and changing patterns of family life. These historical developments have not only altered social institutions but have also reshaped individual experiences of identity, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the psychological construction of masculinity in cinema has undergone a significant transformation, moving away from collective ideals toward increasingly individualized experiences of emotional conflict.

The transition from Raj Kapoor to Ranbir Kapoor represents more than a change in cinematic style or generational preference. It symbolizes a broader shift in the psychological understanding of male identity.

Whereas classical protagonists confronted visible social inequalities, contemporary protagonists frequently struggle with invisible psychological burdens such as identity confusion, loneliness, emotional dysregulation, and existential uncertainty. The locus of conflict gradually shifts from society to the self, reflecting changing cultural understandings of mental health and emotional experience.

Several important psychological transitions characterise this evolution.

First, collective social struggles increasingly give way to individual psychological crises. Earlier cinematic narratives focused on poverty, unemployment, corruption, and class inequality, whereas contemporary narratives emphasise depression, alienation, identity confusion, and emotional instability. The primary source of suffering is no longer external social injustice but internal psychological conflict.

Second, social identity becomes increasingly individualised. Raj Kapoor's protagonists define themselves through family, community, and moral responsibility. By contrast, contemporary protagonists continuously negotiate their identities within rapidly changing social environments, often experiencing uncertainty regarding authenticity, purpose, and belonging. Identity becomes a dynamic psychological process rather than a stable social position.

Third, anger undergoes a fundamental transformation. In classical cinema, anger is outwardly directed toward structural injustice and functions as a morally justified response to social inequality. In contemporary cinema, however, anger becomes internalised, frequently manifesting as emotional withdrawal, impulsivity, self-destructive behaviour, or interpersonal aggression. This shift reflects changing mechanisms of emotional regulation and coping.

Finally, the meaning of masculinity itself becomes increasingly complex. Emotional restraint, once associated with dignity and resilience, gradually evolves into emotional suppression and psychological isolation. Contemporary protagonists are expected to negotiate conflicting expectations of strength, vulnerability, success, intimacy, and independence, producing significant emotional tension.

Understanding this historical and psychological transition provides the necessary foundation for analysing the cinematic characters portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor. His films capture the emotional complexities of contemporary masculinity, where identity is continuously negotiated and psychological conflict increasingly originates from within the individual rather than from external social structures.

Excellent. We are now entering the most important analytical section of the chapter. This section should clearly demonstrate the psychological shift from Raj Kapoor's socially grounded masculinity to Ranbir Kapoor's internally conflicted masculinity. Rather than simply describing the films, the discussion should critically interpret them through established psychological theories.

5. Ranbir Kapoor: Internalized Anger and Fragmented Identity

The representation of masculinity in contemporary Indian cinema differs markedly from that of the post-independence period. While earlier protagonists confronted visible social inequalities and moral dilemmas, contemporary male characters increasingly struggle with psychological conflicts that originate within the self. Rapid urbanization, globalization, changing family structures, technological advancement, and evolving social expectations have fundamentally altered how identity, relationships, and emotional experiences are understood. As a result, masculinity is no longer portrayed as a stable social role but as a complex psychological process characterized by uncertainty, emotional vulnerability, and continuous negotiation.

Ranbir Kapoor's filmography offers one of the clearest illustrations of this transformation. Across his performances, the male protagonist is rarely a heroic figure battling external injustice. Instead, he is an individual attempting to reconcile conflicting identities, unresolved emotional needs, fractured relationships,

and an overwhelming search for authenticity. His characters often experience profound loneliness despite social success, suggesting that contemporary psychological suffering is increasingly disconnected from material deprivation and more closely associated with emotional isolation and identity confusion.

From a psychological perspective, these portrayals resonate with Erikson's theory of identity development, Winnicott's distinction between the true and false self, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation, and contemporary perspectives on affective dysregulation. Together, these frameworks reveal that contemporary masculinity is shaped not only by changing cultural expectations but also by increasing psychological complexity. The following sections examine selected films to illustrate how anger, emotional vulnerability, attachment, and identity are represented in contemporary Indian cinema.

5.1 Emotional Architecture of Ranbir Kapoor's Protagonists

Unlike Raj Kapoor's characters, whose identities remain anchored in social responsibility and moral certainty, Ranbir Kapoor's protagonists inhabit psychologically unstable environments in which identity is constantly questioned and reconstructed. They frequently experience conflicts between their authentic desires and socially prescribed roles, leading to emotional exhaustion, identity diffusion, and chronic psychological distress.

Erikson's concept of identity crisis provides an important starting point for understanding these characters. Identity is no longer a relatively stable psychological achievement, but an ongoing struggle characterised by uncertainty regarding purpose, belonging, and self-worth. These protagonists often possess multiple, competing identities that cannot be easily integrated, resulting in persistent internal conflict.

Giddens' (1991) notion of the reflexive project of the self-further explains this phenomenon. Contemporary individuals must continuously redefine themselves within rapidly changing social contexts rather than relying on stable cultural traditions or clearly defined social roles. Consequently, identity becomes a lifelong psychological project requiring constant self-evaluation and adaptation. Ranbir Kapoor's characters vividly embody this condition, repeatedly questioning who they are, what they desire, and how they should live.

Emotionally, these protagonists demonstrate significant difficulties in regulating distress. Rather than processing emotions adaptively through interpersonal support or cognitive reflection, they frequently suppress emotional experiences until they become overwhelming. Gross's (1998) theory of emotional regulation suggests that such suppression often results in emotional flooding, impulsive behaviour, and psychological breakdowns. Accordingly, anger in contemporary cinema is rarely directed toward external systems of injustice. Instead, it becomes internalised, manifesting through withdrawal, self-blame, emotional instability, or explosive outbursts.

From a psychodynamic perspective, Freud's concept of **turning against the self** also provides valuable insight. Emotional conflicts that cannot be safely expressed outwardly are redirected inward, contributing to guilt, depressive symptoms, and self-destructive behaviour. Consequently, contemporary masculinity appears increasingly vulnerable to internal psychological fragmentation, reflecting broader cultural shifts in emotional life.

5.2 Scene Analysis I: *Tamasha* (2015) – The Breakdown of the False Self

Among contemporary Hindi films, *Tamasha* offers one of the most compelling psychological portrayals of identity conflict and emotional breakdown. The protagonist, Ved, initially appears successful and socially well-adjusted. However, beneath this socially acceptable identity lies a profound sense of dissatisfaction resulting

from years of suppressing his authentic aspirations to fulfil societal expectations. His emotional collapse represents not a moment of weakness but the culmination of prolonged psychological incongruence.

Winnicott's (1960) distinction between the **true self** and the **false self** provides the central theoretical framework for interpreting this scene. Ved gradually constructs a false self-based upon occupational success, social approval, and conformity. Although this identity enables social acceptance, it simultaneously distances him from his authentic personality. As the discrepancy between these two identities widens, maintaining the false self becomes psychologically exhausting, eventually resulting in emotional collapse.

Carl Rogers' (1961) concept of **incongruence** further illuminates this process. Psychological well-being depends upon consistency between an individual's real experiences and self-concept. When external expectations compel individuals to deny their genuine emotions and aspirations, psychological distress becomes increasingly likely. Ved's breakdown, therefore, reflects the unbearable tension between the person he truly is and the identity he has been performing for years.

Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation also explains the intensity of this emotional outburst. Rather than acknowledging emotional discomfort as it emerged, Ved repeatedly suppresses his feelings until adaptive regulation becomes impossible. The resulting emotional flooding demonstrates how chronic suppression can culminate in uncontrollable expressions of distress.

Existential psychology provides an additional perspective. Sartre's concept of **bad faith** describes the psychological consequences of living according to socially imposed roles while neglecting personal authenticity. Ved's journey represents a movement away from inauthentic existence toward self-acceptance, illustrating that psychological healing requires confronting rather than avoiding one's authentic identity.

Consequently, *Tamasha* portrays masculinity as an ongoing struggle for authenticity within a society that frequently rewards conformity over emotional truth. Anger and emotional breakdown become expressions of psychological liberation rather than mere pathology, symbolizing the painful process of reconstructing an authentic self.

5.3 Scene Analysis II: *Rockstar* (2011) – Pain as Identity

In *Rockstar*, Ranbir Kapoor portrays Jordan, a musician whose personal suffering gradually becomes inseparable from his identity. Unlike classical cinematic heroes who seek to overcome adversity, Jordan increasingly derives meaning from emotional pain itself. The film therefore presents one of contemporary Indian cinema's most complex explorations of grief, attachment, creativity, and psychological identity.

Attachment Theory offers a compelling explanation for Jordan's emotional trajectory. His relationship with Heer becomes the primary source of emotional security and personal meaning. However, the loss of this attachment figure destabilises his entire psychological world. Bowlby argued that attachment disruptions produce intense emotional distress because they threaten the individual's internal sense of safety and continuity. Jordan's grief extends beyond bereavement; it becomes a crisis of identity itself.

Freud's concept of repetition compulsion further explains Jordan's repeated engagement with emotional suffering. Rather than resolving grief, he continually revisits painful memories, unconsciously maintaining psychological attachment through persistent suffering. Emotional pain gradually evolves into a defining component of his identity, making recovery psychologically threatening because it would require relinquishing the very experiences that now give his life meaning.

Existential perspectives similarly illuminate this process. Nietzsche suggested that suffering often becomes a source of personal meaning and creative transformation. Jordan's music emerges directly from his emotional turmoil, illustrating how artistic expression may simultaneously facilitate emotional communication while

reinforcing unresolved psychological conflicts. Creativity functions both as adaptive coping and as a mechanism that perpetuates emotional pain.

From the perspective of emotional regulation, however, Jordan demonstrates limited capacity to integrate grief adaptively. His emotions fluctuate between despair, anger, longing, and emotional withdrawal, reflecting persistent dysregulation rather than psychological resolution. Consequently, *Rockstar* portrays masculinity as deeply intertwined with emotional vulnerability, demonstrating that contemporary male identity may become organized around unresolved loss rather than social achievement.

Excellent. We are now approaching the final analytical sections of the chapter. These sections should demonstrate how contemporary Indian cinema not only represents emotional vulnerability but also questions traditional notions of masculinity. Rather than simply comparing films, the discussion should integrate psychological theories into a broader interpretation of cultural change.

5.4 Scene Analysis III: *Barfi!* (2012) – Redefining Masculinity through Emotional Intelligence

Among Ranbir Kapoor's performances, *Barfi!* presents perhaps the most unconventional representation of masculinity. Unlike many contemporary male protagonists who struggle with aggression, identity confusion, or emotional instability, Barfi communicates primarily through empathy, humour, and non-verbal emotional expression. His character challenges dominant cinematic stereotypes by demonstrating that masculinity can be expressed through compassion, sensitivity, and emotional authenticity rather than physical dominance or emotional restraint.

From the perspective of emotional intelligence, proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990), Barfi exhibits a remarkable ability to perceive, understand, and respond to emotions despite his inability to communicate through conventional speech. His interactions are characterized by empathy, emotional atonement, and an intuitive understanding of the feelings of others. Rather than relying on verbal communication, he establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships through facial expressions, gestures, touch, and shared emotional experiences. These behaviours reflect a sophisticated capacity for emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity.

Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation also offers valuable insights into Barfi's psychological functioning. Throughout the film, he demonstrates adaptive regulation strategies by responding to challenging situations with flexibility, humour, and acceptance rather than frustration or aggression. His emotional responses remain proportionate to environmental demands, illustrating that psychological resilience is not dependent upon conventional communication but upon the ability to process emotions constructively.

The film also challenges Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Traditional masculine ideals frequently associate strength with dominance, independence, and emotional restraint. Barfi, however, embodies an alternative form of masculinity grounded in care, kindness, emotional openness, and relational connectedness. His vulnerability is never portrayed as weakness; instead, it becomes the source of his emotional strength and interpersonal effectiveness.

From a broader psychological perspective, *Barfi!* suggests that authentic masculinity need not conform to rigid social expectations. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and relational warmth emerge as equally significant indicators of psychological maturity. Consequently, the film expands the cultural understanding of masculinity by demonstrating that emotional openness and resilience are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

5.5 Scene Analysis IV: *Animal* (2023) – Hypermasculinity and Emotional Dysregulation

In sharp contrast to *Barfi!* *Animal* presents an extreme representation of masculinity characterised by violence, dominance, and emotional suppression. The protagonist appears outwardly confident, fearless, and powerful; however, beneath this hypermasculine exterior lies profound psychological vulnerability rooted in unresolved attachment needs and emotional insecurity. Rather than depicting aggression as an inherent characteristic of masculinity, the film portrays violence as a maladaptive attempt to compensate for emotional deprivation and fractured identity.

Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity provides the primary framework for interpreting this character. The protagonist strives to embody culturally valued masculine ideals such as strength, authority, and control. Yet these performances are driven less by genuine confidence than by an overwhelming need for approval and validation. His exaggerated displays of aggression reveal the instability of hegemonic masculinity itself, illustrating how rigid gender expectations may contribute to psychological distress rather than emotional resilience.

Attachment Theory further explains the protagonist's behaviour. His persistent desire for paternal recognition reflects unresolved attachment insecurity, where emotional validation from a significant caregiver becomes central to self-worth. Bowlby (1969) suggested that inconsistent or emotionally unavailable caregiving may produce enduring patterns of anxiety, dependency, and emotional dysregulation. Throughout *Animal*, the protagonist's violent actions can be interpreted as repeated attempts to obtain affection, recognition, and acceptance that were psychologically unavailable during earlier stages of development.

Kohut's (1971) concept of narcissistic injury also provides valuable insight. When an individual's need for affirmation is repeatedly frustrated, the resulting damage to self-esteem may be compensated through exaggerated displays of power, dominance, or grandiosity. The protagonist's aggression therefore, functions not as evidence of psychological strength but as a defensive response to underlying emotional fragility.

Gross's theory of emotional regulation similarly highlights the protagonist's inability to regulate intense emotional experiences adaptively. Feelings of rejection, anger, and disappointment are expressed almost exclusively through impulsive aggression, reflecting severe deficits in emotional processing and impulse control. Violence becomes the primary means of communication because alternative strategies for emotional expression remain underdeveloped.

Consequently, *Animal* presents a psychologically complex critique of hypermasculinity. Rather than celebrating violence, the film demonstrates how unresolved emotional wounds, insecure attachment, and rigid gender expectations may converge to produce destructive patterns of behaviour. The character's aggression ultimately reflects emotional pain rather than psychological strength, reinforcing the chapter's broader argument that contemporary masculinity increasingly conceals vulnerability beneath performances of dominance.

6. Comparative Psychological Analysis

The comparative examination of Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor reveals a profound transformation in the psychological construction of masculinity within Indian cinema. Although both actors portray men confronting adversity, the nature of their struggles differs fundamentally because they emerge from distinct historical, cultural, and psychological contexts. Raj Kapoor's protagonists represent a society in which identity is embedded within collective values and moral responsibility, whereas Ranbir Kapoor's characters inhabit a world characterized by individualization, emotional uncertainty, and fragmented selfhood.

This comparison demonstrates that the evolution of Indian cinema reflects broader societal changes in the understanding of male identity, emotional expression, and psychological well-being. The transformation

extends beyond cinematic style to encompass changing cultural narratives regarding anger, vulnerability, attachment, and emotional regulation.

Nature of Anger. Raj Kapoor's characters direct anger toward external systems of inequality and injustice. Their frustration is expressed through ethical resistance, dialogue, and constructive action, illustrating adaptive emotional regulation and Freud's concept of sublimation. In contrast, Ranbir Kapoor's protagonists internalize anger, which frequently manifests as withdrawal, impulsive behaviour, emotional collapse, or interpersonal aggression. This transition reflects the movement from socially mediated frustration to intrapsychic emotional conflict.

Identity Formation. Classical protagonists possess relatively coherent identities rooted in family, community, and moral values. Their sense of self remains stable despite external adversity. Contemporary protagonists, however, experience identity as fluid, uncertain, and continuously negotiated. Erikson's identity crisis, Giddens' reflexive self, and Winnicott's distinction between the true and false self collectively explain the psychological fragmentation evident in contemporary cinematic masculinity.

Emotional Regulation. Raj Kapoor's films consistently portray adaptive regulation strategies involving reflection, empathy, humour, and supportive relationships. Emotional expression is viewed as compatible with psychological resilience. Conversely, Ranbir Kapoor's characters frequently rely upon suppression, avoidance, or impulsive emotional expression, illustrating significant affective dysregulation and impaired coping.

Attachment Relationships. Secure attachment relationships provide emotional stability within Raj Kapoor's narratives, allowing interpersonal bonds to function as protective factors during adversity. In contemporary cinema, relationships often become sources of emotional conflict, dependency, or abandonment, reflecting increasingly insecure attachment patterns that contribute to identity instability.

Masculinity. Raj Kapoor presents masculinity as an integration of responsibility, compassion, resilience, and emotional openness. Contemporary masculinity appears considerably more unstable, oscillating between vulnerability and exaggerated performances of dominance. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Kimmel's concept of masculine fragility provide valuable explanations for this transformation.

Overall, the comparison illustrates a historical movement from socially integrated masculinity toward psychologically fragmented masculinity. Whereas classical cinema portrays emotional suffering because of social injustice, contemporary cinema increasingly represents emotional distress as an internal psychological struggle involving identity, attachment, and authenticity.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of masculinity in Indian cinema, as reflected through the cinematic journeys of Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor, represents far more than a generational change in storytelling or acting styles. It signifies a profound psychological, cultural, and social transformation in the way male identity is understood, experienced, and represented. By examining these two actors through established psychological frameworks, this chapter demonstrates that Indian cinema functions not merely as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural archive that documents changing emotional realities, evolving gender expectations, and shifting constructions of selfhood.

Raj Kapoor's protagonists emerged during a period when Indian society was largely organised around collective ideals of nation-building, social responsibility, and moral integrity. Consequently, their emotional struggles were primarily responses to external social conditions such as poverty, inequality, corruption, and injustice. Despite experiencing disappointment, rejection, and hardship, these characters maintained coherent identities grounded in ethical principles and community values. Their anger was directed towards social transformation rather than personal destruction, reflecting adaptive emotional regulation and psychologically

integrated forms of masculinity. Relationships, particularly those based on trust, affection, and mutual support, functioned as protective factors that reinforced resilience and psychological stability. Within this cinematic framework, vulnerability was not incompatible with strength; rather, emotional openness contributed to moral courage and social responsibility.

In contrast, the protagonists portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor reflect the emotional complexities of contemporary society, where identity is increasingly shaped by individual aspirations, social expectations, and psychological uncertainty. Their struggles are characterised less by structural inequalities than by internal conflicts involving authenticity, belonging, attachment, and emotional regulation. Rather than confronting external adversaries, these characters frequently battle fragmented identities, unresolved emotional wounds, and existential uncertainty. Anger becomes internalised, relationships become psychologically ambivalent, and emotional vulnerability often manifests through breakdowns, withdrawal, impulsivity, or aggressive behaviour. These representations correspond closely with contemporary psychological theories of identity diffusion, emotional dysregulation, insecure attachment, and the fragility of hegemonic masculinity.

A major contribution of this chapter lies in demonstrating that the transformation of masculinity in Indian cinema parallels broader socio-cultural changes within Indian society. Processes such as globalisation, urbanisation, economic liberalisation, changing family dynamics, digital communication, and increasing awareness of mental health have fundamentally altered how men experience and express emotions. As collective identities become less stable, psychological struggles increasingly shift inward, resulting in new forms of emotional conflict that contemporary cinema vividly portrays. The movement from external social struggle to internal psychological conflict, therefore, reflects a larger transition from collectivist social identities to individualised experiences of selfhood.

Another important contribution of this chapter is its interdisciplinary integration of film studies with psychological theory. Rather than interpreting films solely through aesthetic or sociological perspectives, the chapter applies concepts from developmental psychology, clinical psychology, social psychology, psychodynamic theory, attachment theory, emotional regulation, and gender studies to explain changing representations of masculinity. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates how cinematic narratives can serve as valuable sources for understanding psychological development, emotional functioning, identity construction, and cultural change. It also highlights the usefulness of cinema as a medium through which psychological theories may be examined within everyday cultural contexts.

The chapter further argues that contemporary Indian cinema has expanded the cultural discourse surrounding men's mental health. Earlier cinematic narratives often emphasised resilience, sacrifice, and emotional control as defining characteristics of masculinity. Contemporary films, while still portraying strength, increasingly acknowledge emotional vulnerability, psychological distress, identity confusion, loneliness, and unresolved trauma as legitimate aspects of male experience. This shift contributes to reducing stigma surrounding emotional expression and encourages more nuanced understandings of masculinity beyond rigid gender stereotypes.

From an applied psychological perspective, these findings have important implications for mental health professionals, educators, researchers, and policymakers. Cinematic portrayals influence public attitudes towards emotional expression, coping strategies, interpersonal relationships, and gender roles. Understanding how masculinity is represented in popular culture may therefore inform interventions aimed at promoting emotional literacy, adaptive coping, healthy relationship formation, and positive masculine identities among adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, integrating cinematic analysis into psychological education may facilitate greater awareness of how cultural narratives shape emotional development and mental health.

Finally, the comparative analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that masculinity should not be understood as a fixed or universal construct but as a dynamic psychological phenomenon that evolves in response to changing historical, cultural, and social contexts. The journey from Raj Kapoor's morally integrated protagonists to Ranbir Kapoor's emotionally fragmented characters illustrates how Indian cinema has progressively shifted from narratives of collective hope to narratives of personal introspection. While this transition reflects increasing psychological complexity and emotional vulnerability, it also opens new possibilities for understanding authenticity, resilience, and emotional well-being in contemporary society.

In conclusion, the psychological evolution of masculinity portrayed through Raj Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor reflects broader transformations in Indian cultural consciousness. As cinema continues to engage with issues of identity, emotional regulation, mental health, and interpersonal relationships, it remains an invaluable resource for examining the changing emotional lives of men. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by exploring representations of masculinity across different regions of Indian cinema, examining audience interpretations of male protagonists, or investigating how cinematic portrayals influence psychological attitudes towards gender, emotion, and mental health. Such investigations will further strengthen the dialogue between psychology and cinema, enriching both disciplines while contributing to a deeper understanding of human behaviour within changing cultural landscapes.