

An Examination of Masculinity as the Cause of Domestic Violence in *Big Little Lies*

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Abstract—The recent HBO series *Big Little Lies* has received much popular and critical acclaim for its exploration of several socially relevant themes including domestic violence. Achieving a nuanced portrayal of domestic violence, this television series grapples with the complex issue but does not quite expose its root. This short paper analyses the concept of masculinity, which is described by Connell (2005) as the practices and behaviors evinced by men and postulates that this social construct forms the fundamental reason for domestic violence. To support this argument, the paper highlights relevant examples from the television series and primarily investigates two themes: (1) why the ideal of masculinity becomes the ground that breeds domestic violence, and (2) how the conceptualization and articulation of masculinity influence social groups, particularly women and children. The present investigation of the series validates the view that socially constructed masculine traits such as superiority and dominance trigger violent tendencies in men who desire to sustain their control over their intimate relations. The ideal of masculinity also causes men to disregard the impact of their violent actions on others close to them. As a result, women and children are often physically and mentally victimized.

Keywords—*Big Little Lies*, masculinity, domestic violence, gender roles, women and children

I. Introduction

The number of women who become victims of domestic violence increases every year. In fact, it has been reported that 1 in 3 (35%) women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by their intimate partners [1]. Victims of domestic violence often tend to believe that their children are not at risk. However, the series *Big Little Lies* divulges the falsity of this expectation. Celeste, an abused mother of two children lives in a luxurious house with a seemingly perfect husband. She believes that the abuse she endures does not affect her children. However, one of her sons who has witnessed the assaults on her for some time ends up imitating his father and physically abuses his schoolmate. When children witness acts of violence enacted by their parents as they grow up, they receive the message that abuse is an acceptable method of interaction. “Because witnessing domestic violence can terrorize children and significantly disrupt child socialization, many researchers have begun to consider exposure to domestic violence to be a form of psychological

maltreatment” (McGee & Wolfe, 1991; Peled & Davis, 1995; Somer & Braunstein, 1999) [2][3][4].

Big Little Lies has accrued an immense fan-base since it was first aired in 2017. It has been nominated for and has won numerous awards, some of which include 2018 Golden Globe’s “Best Television Limited Series,” and three awards for “Best Performance by an Actress.” *Big Little Lies* successfully grabbed the attention of audiences because of its intriguing murder mystery; but its impressive viewership is also a testimony to the ways in which the show simultaneously addresses issues related to masculinity, domestic violence, and female empowerment. In a welcome departure from the usual practice of casting male leads, the protagonists of *Big Little Lies* are played by A-list Hollywood actresses. Notably, instead of competing or working against each other, the principal women characters form a support network for each other as they confront myriad (and often terrifying) difficulties. This plot and characterization strategy is significant because such a portrayal conveys a clear message that women must stand together to challenge abuses of power.

In the contemporary context, audio-visual media have become powerful means of cultural production: they reflect society, and also wield the power to influence social values. Audio-visual content, whether film or television-based, also accord audiences the opportunity to observe human nature. Regardless of whether an audio-visual narrative is based on fact or fiction, audiences make their own assumptions, predictions, and judgments on the characters or settings being presented the moment they begin viewing. The constant to the audio-visual media combined with active observation can shape the way people give and take love, and how they act around others. Therefore, the content presented through films and television series is extremely influential in shaping the behaviors of audiences. The representation of gender is a popular and much-explored theme in contemporary film and television-based narratives. In his work *Introduction to Film Studies*, Nelmes [5] states that the way gender is portrayed on the screen generates concerns and anxieties in our societies since the images, performances, and simulations are “concentrated, symbolic, and have a super-powered meaning.” Along similar lines, Joan Mellen also explores masculinity and gender in films in her work, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*.

Mellen [6] describes men as big bad wolves because films typically represent dominant and powerful male characters. Additionally, Mellen's research reveals that masculine values are so strong in the film industry that men refuse to accept roles that may make them seem weak or vulnerable. Notably, violence is commonly depicted on screen as a masculine trait, and this consistent portrayal has served to normalize the perception that the quality of violence is inherent in men.

The causes and effects of domestic violence, have been studied along with other relevant issues by numerous researchers. There is a consensus among researchers that a multiplicity of factors triggers violent behavior in men, especially toward their partners. The concept of masculinity is one such factor. Omar [7] and Abumere [8] elucidate that masculinity is conceptualized as the behaviors, languages, and practices that prevail in specific cultures and locations. They also illuminate that the dominant understanding of masculinity is shaped by patriarchy: its prescribed balance of power suggests that men are more highly valued than women. Gregory [9] adds that masculine norms can cause feelings of intense shame in male members of society who feel unable to live up to the behavioral standards established for men. In many instances, such conditioning and the emotions that result lead men to lash out, often in violence, to prove their manhood. Umberson [10] compared non-violent men and men who had a history of violence to uncover the triggers of violent behavior by men. Her study reports that acts of violence often emanate from men who cannot contain or control their emotions. Gregory [9] also finds that feelings of abandonment, desperation, and shame can incite men to perpetrate violence on their female partners.

In examining domestic violence, researchers have also investigated the responses of physically abusive men and have assessed their self-reflections on the violent acts committed by them. The examination of data collected from the Family Violence Diversion Network in the Southwestern region of the United States leads Gregory [9] to discover that men who abuse their female partners tend to place the blame of their violent acts on the women they batter by detailing their undesirable behaviors and defective personalities. Such an assignation of blame often causes female victims of domestic abuse to evaluate themselves as culpable. Consequently, many victims think they deserve to be abused and make excuses for their violent partners. Omar [7], Anderson [11], and Gregory [9] agree that violence, aggression, and domination are ways in which men establish their supremacy and prove their superiority to their partners. Although their direct victims are usually their female partners, the children of abusers are also placed at risk by domestic violence. Johnson [12] finds that children are often used as ploys to make female partners feel guilty when they attempt to break away from an abusive relationship.

Previous studies probing the construct of masculinity and its associations with domestic abuse against women have led researchers to the identification of the social construct of masculinity as a vital and determining factor of the domestic violence perpetrated against women. However, no study has, to date, critically analyzed the effects of domestic abuse on the female character, Celeste, and her children in the series *Big Little Lies*. This paper adds to the scholarly discussion on the notion of masculinity as the root cause of domestic violence and examines and its direct effects on the behavior of men toward women and children. Using Connell's [13] definition of masculinity as its conceptual grounding, the paper hopes to contribute to a more comprehensive academic understanding of the crucial connections between socially driven expectations of what is masculine and the social evil of domestic abuse.

II. Method

This study employs the qualitative research method to explore the cinematic discourse delivered by the TV Series *Big Little Lies* (2017). In its broadest scope, the study attempts to understand the significance of the human interactions between the major characters of the series. The data are analyzed in two stages: first, a close textual reading of the series is performed to grasp how the character Perry is used to convey the idea of masculinity; second, the impact of this version of masculinity on women and children is evaluated through the examination of the female character Celeste and her children. To access the corpus for this study, the TV series *Big Little Lies* (2017) was viewed by subscribing to HBO, a premium American cable television network that produces and releases motion pictures and original television shows. HBO provides a download option for users to re-watch shows and movies offline without having to use an internet connection. Pirated movie streaming websites could be alternative means of access and the series could also be downloaded over the Internet along with subtitles through such illegal means.

Since this paper focuses on the portrayal of masculinity, a thorough analysis required a few steps to be followed. First, dialogs, actions, and reactions from scenes were purposefully selected and elements irrelevant to the themes of masculinity or domestic violence were not considered in the examination. Each scene portraying Perry's violent behavior toward Celeste is scrutinized for the relevant dialog, actions, and reactions to attain an in-depth understanding of masculinity and the motivations that govern the targeted behavior. The second section of this paper carefully investigates particular scenes involving Celeste because her character demonstrates numerous emotions in these scenes and a thorough observation of her expressed feelings is conducted to understand implicit messages.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Masculinity as the Root Cause of Domestic Violence

Connell [13] defines masculinities as “configurations of practice.” This description indicates that men act out their masculinity based on a shared understanding of how “real men” behave. According to Connell [13], the construct of masculinity encompasses three elements: social factors encountered by individuals; gender relations that allow both men and women to understand the concept of the masculine; and the impact generated when these gender relations are socially applied. Abumere [8] builds on this definition, stating that masculinity is a concept that includes behaviors, languages, and practices that exist in specific cultural settings and locations. These characterizations allow the inference that masculinity is not biologically determined or naturally ascribed; rather it is frequently exercised through people’s actions and interactions with others. Thus, masculinity is itself learned through social interactions.

Masculinity is often defined in relation to its opposite, femininity. The notion of masculinity cannot exist in isolation from femininity and vice versa. Masculinities are not solely about men; women also generate the meaning of what is male-appropriate and perform the practice of masculinity. Even so, masculinity and femininity differ in numerous ways. Their differences are vested in the power relation between men and women which, in many societies, views females in positions of subordination to men.

A few kinds of masculinities have been studied by researchers, but the most prominent among them is a construct labeled hegemonic masculinity. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “... the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” Connell speaks of hegemonic masculinity both in terms of men’s relations to women and men’s associations with other men. The notion of hegemonic masculinity indicates the societal acceptance of masculinity as dominant and superior to femininity. It thus accords men with natural rights to certain roles and positions that disadvantage women. These definitions of masculinity are created and maintained through cultural products such as literature, film, etc. The present research paper will specifically focus on one such cultural product, the American TV series, *Big Little Lies*.

Domestic violence is an issue that has attained a lot of attention from film, television, and other genres of popular culture. Celeste, one of the main characters in *Big Little Lies*, appears to be blessed with a perfect life: she is beautiful, rich, and married to an apparently perfect husband. Perry is presented as a loving husband who treats Celeste like a goddess. Connell’s [13] concept of masculinity is suited to the analysis of Perry’s character. Studies have demonstrated that

masculine identities are constructed through acts of violence that emanate from men’s desire to control their partners [11], and Perry embodies this tendency. Perry’s violent acts are made evident from the first episode. For example, Perry discovers in a scene that his twin children’s classmate, Ziggy, was allegedly involved in an incident of choking a girl. He tells Celeste that the twins should stay away from Ziggy, but Celeste dismisses his suggestion as ridiculous because she believes that Ziggy is not capable of such violence. Offended by his wife’s snap judgment, Perry forcefully grabs Celeste’s arm (episode one, minute 00:41:37).

Perry feels the need to establish that he is superior to his wife, and he uses violence to assert his ascendancy. Perry’s attempt described above seems to be successful because the next day, when driving the twins to school, Perry speaks sweetly and apologizes to his wife, and she confesses that he had been right about Ziggy. Shortly afterward, when they arrive at school, Perry learns that he has missed out on the opportunity to meet his children’s teachers because Celeste had already met with them in his absence on Orientation Day. Perry is outraged and accuses Celeste of treating him like an outcast. According to Gregory [9], such feelings of abandonment and desperation could trigger violence in males toward their female partners. This link between certain negative emotions and male violence is observable in Perry in a number of scenes including Perry and Celeste’s marriage counseling sessions. Perry’s anger issues seem to stem from his fear of losing Celeste. He feels inadequate and insecure when he learns that his wife is unhappy with him and is afraid she will leave him. He confesses that he is terrified of Celeste leaving him, and his occasional acts of violence are attempts to reassert his control over her.

Gregory [9]’s research reveals three patterns of behavior evinced by men when they achieve manhood and feel the need to prove their masculinity. The first of these displays is *Lord of the Manor*: men who grow up to be violent have probably witnessed fathers or other men in their community commit acts of violence or assert control in their relationships, while their mothers or other women submitted to the conduct. Physical violence may not take occur in such instances because the woman in the relationship tends to do what her husband wants, so there is no need for physical violence. The second model is the *Frightened Boy*. Such men fear abandonment and feel deep shame because they have been led to believe they are flawed. They try to always be in control to avoid these feelings. Men of this type often cannot handle workplace or domestic stress and can lash out, even violently, against their partners when they are upset. The last prototype Gregory describes is the *Rebel*. These men may have experienced violence, control, or neglect as children. They grow up to detest any form of control, even innocuous acts of domination. This type of man may view even a simple request from their partners as an attempt to control, and this

perception is often enough to cause the outbreak of violence against the partner.

Perry may be categorized as a *Rebel*. It is not divulged whether he was ever abused or neglected as a child; however, he evidences other signs characteristic of the *Rebel* prototype. This category of violent men cannot stand to be ignored; at the same time, they cannot be controlled. The feeling of being neglected or dominated often elicits anger issues in such men. They also fear abandonment, so they never want to leave a relationship; on the other hand, they tend to push their partners away through violence even when they desire affection and long for intimacy. Gregory makes another important and relevant point: couples formed with such men go through much physical aggression, followed by a “honeymoon” phase that provides the only intimacy they “enjoy.” The *Rebel* type describes Perry perfectly, both because he cannot be controlled at all and because of the intimacy he enjoys in his relationship with his defiant partner.

Perry’s expression of masculinity can further be discerned in episode three, minute 00:05:52. Perry is outraged because Celeste has not kept him apprised of the schedules of his twin children. Celeste does not want to instigate a fight, so she tries to kiss him but he refuses. Perry is clearly hurting his wife physically in this scene, but he perceives Celeste as the aggressor by stating that she is the one who wound him in the first place. Anderson [11] states that batterers tend to place the blame for their violent actions on their female partners by detailing their negative behaviors and personalities. The violence occurs when these men have the specific urge to punish and/or “discipline” their female partners who have failed to fulfill a physical, sexual, or emotional need in the men. Perry feels that Celeste excludes him from his children’s lives and he needs to punish his wife for this transgression. He thus justifies his violence as treatment his wife deserves.

B. The Effects of Masculinity on Women and Children

The harmful effects of masculinity are commonly acknowledged by academics, and to some extent by the public at large. Societies impose certain standards that compel men to behave in a certain manner. Many times, men end up men damaging their own existence and the lives of others around them. Masculinity dictates that men must be strong, must hide their feelings, and must be ascendant over their women. This idea of masculinity leads men to lose out on some important aspects of all human life regardless of gender, for example, the establishment of deep emotional connections and caring relationships. In its worst aspects, the construct of masculinity encourages violence.

Discussions of the harmful effects of masculinity should not be regarded as a blanket condemnation of all men. Instead, such discourse aims to examine prejudicial standards, rules, and requirements that are equally enforced upon men because patriarchy hurts men as much as it injures women. The many harmful

stereotypes of masculinity and the normative ideas about how men should be and act are inculcated in children. Young men are thus shaped by the damaging stereotypes of masculinity and are forced to develop an insensitivity to emotions, to feel the pressure of competing to fit in, and are compelled to reject phenomena that are labeled as “feminine” and “only for girls.” Young boys are taught from an early age that expressing their emotions is taboo, and such forceful suppression of unwanted emotions causes long-term harm to their relationships with male as well as female companions.

Women who are abused by their spouses are very likely to experience physical and psychological trauma. Some of the psychological impacts could include the increase of depressive tendencies, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of psychological distress in comparison to women who do not experience physical abuse. The psychological disorder labeled the Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS) was delineated in the late 1970s by Dr. Lenore E. A. Walker [14]. BWS explains why women remain with their abusive partners. Walker [14] associates BWS with trauma, lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal, and intrusive memories. All these symptoms can be marked in Celeste’s characterization. Celeste is often in denial of Perry’s abusive tendencies in their marriage counseling sessions. In the first therapy session which is shown in episode three, the counselor asks whether their relationship has run out of passion, and Celeste replies with the following statement:

Celeste: “Passion is not our problem. If it is, maybe it’s because there is too much of it... things can get a bit volatile. We fight a lot and we say things. We yell, we scream, and we just have a lot of anger that we need some help controlling.” (Eps.3, 00:24:24)

Celeste: “We get angry, we fight and we have crazy sex then we make up and it’s all better” (Eps.3, 00:29:52)

Celeste: “We both acknowledge that this relationship is toxic. We want to know strategies, techniques, to make him – us – stop” (Eps 5, 00:37:33)

Perry is always the one to initiate a fight. He is the one who explodes in anger at every argument, not Celeste. However, a closer inspection of the lines above shows that Celeste uses the pronoun “we” instead of “he.” In truth, Perry is the only one who yells, screams, and vents his anger. Instead of squarely blaming Perry, Celeste holds herself partially accountable for the fights that occur in their relationship. Celeste also denies her husband’s violent behavior in the therapy sessions. When asked if the “anger” and “volatility” in their relationship comprise physical expressions of anger, Celeste quickly rejects the question and says that the anger is only emotional and verbal.

Celeste and Perry start therapy primarily in an attempt to try tone down Perry’s anger. For this

change to occur, Perry must acknowledge that his actions place other people in danger. Unfortunately, instead of owning his actions, Perry constantly seeks evidence that his wife does not love him anymore because she had once threatened to leave him. It is noteworthy that Celeste is fully aware that she is hiding the truth about her husband's behavior during therapy despite being afraid for her life on certain occasions such as when Perry chokes her. On his part, Perry also downplays the severity of his actions during therapy: instead of depicting the reality of his violence, he uses phrases like "grab her by the shoulders" and turns the situation around so that he can blame Celeste and make her feel guilty.

Since Perry is partially truthful in therapy sessions with regard to his abusive actions, Celeste's accounts of abuse are also influenced. Celeste visits the therapist alone in episode five after Perry forces himself on her for the second time. When asked why she has come alone, Celeste responds that Perry is in Chicago. Since the idea of couple's therapy is initiated by her husband after the incident, Celeste takes it as a positive sign even though he is absent from the session. Scrutinizing this scene more intensely, Celeste justifies Perry's absence and does not want to admit that she needs to go through a solo session without Perry breathing down her neck. During the session, Celeste continues to shield her husband. She dodges questions, and worse, she blames herself and stands up for Perry when the therapist criticizes him. She even becomes defensive, accusing the therapist of not doing her job because she is critical of her client.

Low self-esteem is another effect observed in victims of domestic abuse. Living with a constantly abusive person can make one feel unloved and unworthy of being loved. In episode four, Celeste helps her best friend, Madeline, to become her legal assistant. When they are done with the task, Madeline praises Celeste's legal prowess, saying that she is an amazing lawyer. Celeste giggles in response and says "oh... really?" with a surprised look. She is not used to receiving praise, especially about her professional performance, since she has not worked for a while. One of the reasons behind her not working is Perry's resistance to her returning to work. Celeste admits to herself and to Madeline that working makes her feel good about herself, and she realizes how much she misses her work. However, not long after saying this, she goes back to resenting herself for admitting that being a mother is not enough to make her happy.

In discussions of domestic violence, people generally wonder why battered women do not immediately leave their spouses. It is, in reality, not very simple for those who are actually experiencing abuse to give up on the relationship with their abuser. Women remain in abusive relationships for a myriad of reasons. In Celeste's case, it is because she loves Perry and her children. In the counseling session in episode five, Celeste admits that she has had thoughts of leaving Perry, but then she thinks about everything they have, their journey of getting pregnant, going

through four miscarriages and that Perry has always been steadfastly at her side from the beginning.

Celeste also remains in her relationship with Perry because when he is not abusive, he is a wonderful father and a husband: he adores her and treats her like a goddess. He showers Celeste with flowers and diamonds, especially after they have a fight. The perpetrator himself becomes the source of solace when he grants small indulgences. Every time Perry gives Celeste a gift, it becomes a constant reminder that underneath the violence, he is still the husband who loves her deeply. In episode three, Perry exemplifies this behavior when he gives Celeste a diamond necklace as she showers, promising her that he will get better and go regularly for counseling sessions to fix his violent self. Perry's apologetic acts and his words of assurance keep reminding Celeste that she is still loved, and this type of dynamic typically prevents many women from quitting abusive relationships.

Besides women, children are likely to get affected by the unhealthy situations they encounter in households in which violence occurs. Abumere [8] argues that children are often used as pawns to make female partners feel guilt when they are about to quit the abusive relationship. In one such scene, Perry discovers that Celeste is readying an apartment where she will live after separating from him (episode 7 minute 00:28:24). Perry tells her "We have a family, Celeste. You have to think about the boys." Nonetheless, Celeste finally decides to leave Perry for the very sake of her children. Celeste learns that their son Max has been hurting Amabella Klein and other schoolmates. Max also threatens his friends to be quiet and places the blame on another kid, Ziggy Chapman. Even after he learns about this shocking fact, Perry still tries to force Celeste into staying by using their children:

Perry: "We will talk to the teachers together. Mother and father. Husband and wife. And I will talk to Max tomorrow morning".

In general, children who witness domestic violence demonstrate social and emotional difficulties. Such problems include increased aggression, depression, fear, and anxiety. In episode 4 minute 00:40:55, Max walks in when Perry is in a fit of rage, choking Celeste for going back to work. When he sees Max, Perry instantly releases his grip on his wife and asks her for a high-five as if nothing has happened. Celeste uses the opportunity to quickly escape from Perry and drives the twins to school. Also, in episode 7, Max and Josh play video games in the living room. Max can hear his mom wincing and crying through the vent that connects the bathroom to the living room. Max is initially confused about what he should do, but when he sees Josh playing the game using a headphone, he follows suit to prevent himself from hearing the noises emanating from the bathroom. Shortly afterward, Max approaches the bathroom and shouts "Mom, we got to go to school." Perry, who has been beating and kicking Celeste on the bathroom floor, rushes out of the bathroom and tells Max that his mom is not feeling

well so she will not be able to drive him to school. Cunningham and Baker's study [15] confirms that children often witness domestic violence beyond direct observations: they may overhear an argument or its aftermath, observing bruises, cuts, or broken furniture. Max's abusive behavior at school may be attributed to his experiences at his home. Max unconsciously begins to imitate his father's abusive tendencies. Episode 5 minute 00:22:20 shows the family joking at the dinner table. Perry is playing make-believe with the twins. They bring out their guns to shoot at Perry and Celeste. Perry quickly grabs and holds Celeste forcefully, telling the boys to "shoot her freely." At first sight, this seems like a harmless joke, but Perry's words implicitly inform the children that it is acceptable to attack their mother or women in general.

IV. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to establish that traditional gender roles, combined with childhood experiences of violence and/or abuse, cause some males to become aggressive, domineering, and even violent. In *Big Little Lies*, Perry and his twin boys evidence this conduct. As a man, Perry evidences the constant need to retain the upper-hand in his relationships and to prove his superiority to his wife. This necessity stems from the social construct of masculinity that shapes men to value themselves higher than women [7][8]. Perry resorts to violence, aggression, and domination to showcase his masculinity and to disguise his insecurities and desire for affection. Besides Celeste, the direct victim of his violent behavior, his children are also get influenced when they directly or indirectly witness his regular abusive acts. They begin to unconsciously imitate their father, internalizing his behavior as normal. Women, who are most likely to become victims of abuse in heterosexual relationships in patriarchal societies, are socially compelled to become submissive and passive. Celeste embodies this articulation of the feminine as she allows the abuse and rarely fights back. When a couple is caught in an abusive relationship, change is usually difficult because gender roles are deeply implanted and violent behaviors often cause feelings of fear, loss of self-esteem, loss of control, and deep shame in victims of the abuse.

This analysis of some behaviors evidenced by the characters of the series *Big Little Lies* demonstrates that domestic violence is rooted in the social definition of masculinity, which can severely and negatively affect women and children, both physically and psychologically. Through its plot and characters, this television series may be viewed as a critique of masculinity, which often enables men to perpetrate horrors on others because society permits them to

wield a certain degree of power over their relationships. In the future, researchers could use this series as a base from which to investigate other social perspectives such as the sense of sisterhood formed among some of the characters to overcome difficulties that result from the notion of masculinity. As active members of society, all citizens should contribute to the transformation of unequal gender roles that prevail in their communities. Society must advocate new gender equations that teach and demonstrate respect and equity among individuals. Communities everywhere must emphasize the absence of any tolerance of violence within relationships among their members.

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