Reimagining Masculinity: Analyzing the Representation of Men in *Shambhala*

Bimala Sharma, PhD[1]

Abstract

This research article examines the representation of men in a Nepali cinema Shambhala. It is a film which amalgamates Buddhist philosophy, spiritual pilgrimage, and interpersonal struggles in the village of Himalayas. Mostly commercial popular films replicate the stereotypical images of masculinity whereas Shamabhala presents a nuanced picturization that encounters orthodox gender norms. This study concentrates on answering these research questions: how are male characters in Shambhala depicted in terms of emotional, spiritual, and psychological depth, what cinematic techniques are used to convey masculinity in the film, and in what ways does Shambhala resist or support traditional notions of masculinity? To search answers to the mentioned questions the research attracts cinematic analysis and gender theory to scrutinize the character arcs, emotional depth, spiritual transformation, and the interpersonal roles men occupy within in the narrative. The research recognizes an alteration from the governing patriarchal masculinity to a more fluid and introspective identity, portraying men as emotionally complex and spiritually aware. This study provides the budding discourse on gender in South Asian Cinema and unlocks a discourse on unconventional masculinities in non-Western contexts.

Introduction

Cinema reflects society as it is a cultural text. It is an influential medium which on the one hand represents the society and on the other frames the society as well. In doing so, Cinema surfaces the wrongs going on in society and try to fix it and reframe it. Cinema shapes societal norms also including opinions about gender. Nepali cinema is in its budding phase, it also presents a wide range of landscape to comprehend how identities are portrayed in cinema. Min Bahadur Bham's *Shambhala* offers an alternative opinion of masculinity in comparison to other conventional South Asian cinematic tropes. *Shambhala*

1. Associate Professor, Department of English, Balmeeki Campus, Exhibition Road, Kathamndu, Nepal Sanskrit University, Beljhundi, Dang, Nepal, Email: bimalasharma74@gmail.com

   Orcid Number: 0009-0001-2544-6063

directed by Min Bahadur Bham is a 2024 drama film written by Bham and Abinash Bikram Shah. Thinley Lhamo, Tenzin Dalha and Sonam Topden are the major star cast of the film. The film is about narrating the life trajectory of a Himalayan female Pema who is in pursuit of her husband who is missing. Her pregnancy and the challenging precarious circumstances turn the task of searching her husband more difficult. Pema, a young, newly married woman lives in a polyandrous society of the Himalayan region of Nepal with her three husbands-Tashi, Karma and Dawa. This study exhibits how *Shambhala* redefines masculinity with the help of its male characters, thematic symbolism and narrative arc, concentrating specifically on emotional expression, vulnerability and spiritual longing.

Review of Literature

In the context of global cinema, it is found that the cinematic representation of masculinity has gone through remarkable scrutiny and evolution over a period of time. R.W. Connell's dominant theory of hegemonic masculinity spotlights a standardized model of male identity trademarked by dominance, stoicism, and emotional detachment. This "hegemonic male" archetype has functioned as the yardstick for masculine representation across different cultural circumstances. Connell debates that hegemonic masculinity conserves its dominance with the help of social institutions, incorporating media and cinema, which frequently glorify specific attributes-physical strength, emotional detachment, and heteronormative authority- while marginalizing others (77). This is the way in which a perception is built and practiced in the society.

Similarly, Jeffery Weeks and John Beynon expand on Connell's structure by scrutinizing the junctures of masculinity with globalization and cultural identity. Beynon, in specific, records the omnipresence of the tolerant, powerful male character in mainstream cinema, signifying that despite regional and cultural dissimilarities, the hegemonic male remnants a global cinematic fixture. This masculinity, he contends, is often resistant to alteration, still susceptible to regional disparities, specifically as cinema intermingles with local principles and political surroundings (Beynon 10-12). Although regional has some differences still the main characteristics resembles with the global.

Additionally, in South Asian cinema, specifically Bollywood, the global norms of masculinity are reiterated and frequently intensified. Mushtaq Khan views that Bollywood has disseminated a hypermasculine epitome for a long period of time that axes on patriarchal governance and substantial domination, habitually locating male protagonists as ethical authorities and preservers of tradition (34). Current cinema has progressively interrogated conventional depictions of masculinity, providing a variety of male characters that confront hegemonic standards. Since the threatening anti-hero of *Deewar* (1975) to the ethically virtuous characters in current films like *Dabangg* (2010), the South Asian screen hero is specifically portrayed as emotionally suppressed and duty-obliged (36). The hero of *Deewar* have exemplified the "angry young man" archetype- ethically multifaceted and

emotionally subjugated, framed by systematic injustice. In juxtaposition to this, *Dabangg* (2010), highlights hypermasculinity through its tough. Emotionally indifferent protagonist, glorifying aggression as a maker of male power. A more contemporary modification can be observed in *Dear Zindagi* (2016), where the male therapist character models emotional intelligence and nurturing support challenging the stereotypical image of the emotionally unavailable man. *Masaan* (2015), a Nepali cinema, offers a sensitive picturization of male grief and vulnerability in the face of caste and loss, whereas *Sano Sansar* (2008), captures urban masculinity shackled between modernity and immaturity, often exhibiting emotional awkwardness. *Pashupati Prasad* (2016) in contrast, focuses a marginalized yet resilient male hero whose calm battle for dignity criticizes structural violence without resorting to masculine posturing. Within this embryonic background, *Shambhala* reimagines masculinity through its spiritually inclined male characters who embody emotional depth, care, and internal conflict. Instead of conforming the dominant standards of power and stoicism, the cinema's male figures showcase how masculinity can be intertwined with vulnerability, introspection, and relational sensitivity, presenting a critical intervention in both Nepali and South Asian cinematic discourses on gender.

Though, the former era has witnessed an advancement in Bollywood's representation of male protagonists. Intellectuals as Ravi Vasudevan and Shohini Ghosh have viewed the advent of more emotionally communicative and morally clashed male characters. Films like *Dear Zindagi* (2016) and *Masaan* (2015) represent men in coping with vulnerability, psychic health, and societal anticipations- signals of a softening masculinity within urban middle-class narratives (Vasudevan 58; Ghosh 102). Nevertheless, these representations often remain restricted to the urban elite, excluding wider regional and cultural representations.

In similar fashion while shifting to Nepali cinema, it is found that the alteration in gender representations has been more contemporary and lesser. Researches by Pasang Tamang hint an emerging but noticeable fashion in which male characters symbolize a more introspective masculinity, signifying vulnerability, moral doubt, and interpersonal complications (44). Tamang contends that Nepali Films like *Sano Sansar* (2008) and *Pashupati Prasad* (2016) challenge the domination of conventional masculinity by permitting masculine characters to cry, doubt, and pursue redemption (47-48). It is acceptable that these days few cinemas represent male in different light as well.

Based on it, Srijana Gurung has done a thematic study of gender roles in current Nepali cinema and located an escalation in representations of emotional labor by male protagonists. She contends that such representations replicate wider societal alterations in Nepal incorporating the influence of migration, economic struggles, changing family dynamics (29). These burdens have interrupted the patriarchal norms conventionally reinforced through cinematic masculinity.

Nonetheless, realistic study concentrating especially on Shambhala-a cinema which has earned attentiveness for its aesthetical and thematic retreat from mainstream Nepali cinema-remains scarce. Preliminary assessments and acute interpretations propose that the film circumstances its male protagonist not as a heroic savior, but as an ethically disputed and spiritually pursuing individual. This stands in disparity to earlier Nepali cinemas where male characters frequently demarcated by obligations, honor, and reputation of community (52). This seems to be more realistic than the earlier representations.

However, the spiritual connotations of *Shambhala* proposition productive ground for construing masculinity through a lens of moral contemplation. Intellectuals as Ashish Nandy and Dipesh Chakrabarty have extensively promoted for postcolonial analyses of South Asian subjectivity that account for interiority, emotional fragmentation, and cultural hybridity (Nandy 123; Chakrabarty 89). Operating this framework, one can contend that *Shambhala* tries to decompose the heroic narrative by centering on emotional transparency and vulnerability as core masculine attributes.

Along with this, the Comparative studies from other Asian films maintains the credibility of such a change. Jinhee Choi, transcribing on Korean films, recognizes a fashion she calls "melodramatic masculinity," where men articulate grief, love, and catastrophe openly-a cinematic policy that undermines hegemonic principles (64). Likewise, Koichi Iwabuchi climaxes how Japanese cinema reimagines male individualities through the lens of social ambivalence and emotional accessibility (41-42). These visions can deliver a comparative background to comprehend how Nepali cinema may also contribute in a provincial rearticulation of masculinity.

Additionally, current works in global film scholarships stress the mounting significance of "affective masculinity", wherein emotional openness is framed not as weakness but as a mark of maturity and self-awareness (108). In this light, films like *Shambhala* might be appreciated as a revolutionary, a new cinematic lexicon in Nepal-one that extends beyond domination and emotional suppression to embrace self-examination, spirituality, and interpersonal integrity.

In inference, however hegemonic masculinity continues to exert a dominant influence across global and South Asian cinema, Nepali films are commencing to inscribe out alternative masculine imaginaries. Prevailing scholarships by Tamang and Gurung postulate preliminary substantiation of this alteration. Findings of masculinity in global cinema (Connell 67-83; Beynon 53) have extensively emphasized the domination of "hegemonic male"-stoic, powerful, emotionally detached. South Asian cinema, exceptionally Bollywood, has archaeologically simulated these prototypes (Khan 123-135). Nevertheless, contemporary works in Nepali cinema have commenced to push back in contradiction of these narratives (Tamang 88-101). Earlier investigation on gender in Nepali film (Gurung 134-148) indicates an evolving trend of emotional transparency and

ethical self-examination in male characters. As Nepali cinema matures both thematically and stylistically, advance scholarship is indispensable to record and theorize these budding masculinities' discourse. Till date the precise contribution of *Shambhala* has not been systematically investigated. So, explicit studies on *Shambhala* persist sparse.

Research Gap

In spite of the embryonic representations of gender in Nepali cinema, there is an absence of analytical study concentrating precisely on the cinema *Shambhala* and its portrayal of male identities. This gap demands a close interpretation of the cinema which connects cinematic technique and gender theory.

Statement of the Problem

How does Shambhala portray masculinity, and in what ways does it challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles correlated with men in Nepali culture?

Research Questions

a. How are male characters in *Shambhala* depicted in terms of emotional, spiritual, and psychological depth?

b. What cinematic techniques are used to convey masculinity in the film?

c. In what ways does *Shambhala* resist or support traditional notions of masculinity?

Research Objectives

a. To analyze the portrayal of masculinity in *Shambhala.*

b. To examine the role of cinematic techniques in the construction of male identity.

c. To identify alternative representations of men in *Shambhala*.

Research Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research methodology based on critical film interpretation and cognizant of gender theory. The Primary data is drained from an immersive and intimate watching of *Shambhala,* concentrating on an intense exploration of the film's narrative structure, scrutinizing character expansion, dialogue, cinematography, and scenes. Examined through this analytical lens, the film is investigated not merely as a text, rather as a cultural artifact that replicates and potentially challenges prevailing gender norms.

The research is supplemented by secondary sources which include speculative researches, scholarly articles, theoretical texts, papers, books on gender and film studies,

and available interviews with the director, actors and other cast members. All these resources offer a critical perspectives and contextual backing which can assist an in-depth comprehension of the film's gendered narratives. Thematic coding is pertained to interpret repetitive motifs and characters' attributes.

Thematic coding is applied to organize and analyze the data. This method involves recognizing repetitive patterns, motifs, and traits within the film specially in regard to how masculinity is constructed, challenged, or transformed. Topics such as emotional subjugation, spiritual transformation, physical endurance, and male vulnerability are coded and scrutinized to detect fundamental messages about gender performance and identity.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on a dual theoretical framework which draws on both Western gender theory and Eastern philosophical perspective.

This study draws on R. W. Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity which offers a foundational understanding of prevailing masculine ideals as socially constructed, hierarchical, and context-specific. His theory permits for a critical examination of how South Asian cultural settings impact the depiction of masculinities in *Shambhala,* and how specific male behaviors are advantaged over others.

Contemplating this is and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, that theorizes that gender is not a fixed identity rather a repeated set of acts and performances framed by societal norms. Butler's framework is contributory in investigating how male characters in the film enact or resist prescribed gender roles. It also enables an examination into the fluidity or rigidity of gender identities as depicted in the cinematic narrative.

To add up to these above-mentioned insights of Western theories, this study integrates perspectives from Eastern philosophies, with an exclusive concentration on Buddhist philosophy. Topics such as detachment, suffering, the temporariness of the self, and the inward journey for spiritual awakening are indispensable to comprehending the internal transformation of male characters. These philosophical notions are employed to scrutinize how masculinity in Shambhala intersects with spiritual introspection and existential questioning, providing a more holistic sight of the male experience that transcends traditional gender binaries.

Connell's framework assists contextualize the prevailing models of masculinity in South Asia, whereas Butler's performativity permits an examination of how male characters "perform" or subvert gendered expectations. Additionally, Eastern philosophies-especially Buddhist philosophy of detachment, suffering, and self-discovery-are considered to construe the spiritual dimension of the male journey.

The Plot of *Shambhala*

Shambhala directed by Min Bahadur Bham is a 2024 drama film written by Bham and Abinash Bikram Shah. Thinley Lhamo, Tenzin Dalha and Sonam Topden are the major star cast of the film. The film is about narrating the life trajectory of a Himalayan female Pema who is in pursuit of her husband who is missing. Her pregnancy and the challenging precarious circumstances turn the task of searching her husband more difficult. Pema, a young, newly married woman lives in a polyandrous society of the Himalayan region of Nepal with her three husbands-Tashi, Karma and Dawa. They were living a peaceful life till Tashi goes for a month-long trade trip to Lhasa and got disappeared. Newlywed Pema got pregnant and her fidelity is questioned by the neighbors and villagers. She decides to go in search of Tashi to prove her chastity and clear the doubts of the villagers. Primarily Karma, one of her husbands, the middle brother of Tashi, joins her search. Karma is also a monk so initially he struggles to cope with worldly affairs but soon he learns and starts enjoying the life events and then starts loving and caring Pema during the journey. After a while Karma returns to his monastery because of the death of the Rinpoche, the head of the monastery, and Pema is compelled to continue her journey alone. As she moves forward alone it clarifies that her journey is not about finding her husband and proving her chastity rather it is about self-discovering and her own liberty from the worldly affairs and attachment and seek salvation. With each step of her journey, she grows more spiritual and enlightened. In the closure when she returns to her home in the village, she confronts the returned Tashi standing up for her and her life. Her child finally is revealed as the reincarnation of the Rinpoche.

Reimagining masculinity: representation of men in *Shambhala*

Unlike in conventional films, in *Shambhala,* the female protagonist Pema embarks on a treacherous journey through the Himalayas in pursuit of her missing husband. Her journey functions both as a physical and metaphysical quest. Unlike conventional female heroines, she does not demonstrate fluidity or vulnerability instead, she exhibits patience, emotional struggle, and spiritual vulnerability. Her relationships-with the monk, the landscape, and her own past- exhibit a profound internal conflict, stimulating the myth of the emotionally attached woman.

In contrast to this, *Shambhala* which inscribes a mystical and emotional journey painted on the stunning canvas of white Himalayas also narrates the story of Tashi, a devout Buddhist monk, who embarks on a traitorous journey through the remote Himalayan wilderness in search of his vanished wife, Pema, who has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. She was pregnant when she vanished, adding urgency and emotional weight to Tashi's quest. Tashi's search is not just physical rather spiritual. Along the way, he encounters his own internal conflicts, suppressed desires, and the tension between religious duty and human cravings. His trail is interwoven with ancient myths and the

legend of Shambhala, a mythical utopia trusted to be concealed in the Himalayas- a place of peace, enlightenment, and eventual truth. The narrative reveals with haunting beauty and symbolism, muddling the mark between realism and deception. As Tashi digs innate into the mountains, he encounters not only the substantial encounters of nature but also the emotional and ethical predicaments of love, loss, and self-discovery.

a. Depiction of male characters in terms of emotional, spiritual, and psychological depth:

In Nepali cinema *Shambhala* by Min Bham male characters are epitomized with a nuanced emotional and psychological landscape that challenges traditional, stoic representations of masculinity. Prominent male characters in *Shambhala* are Tashi, Karma, Dawa, Ram Sir, and Rinpoche. Among these Tashi embodies an intensely conflicted character, discernable by core turbulence, yearning, and vulnerability.

Emotional depth: Moments of introspection and silent suffering replicate the emotional universe of Tashi. He is not emotionally subjugated rather represented as someone coping with love, jealousy, and guilt. For example, his restrained reactions when he knows about his pregnant wife, Pema, accentuate a hurtful amalgam of treachery and vulnerability rather than anger or violence. "Tashi looked down, his fingers trembling around the prayer beads. He did not speak, but the silence was louder than words-his face caught between forgiveness and despair." Similarly, his middle brother Karma initially joins Pema to search his brother but later leaves her alone and goes back to monastery after the death of Rinpoche. While Karma was at home it is shown that he is calm and quiet who obeys the orders of his brother and wife. At only one point of time during their trail he expresses his love towards his wife Pema. This shows that he has alternative masculine trait where he suppressed his emotions as traditional male. The youngest husband Dawa represent the conventional male who gets jealous of Ram sir when he becomes close to Pema. Dawa is also shown as a rebellious character who stood against Pema and questioned her chastity as conventional husbands.

Spiritual depth: The monk, Karma and Tashi, the male characters are represented as genuinely spiritual people. The spiritual aspects in them are not just ornamental rather it is embedded in their everyday routined lifestyle which is a part of their living and emotional engagement through a process. Tashi's pilgrimage to the mythical valley of Shambhala functions as a metaphor for inner reconciliation. "The journey is not outward," the old monk tells Tashi. "Shambhala lies within the one who seeks it with truth." So, it is about self-introspection. The quest of finding the real self. Karma was already a Buddhist follower. Karma leaves Pema alone as soon as he is informed about the death of the Rinpoche. He leaves her to continue her journey and returns back to monastery which shows his spiritual quest. The monk was the head of the monastery who was an enlightened guru and he use to teach others about the spirituality and attaining salvation. So, the male characters seem to be more spiritual which is not the trait of conventional masculinity.

Psychological depth: Tashi's psychological intensity is emphasized by his constraint and ethical conflict which goes on and on. His pronouncement not to encounter Pema or her lover directly but to embark on a spiritual journey instead replicates a layered of internal processing which lead to this level of maturity where he is not in angst rather is indifferent to what has happened. He chooses to mute himself and seek salvation through pilgrimage and walks on the path of spirituality. "He walks the mountain path like a ghost, burdened not by what he knows, but by what he cannot say." In primary phase Tashi is shown with conventional male traits who embarks on a trail to Lhasa for a trade deal. Which shows he was the bread winner of the family, the savior. Later he resists the conventional traits and psychologically transforms himself and he embarks on the trail of spirituality. Primarily he is shown a bold, strong headed, and confident man later he turned into a submissive, fluid, mature man who transforms himself and goes on in a spiritual journey.

b. **Cinematic techniques that convey masculinity in the film**

Min Bahadur Bham employs various visual and narrative techniques to explore masculinity:

Framing and composition: The extraordinarily expanded Himalayan canvas dominate the scenes of the film which signify the dominance of the nature or superpower. In this backdrop Tashi is positioned where he is dwarfed by the extended white Himalayan landscape and this signify the pathetic condition of the male character Tashi who is too small in comparison to the nature, metaphorically the problems of life he is encountering. This transmits a sense of existential solitude and vulnerability instead of governance, dominance or regulation, challenging typical conventional hero or protagonist specifically with heroic framing of male protagonists. Cinematographic shots accentuate his miniaturization, as in the repetitive motif of Tashi standing alone against sweeping landscapes, suggesting inner dislocation.

Sound design and silence: As it is said silence speaks louder than words, similarly silence in this film *Shambhala* functions as a dominant strategy to introspect. It plays a profound role in the film. The disappearance of the dialogues in various scenes enriches the emotional gravity and propose subjugated communication- emphasizing the internalized emotional lives of men. The most intensifying emotional moments as Tashi knowing about Pema's pregnancy-are shown devoid of background music or sound, accentuating the character's interior process.

Symbolism and ritual: An alternative masculine identity is signified through the symbols as Buddhist rituals, prayer wheels, chanting of mantras, the beads, etc. These elements are employed and inserted in the film not just as cultural markers but to signify an alternative masculine identity deep rooted in discipline, humility, and transcendence rather than physical or emotional dominance. Male characters are also exhibited as people with religious, tradition and ritual consciousness.

Cinematic fundamentals such as extended takes, close-ups on the protagonist's expressions, and the recurrent usage of natural images reinforce the internal turbulence and spiritual burden Tashi conducts. The narrative advancement discloses a decentering of the masculine ego and the emergence of a more holistic identity.

c. *Shambhala* resists traditional South Asian and global cinematic masculinities

Rejection of aggression: Tashi's choice of spiritual journey instead of confrontation or violence unlike other conventional male protagonists positions him alternative masculinity. His quest is not to achieve or reclaim his gone honor or respect rather it is more focused one comprehending and accepting it as a part of life. His muteness and withdrawal do not signify his weakness rather they signify his maturity, meditative masculinity which values internal peace over external so-called power. Silence and withdrawal are shown as strength not weakness.

Masculinity as care: In spite of the suspicion that the child in Pema's womb may not his own Tashi chooses to take care of Pema. This nurturing, patience and emotional endurance embodied in Tashi proposes a model of masculinity rooted in compassion rather than regulation or governance.

Support for alternative masculinity: At the same time, *Shambhala* doesn't wholeheartedly discard conventional gender roles; Tashi is still shown as the provider and protector that is why he goes on a journey for trade. To some extent the film showcases traditional gender role though the characters in a polyandric society of Himalayan region of Nepal. Yet, these roles are redefined through spiritual and emotional intelligence rather than dominance or control. "To walk away was not weakness," the voice-over implies in the final scene, "but the beginning of a new kind of courage."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper reimagining masculinity: analyzing representation of men in *Shambhala* finalizes that the alternative masculinity is must. Depiction of male characters in terms of emotional, spiritual, and psychological depth is justifies that men are also fluid, emotional, spiritual and psychologically weak at times. Cinematic strategies like framing and composition, sound and silence, symbolism and ritual all convey masculinity in the film. *Shambhala* resists traditional South Asian and global cinematic masculinities as rejection of aggression, masculinity as care, and it supports for alternative masculinity. *Shambhala* presents a powerful rethinking of masculinity through the emotionally rich, spiritually grounded, and psychologically complex portrayal of its male characters. Using silence, space, ritual, and landscape, the film carves a quiet yet radical resistance to conventional gender roles, offering a deeply human vision of what it means to be a man. The examination discovers that *Shambhala* propositions a transformative representation of masculinity rooted in spiritual awakening, emotional intellect, and relational ethics.

The film criticizes conventional patriarchy by portraying a male protagonist who is contemplative and emotionally expressive. It consequently contributes to the discourse on alternative masculinities within the cultural circumstance of Nepal, proposing a model of male identity that embraces vulnerability and progression.

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