

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Performing Masculinity: Male Vulnerability and Trauma in *Baby Reindeer*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.395](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.395)



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Article info

Article Received: 19/08/2025
Article Accepted: 08/09/2025
Published online: 12/09/2025

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore male vulnerability in popular media and the wider discourse, with particular focus on the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer*. In a cultural landscape where male characters are typically confined to rigid tropes of strength, stoicism, and invulnerability, *Baby Reindeer* emerges as a trailblazing show that unsettles these conventions. By foregrounding the fragile and uncomfortable dimensions of masculinity, the series disrupts the silences maintained by patriarchal narratives, which not only oppress women but also constrain men by denying them space to articulate pain. In doing so, the show challenges reductive molds of manhood that perpetuate harmful binaries and power hierarchies. This paper argues that *Baby Reindeer* illuminates a significant gap in media representation by revealing how patriarchy damages men as much as it subjugates women. Beyond exposing overlooked male experiences, the series reimagines masculinity as fluid and evolving, moving away from outdated ideals and opening new avenues for popular culture to engage with male vulnerability.

Keywords: Baby Reindeer, Masculinity, Media Studies, Male Vulnerability, Patriarchy, Trauma.

Introduction

Media representations of women have evolved significantly over the years, showcasing powerful, resilient, and self-reliant characters. However, portrayals of men and masculinity have remained largely stagnant, confined to outdated tropes of heroes defeating villains or protecting their love interests. These narrow depictions continue to dominate mainstream cinema. Occasionally, a show challenges this

dated narrative. One such standout is *Baby Reindeer* (2024), a Netflix series that recently captivated audiences worldwide. While the show revolves around the story of a man being stalked by a disturbed woman, its true brilliance lies in its portrayal of male vulnerability. It delves into rarely addressed themes like male sexuality, abuse, rape, and the social shame attached to them.

The narrative centers on Donny, a struggling comedian attempting to break into London's comedy scene while working as a bartender. His life takes a dark turn when he meets Martha, a seemingly harmless woman who becomes an obsessive stalker. Instead of immediately reporting her, Donny finds himself paradoxically drawn to the attention. After enduring her stalking for two years, he finally reports her to the authorities, but the delay reveals the complex emotional and psychological barriers that cloud his judgment.

"Baby Reindeer does such a phenomenal, gut-wrenching job at examining how trauma and abuse can make people act in ways that- to the outside observer- makes no sense. Donny's inaction with Martha seems inexplicable, until we realize that so much of what he does is driven by confusion and self-hatred." (Kain)

Baby Reindeer is unflinchingly raw, making viewers deeply uncomfortable at times—an intentional choice that compels reflection. The discomfort is not gratuitous but necessary, as it forces audiences to confront societal biases and blind spots regarding male trauma. The show's courage in addressing these taboo topics is a testament to the importance of broadening the scope of masculinity in media.

In one of the show's most gripping and poignant moments, Donny breaks down during a comedy set, confessing his harrowing experience of sexual abuse. He recounts being groomed as a young, struggling comic by a celebrated writer-director who exploited his precariousness. Despite recognizing the abuse, Donny admits he couldn't fully process the situation at the time and returned to his abuser repeatedly, trapped in a cycle of confusion, shame, and dependency. Another heart-wrenching scene in *Baby Reindeer* unfolds when Donny confesses to his parents not only about his confusion regarding his sexuality- whether he is gay, bisexual, or straight- but also about the

trauma of his sexual assault. In this deeply vulnerable moment, Donny breaks down, exposing his raw pain, and says, "I never wanted you to know because I didn't want you to think less of me, as a man." (Gadd 05:20) This statement, directed at his parents is ultimately aimed at the society as a whole, encapsulates the devastating impact of society's rigid definitions of masculinity. Patriarchy perpetuates the belief that men must embody strength, authority and invulnerability, leaving no space for fragility and victimhood. Under this system, a man who is sexually assaulted is seen as failing to uphold these ideals of masculinity, rendering him "less of a man". Donny's question is both an indictment of this toxic construct and a plea for recognition, compassion and humanity.

The scene takes an even more emotional turn when Donny's father responds by saying, "Would you see me as less of one?" (Gadd 06:00) In this moment, the father reveals that he, too, carries the burden of unspoken trauma, hinting at sexual abuse he endured as a child. This revelation shocks both Donny and the audience, as it exposes the intergenerational silence enforced by patriarchal norms. For decades, the father had buried this pain, unable to speak out or seek solace, perpetuating the very cycle of shame and silence that Donny now struggles to break. What follows is a profoundly moving depiction of shared trauma, where father and son embrace, cry and unburden themselves in each other's arms. This raw moment of connection challenges the notion of masculinity as stoic and unyielding, instead offering a rare glimpse of what might be called "brotherhood"- a parallel to the sisterhood celebrated in feminist discourse. Here, two men find solidarity in their shared pain, acknowledging their humanity beyond the oppressive social expectations of what it means to be a "real man".

These powerful and deeply uncomfortable scenes tackle topics rarely depicted in mainstream media—male sexual abuse, grooming, and the societal stigma surrounding male victims. Donny's journey of

coming out to his parents and society, further adds layers to the narrative, making *Baby Reindeer* an unforgettable portrayal of complex emotions and hidden scars. It is a groundbreaking series that challenges viewers to confront deeply ingrained biases while shedding light on the often-overlooked struggles of men.

Rebecca Feasey in *Masculinity and Popular Television* (2008) talks about the growing interest in the discipline of Television Studies and observes that within the discipline, as well as in media studies, gender studies are often synonymous with women's studies (1). Even in everyday discourse, discussions around gender tend to immediately focus on women. She further points out that the sustained interest in the depiction of women in television is mainly due to its historical association with domesticity, as it was initially targeted at female consumers during the 1940s when women predominantly stayed at home. Additionally the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s also played a significant role, sparking a revolution in how women were portrayed in media (Feasey 2).

As a result, early feminist theorists focused on femininity and women on screen, often overlooking portrayals of masculinity and men's roles. MacKinnon points out that this might have shifted away the focus from women's issues that needed representation (8). While this approach offered significant insight into feminism, it also reinforced the notion of masculinity and the male heterosexuality as fixed, stable and unchanging, thus rendering them beyond scrutiny. Rebecca Feasey challenges this idea by advocating for the use of "plural masculinities" (2) instead of fixed masculinity, emphasizing that masculinity is a fluid, time bound and variable concept.

In their paper titled *Male Victims of Sexual Assault: A Review of Literature* (2023), John C Thomas and Jonathan Kopel highlight a critical gap in research, noting that the body of

literature examining men as victims of sexual abuse is alarmingly insufficient. They critique the legal system, societal norms, and academia for systematically excluding men from discussions about such heinous acts. They mention two primary reasons for this neglect. First, societal expectations of men as strong, muscular protectors make it difficult for both individuals and communities to perceive men as potential victims of sexual violence. This stigma often silences male victims, as shame and fear prevent them from speaking out. Second, both societal norms and legal frameworks often fail to recognize that men can be sexually victimized. This lack of acknowledgment perpetuates ignorance and leaves male victims without adequate support or justice. *Baby Reindeer* tackles these biases, playing a crucial role in fostering an inclusive dialogue about sexual violence that recognizes and supports all victims, regardless of gender.

In her seminal work *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2004), Bell Hooks argues that patriarchy is not merely a system of oppression targeting women but a societal structure that inflicts profound harm on men as well. She identifies patriarchy as the root cause of gender-based suffering, describing it as a belief system that enforces the notion of male dominance by equating masculinity with strength and authority, while casting women or anyone deemed "lesser"- as inherently weak. This rigid framework, Hooks contends, dehumanizes both genders: it constrains women by perpetuating their subjugation and simultaneously robs men of their emotional authenticity, forcing them to suppress vulnerability to conform to an ideal of stoic, unyielding strength (12).

In the show, Donny's silence about his abuse becomes a central theme, highlighting the psychological and social barriers that prevent men from speaking openly about their trauma. He admits that he was hesitant to share the truth of his assault with society or his family. He further acknowledges that his silence was born

not only from the pain of the abuse itself but also from the deep sense of shame and confusion it inflicted upon him. The assault led him to question his sexuality and contributed to a profound erosion of his self-esteem. This internalized trauma shaped his behavior, leaving him vulnerable to the attention of his stalker, Martha. Donny's delayed reporting of her harassment is emblematic of this fractured self-worth, rooted in the long-term effects of his unresolved trauma.

Donny's admission of his confusion following the assault is particularly significant, as it underscores the pervasive silence surrounding male vulnerability. His inability to immediately comprehend what had happened, after being drugged and assaulted during what initially seemed like a consensual party, highlights the societal gaps in discourse around male sexual violence. In a society where individuals are well-informed about the risks of sexual assault, they are more likely to recognize and process such violations as they occur. However, Donny's confusion reveals the consequences of a culture that rarely addresses male victimhood or provides frameworks for understanding and articulating such experiences.

Hooks in her work quotes Terence Real, a noted author and psychologist, who offers critical insights into this phenomenon. He observes that there exists a collective silence among men- "a conspiracy of silence" (37), when it comes to acknowledging and sharing their experiences of trauma or violence. While feminist movements have empowered women to speak about their struggles with abuse and systemic oppression, men remain constrained by social expectations of stoicism and strength. According to Terence Real, men are socialized to suppress vulnerability, leaving little room for them to process or articulate their suffering. The silence is not only personal but also systemic. As Real points out, it is not considered normal within society for men to speak out about violence inflicted upon them, whether by other

men or by figures of authority, such as fathers or family members. Even within their own circles of male camaraderie or "brotherhood", these conversations remain absent, perpetuating a culture of isolation and unacknowledged pain.

In this dire situation, *Baby Reindeer* has emerged as an innovative and revolutionary show. Its widespread popularity, becoming one of the top-watched shows globally, including in India, is a testament to changing social perceptions. The show's exploration of a man being sexually assaulted in a male dominated world by another man is compelling. In this context, *Baby Reindeer* becomes not only a critical narrative but also an insightful exploration of "hegemonic masculinity".

R.W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (91) refers to the dominant form of masculinity that upholds male power and the subordination of women and other men who do not conform to this ideal. It is characterized by traits such as physical strength, emotional stoicism, heterosexual dominance and authority. This hegemonic masculinity creates power hierarchies, marginalizing those who exhibit alternative forms of masculinity, such as vulnerability, sensitivity or non-heteronormative behavior. Understanding hegemonic masculinity is crucial because it reveals how deeply ingrained gender norms dictate social expectations, perpetuating toxic behaviors and systems of oppression that harm everyone- especially those who do not fit the mold of the ideal man.

Baby Reindeer powerfully illustrates this concept. In the series, a high profile and wealthy writer-director, who embodies the traits of hegemonic masculinity, sexually assaults a more vulnerable and marginalized man. The director's position of authority is leveraged to assert control over the struggling writer, showcasing how hegemonic masculinity is not just about subjugating women but also about enforcing power over men who are seen weaker or less dominant. This dynamic forces the

audience to confront the reality of how traditional masculine ideals can manifest in harmful and abusive ways, both within and between men. *Baby Reindeer* does an important job in making these power structures visible and challenging the very foundation of hegemonic masculinity.

Building on the insights of key theorists and the nuanced portrayals within the series, we now turn our attention to prominent social movements such as MeToo and HeForShe alongside popular TV shows and films. These cultural phenomena offer a valuable lens through which we can explore the ongoing blind spots in media regarding male sexual assault, delving deeper into the complexities of its representation and the social implications.

Contemporary popular movements like Metoo have sparked a global dialogue, centering on female victims of sexual violence and amplifying their voices in the fight for justice. It became a global phenomenon, dominating television, news channels, and even cinema, giving countless women the courage to speak out. However, while the movement brought out essential conversations to the forefront, it largely neglected the sexual assault of men, which ideally should have been part of its agenda. Instead, discussions around men often centered on false accusations of rape and assault, which although are important to address, became the primary male-focused narrative in the whole movement. As a result, the movement inadvertently reinforced the idea of men as perpetrators or falsely accused victims rather than acknowledging their experiences as survivors of sexual abuse.

Similarly, the HeforShe movement, while significant in its push for gender equality, also maintained a media-centric focus, albeit with a slightly different agenda. While HeforShe calls on men to support women's rights, it largely frames men as allies in the fight for equality, reinforcing the idea that men are strong protectors who need to help women

achieve equality. This portrayal positions men as the supporters, rather than acknowledging their own need for support or highlighting the challenges they face within gendered structures. While talking about the MeToo movement, an article in USA today contends,

"we must realize is that the culture of toxic masculinity in the crosshairs of #MeToo is the same culture that contributes to male survivors failing to report or misinterpreting instances of assault" (Bruggeman)

Let's now turn our attention to some widely watched and culturally pervasive shows like *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards*. These series feature men as their main characters, but unfortunately, men's issues remain largely absent and unexplored, with the focus instead placed on the strength, aggression and control these male characters exhibit. These shows perpetuate a traditional, hyper-masculine portrayal of men, where emotional vulnerability, mental health struggles or even the consequences of toxic masculinity are either completely absent or relegated to the background. The narratives center on men in positions of power, dealing with external conflicts, yet their internal emotional battles are rarely acknowledged or depicted in any depth. A stark contrast to this trend is seen in *Baby Reindeer*, a series that presents a deeply vulnerable male character. The portrayal of Donny's vulnerability is so gritty and unfiltered that it feels uncomfortable to watch, and this discomfort stems from the fact that such portrayals of men- men who are not strong, controlling or powerful - are so rare in mainstream media.

Similarly, in India, popular shows like *Mirzapur* and *Sacred Games* also follow this trend, focusing on male power and aggression while overlooking the portrayal of male vulnerability. While the male characters in these shows are depicted grappling with power, violence and crime, the emotional and

psychological effects of these issues are rarely explored in depth. The protagonists in these series maybe vulnerable at times, but the focus is more on their struggle with power or position in society, rather than the internal turmoil they might face as a result of these pressures. In shows like, *The Family Man*, where the male lead's family struggles are depicted, his personal issues with mental well-being or dealing with toxic masculinity are not thoroughly addressed. Even though such shows present nuanced and complex male characters, they largely sidestep conversations on men's emotional well-being or the social expectations placed on them to maintain strength, dominance and control. An article in Kashmir Observer notes,

"A disconcerting trend emerges as audiences seemingly prefer narratives glorifying toxic masculinity over those advocating women empowerment. This shift raises concerns about a potential brainwashing effect, gradually normalizing and even instigating practice of toxic masculinity in their personal lives" (Adil)

This gap in the representation of male issues in both global and Indian media reflects a broader societal reluctance to engage with the complexities of male identity beyond the traditional constructs of masculinity. The lack of such portrayals contributes to the silence around male victimization, reinforcing the stigma that men should always be strong, unemotional and self-reliant. As these representations dominate the global and Indian entertainment landscape, the absence of deeper discussions on men's struggles highlights the need for more inclusive storytelling that acknowledges and addresses the multifaceted nature of masculinity. In conclusion, the pervasive construct surrounding masculinity has long relegated issues such as male victimization and sexual assault to the margins, leaving them unexplored and misunderstood in mainstream discourse. Given the conditions,

Baby Reindeer emerges as a trailblazing show that challenges this very paradigm. Although the series may initially appear to focus on a stalker's obsession with a man, at its core, it addresses Donny's mental health, his experience with sexual abuse and his subsequent journey toward accepting and owning his trauma. This shift in narrative is not only refreshing but also necessary, as it begins to create space for men to openly discuss their experiences of victimization without fear, ridicule or shame.

Ultimately, *Baby Reindeer* serves as both a powerful reflection of the challenges men face in addressing sexual trauma and a beacon of hope for future change. It provides a pathway toward a more accepting and compassionate society, one where male victimhood is no longer dismissed or silenced but acknowledged with the same seriousness as female victimization. As popular media continues to evolve, it is crucial that narratives like Donny's become more prevalent, helping to shift cultural perceptions and break down the barriers that prevent meaningful discussions about male vulnerability and abuse. In this way, *Baby Reindeer* not only illuminates an overlooked issue but also offers a vision of a future where such stories are no longer sidelined, but embraced and understood. An article in Variety about the show *Baby Reindeer* remarks,

"As the series closes, we are forced to confront the lies we tell ourselves and others and how all of those things affect the ways in which we show up in the world- and what we deem acceptable."
(Tinubu)

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