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**Embodying Indian 'Epic' Masculinities:
Interpretations of Masculine Images in *Hatim***

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Embodying Indian ‘Epic’ Masculinities: Interpretations of Masculine Images in *Hatim*

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Abstract

Multiple interpretations of Indian masculinities have transcended into popular culture, of which ones in television shows have received the least scholarly attention. This paper explores the Indianized rendition of the Arabic fairy-tale Hatim Tai from the television show Hatim to locate the embodiment of masculinities that reflect notions from Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The show’s narrative embodies the constructive functions introduced by Vladimir Propp as intrinsic to fairy tales. The research divulges an episodic reading of the protagonist, Hatim’s masculine identity, positioned against that of Dajjal, the antagonist, read against masculine images from the Indian epics. The study involves an interpretative analysis of the male characters’ apparent and insinuated characteristics, physical appearances, and agency in the fairy-tale narrative, exploring how twenty-first-century fairy-tale media renditions reaffirm notions of masculinity dawning down since ages. The paper discusses how Indian ‘Epic’ masculinities percolate into popular culture through television shows.

Keywords: *Fairy Tales, Gender, Masculinities, Mythology, Fictional Television*

Introduction

In the contemporary age, children can select any popular culture pond to dive into, owing to the evolution of technology, a blend of media texts and linked material artefacts (Lindstrand et al., 2016), with one such pond being fairy tales. For millennia, audiences from different eras were drawn to the intoxicating concoctions of beauty, terror, wonders, violence, and charm that fairy tales have produced (Tatar, 2010). Themes like good versus evil, fairness over oppression, compassion, friendship, and faithfulness frequently feature in fairy tales, which are stories with magical components like talking animals or items and enchanted locations. Fairy tales, named so by Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy (Zipes, 2011), can ‘elicit what Richard Wright has described as a total emotional response’ (Tatar, 2010, p. 59). Vladimir Propp equated fairy tales with ‘tales of magic (Aguirre, 2011, p. 2), which, as a genre, has resisted being dominated by any media, continuing to be disseminated by word of mouth.

Fairy tales are still told orally but have even been adapted for films and television (TV), with foreign shows like ABC’s *Once Upon A Time* (2011-2018) and CBS All Access’ *Tell Me A Story*

(2018-2020). Fairy tale productions have not escaped the small screen in India. While DD National's *Vikram Aur Betaal* (1985-1986) centres on the collection of *Baital Pachisi* tales, considered to have been told by the ghost Vetala to the legendary king Vikramaditya, the protagonist in Star Plus' *Son Pari* (2000-2004), is a young girl who receives a magical ball that, when rubbed, summons a fairy and her friend. However, blending foreign tales and folklore, mainly Arabic folktales, into TV productions offers a more interesting avenue to explore. These tales 'continue to exist in unique ways under different environmental conditions' (Zipes, 2011, p. 221) but percolate into Indian TV as tools of unapologetic fantasy storytelling. One example is Star Plus' *Hatim* (2003-2004), a popular fantasy show.

The tale of this benevolent prince of the *Tayy* tribe of Yemen has had multiple renditions in Indian media, including a 1956 and a 1990 film, due to its popularity and relatability in the country, as well as nations beyond, like Pakistan and Iran (Muhabat et al., 2015). Muhabat et al. (2015) examined this Arabic folktale using the TV rendition by Sagar Films Pvt. Ltd. for the channel Star Plus to analyse the narrative functions proposed and characterised by Vladimir Propp. They affirm that it contains all the primary components established by Propp, with the story's elements cohesively combined, some appearing more than twice, thus sufficing as a fairy tale. However, in this version, the impressions of story traditions from Indian epics are not lost on any viewer. Instances such as the villain kidnapping the female protagonist on a flying vehicle or using manipulated dice in a game against the hero remind one of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Beyond the plot points and values imparted, the impressions of masculinities unmistakably portray a garnished blend of Indian sociocultural values and Arabic folklore through the characters Hatim, the principal protagonist and Dajjal, the leading antagonist. In studying masculinities in children's programs, Myers (2012) argues that non-hegemonic masculinities may disrupt traditional ideas about being male. However, certain characters only reinforce the dominant concepts of singular (hegemonic) masculinity, helping maintain the standard gender order. Such studies inspire more academic investigation. Thus, this research divulges an episodic reading of Hatim's masculine identity against that of Dajjal's in the backdrop of parallel characters from the two epics. Frames are drawn along the lines of activeness, aggressiveness, physicality, martial skills and morality using an interpretative analysis of apparent and insinuated characteristics of the male characters, helping understand ideas on masculinities being portrayed in such tales, culminating in extensive commentaries of the hero and villain archetypes such tales showcase. It would be an interface as to how masculine imagery percolates through fictional Indian TV shows.

Legacy of Masculinity: Tracing the Evolution

As an adult, Hatim is introduced as a skilful horse rider and an able archer who jumps to save a lonely female stranger from scary flying creatures. In one episode, he shouts at a crowd cheering to watch a hand-to-hand battle to death, 'Stop this bloody game... if you still want to get called a man, come

fight me (in the ring) ... Sitting afar and clapping will not prove your masculinity' (Ep. 21). The *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, states, 'the act of a coward, a eunuch, or a fool, (are) three abjected constructs of masculinity' (Brodbeck, 2017, p. 129). Given the myriad ideas on being a man instanced in such tales, understanding masculinities contextually becomes imperative. Masculinities are the socially constructed characteristics that men develop over time, and this is reflected in both the social structures they adopt and the ways they conduct themselves (Chowdhry, 2019). Masculinities have varying connotations for different people as such identities change, collapse, and reassemble over time, consequently necessitating ongoing reinforcement and reminders (Chowdhry, 2019; Reeser, 2010; Srivastava, 2015).

Mature relationships, institutional frameworks, and global power dynamics are impacted by a man's social status, behavioural patterns, and how these behaviours are collectively embodied. This makes masculinities a crucial field of study. However, until a recent focus on masculinities studies in the past few decades, the notion always escaped the investigative scanner (Gottzén et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, Sahgal (2009) attempts to draw a cohesive picture of masculinities by asking significant questions about their construction and composition. The most sustaining attributes thereof have been identified as sexual and procreative functions, with recognised traits like the display of power in public and domestic domains, as well as the reassertion of temper and physical strength, particularly in violent acts (Sahgal, 2009), like European colonial Christian cultures (Connell, 2016). While old texts, such as the *Rksamhita*, look at the masculine framings of gods, the epics discussed here define what '*Kshatriya* masculinity' ought to be. In either case, the relational status between hegemonic masculinity and femininity and/or other masculinities is undeniable (Brodbeck, 2017; Sahgal, 2009).

However, the epics have, stage by stage, defined what it means to be a man and how weaker masculinities or 'antagonist masculinity' ought to have stayed away from. This contrasts with a variety of interpretations of masculinities, encompassing embodied practices, traits, and beliefs alongside institutionalised and routinised behaviours and symbols. Understanding these changing norms, as reflected in the media, thus appears to depend on observing masculinities in ephemeral mediated texts. Various studies have tried to explore the portrayals on the small screen using varied methodologies and angles. Wood (1994) states that in children's television, males are shown as hostile, commanding, and rejoicing in activities that reward them for masculine achievements. Myers (2012) examines masculinities in children's programming and argues that conventional notions of what it means to be a man could be challenged by non-hegemonic masculinities, but he also points out that some characters only serve to uphold the conventional gender order by reinforcing ideas of hegemonic masculinity.

A recent report (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media et al., 2020) states that while popular TV for boys challenges some masculine stereotypes, it also reinforces the idea that 'real men' are independent, rugged, physically attractive, engage in high-risk behaviours, and not caring for others. Such studies beget more attention on representations of masculinities on TV. Traditionally, "masculinity

tends to be associated with such traits as rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism and ruthlessness”, with the male hero being “physically strong, aggressive, and assertive, takes the initiative, is independent, competitive and ambitious”, (Ahmed, 2012, p. 2). Today, not only are male characters figuratively more three-dimensional but narratives are also supplemented by more masculine plotlines that both protect and break traditional masculine stereotypes (Feasey, 2008). Various genres of television programming bring in varied renditions of masculine identities and embodiment based on source material, plotline, and target audience, among other factors. *Hatim*, a fantasy television program, also contains unique masculine trajectories and, as such, becomes the focal point of this study.

Narrative Progression and Similarities

The story of Hatim, whose name means ‘black crow’ in Arabic, banks on the plank of indomitable courage and extreme generosity but has not been consistent across the various media renditions. However, stories of this model of ‘Arab manliness’ have always had seeking answers to seven questions at the core of the plotline, and the Star Plus version is no exception. Here, Hatim, the newborn heir of Yemen’s Emperor, is decreed as the harbinger of peace and kindness. Dajjal, the son of the Emperor of Jaffar, is born around the same period, and an old palace servant, Najumi, offers the born-dead infant as a servant to *Shaitaan* (the Devil or evil forces). Twenty-four years pass, and Hatim matures into a gentle and well-liked prince, whereas Dajjal kills his parents and becomes the emperor. He wishes to become the supreme master of the universe by seizing the forces of goodness, which is only possible if he marries Durgapur’s princess, Sunaina.

Dajjal turns her teenage brother Suraj into a stone statue, giving her seven months to accept his marriage proposal before Suraj’s curse becomes permanent. Hatim’s fiancé, Jasmine’s father, the Emperor of Paristan, divulges a prophecy that Hatim must travel to distant lands and find solutions to seven magical questions to decimate Dajjal’s evil force, freeing Suraj consequentially. Jasmine enlists the help of her childhood friend and bodyguard, an elf called Hobo, to accompany Hatim. Dajjal’s powers and magical fortresses are gradually destroyed as Hatim solves the questions through complex journeys across enchanted lands, meeting mysterious people. Once Hatim has answered the sixth question, he does not have the time to answer the last. Several armies descend on Jaffar for the climactic battle, with Hatim arriving at the castle to combat Dajjal. They both die simultaneously, but Hatim negates death by answering the last question.

The recurrent narrative commonalities between Hatim and the epics provide the foundation for the contextual location of this research. Hatim’s birth is as warmly celebrated as Ram’s in the *Ramayana*. However, it is Dajjal’s birth that appears more interesting. Pronounced as an evil who would mark the end of his empire, Dajjal was born without a heartbeat, and the emperor ordered that his heart be taken out. However, Najumi takes exception to the directive and offers the child to the evil forces in exchange for him growing up to establish the rule of evil in this world. In the epic *Mahabharata*, Queen Gandhari had a long pregnancy and gave birth to a blob of immobile flesh. The foetus was

divided into pieces, placed in jars with *ghee* (clarified butter) and incubated. Eventually, one by one, one hundred one offspring (the Kauravas) were birthed, the eldest male of whom was the primary antagonist, Duryodhana.

While the prince of Ayodhya in the *Ramayana* is sent to fourteen years of exile on the eve of his coronation, in the *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas (Yudhishtira, Bheem, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadev – five brothers, the protagonists) earn thirteen years of exile in a lost game of dice, of which the last is to be incognito. While Hatim is not officially exiled, his seven-month-long journey to find answers to the seven questions is no less than one. In exile, the protagonists discover or validate their purpose of being. Ram finds comfort in Lakshmana’s company, while the Pandavas are accompanied by their common consort, Draupadi. Although Hatim initially cannot endure Hobo’s presence, he grows fond of him, as does the latter, and a promising friendship blooms between them. The protagonists go through life-changing experiences to consequentially learn the value of friendship and companionship. They underline the ageless idea that hardship is a furnace for self-realisation and purpose fulfilment.

In the epics, the protagonists often find themselves fighting others’ battles for a sense of duty natural to them. Ram assures Sugriva of his help and kills Bali, the ruler of Kishkindha, who had taken his brother Sugriva’s wife, Ruma, for his own after a misunderstanding over the kingdom. When the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata* attack King Virata’s empire Matsya, the Pandavas take charge and defend it against the attempted invasion. Hatim, too, indulges in fighting for selfless causes, freeing kidnapped children from the shackles of an evil musician Akraab and rescuing the evil-turned-good Teesta’s son from her merciless husband, despite her having turned innocent people, including Hobo, into inanimate objects. All of them get the returns for their noble deeds in the form of help to eventually defeat the leading antagonist.

The contrivance, which helps brew preachy and mystic fairy tales that serve to instil in listeners practices, rituals, and events (Meland, 2020), is not devoid of supernatural elements. Most folklorists agree that supernatural characteristics reside in these old tales, and the folklores considered here also have them (Muhabat et al., 2015). Ram faces Surpanakha, a shapeshifting demoness and the antagonist Ravana’s sister during exile. A sage, mating with his wife in the disguise of a deer, curses Pandu, the father of the Pandavas, to die the instant he tries to “taste the pleasures of the bed” (Rajagopalachari, 2021, p. 38). Hatim encounters not only shapeshifters, one of whom impersonates his fiancé but is himself at a point cursed to turn into a dog for half a day, with Jasmine condemned to be a pigeon for the other half. Thus, shape-shifting, considered one of the defining features of fairy tales (Tatar, 2010), also finds its place here.

Beyond the inspired characters and plot points, it is the ‘string of actions or events called functions’ (Aguirre, 2011, p. 2) that binds *Hatim* in the same fabric as the epics. Instances of absention, trickery, mediation, branding, villainy, struggle, transfiguration, punishment and other functions adorn all three stories. The fulfilment of these functions aids the characters’ discourse through the narrative, which consequentially drafts stereotypical imagery of the characters for the audiences. Additionally,

stereotypes of the ‘performance of masculinity’ (Butler, 1996; Waite, 2009) are constructed in propagating such ideals. Such inflexible archetypes may mould children’s conception of appropriate ‘masculine’ behaviour. Such reinforcements result in an excessive focus on particular traits, limiting the variety of ways men can be themselves, especially given the variance in how men are consequentially viewed in society (Feasey, 2008). Thus, such examinations of masculine imagery in fictional narratives become imperative.

Heroic Echoes: The ‘Manly Ideals’ Resonated

In *Ramayana*, Ram is hailed as *Maryada Purushottam* (*Maryada* meaning dignity, *Purush-ottam* being a portmanteau for *purush* meaning male and *Uttam* meaning the best), translating into the most extraordinarily dignified ideal man. Yudhishtira in the *Mahabharata* is referred to as *Dharmaraj* (The righteous ruler), who is so fair and just that his chariot stays two feet above the ground. Hatim is similarly hailed as ‘*Ummeed ki Kiran*’ (the ray of hope) (Ep. 1) and ‘*Neki ka Farishta*’ (the angel of righteousness) (Ep. 30). In the respective stories, Ravana, Duryodhana and Dajjal receive the flak for being short-sighted, arrogant and foolish. Their greed and pride lead to their imminent downfall and consequent death. The reinforcement of stereotypical distinguishing of moral values into the black-and-white ends of the spectrum, with no space for greyness in characters, does not excuse the lack of critical attention these characters have suffered (Carter, 2006; Jorgensen, 2018). An interpretative analysis of their trajectories shall close this gap.

Quests and Quandaries: Masculine Proactivity

There is a sharp contrast between the male characters and their female counterparts in fairy tales. For one, the former need to be more active and are judged on their ability to overcome obstacles (Jorgensen, 2018; Stone, 1975). They face unique challenges and must overcome them using martial, logical, and makeshift skills. Ram is faced with the challenge of finding a path from India to (Sri) Lanka, for which he prays to the ocean. As per instructions then received, a member of his *vanara sena* (monkey army) engraved his name on rocks and threw them into the ocean. They start floating, solving Ram’s ordeal (Narayan, 1977). In the *Mahabharata*, it is contended that a *Kshatriya* should be restless because this dissatisfaction would drive him to acts of heroism and riches. Therefore, the Pandavas actively sought alliances before the impending war with their cousins, the *Kauravas*, enlisting the help of Sri Krishna (their maternal cousin and a god).

Hatim must continuously be on his toes, looking for answers to one question after the other. His valour makes him offer himself as bait to monsters and giants, even though the battle is not his and there is no guaranteed fruit at the end. Women are given a more passive role in the sense that even though it may be centripetal of the narrative, their reliance on the men to avenge them or defend their honour is quintessential. In the epics, ‘the damsel’s distress compels and is assuaged by heroic action’ (Brodbeck, 2017, p. 130). Sita, Draupadi and Jasmine fall into the same pigeonhole. Draupadi,

humiliated by Duryodhana and his brothers, waits for Bheema to get her Dushasana's blood to wash her hair. Sunaina weeps for her brother and blames herself for the ordeals, yet she relies on Hatim to vanquish Dajjal. Their activeness is limited to trusting their male counterparts or boosting their morale, leaving it upon the man to think on their feet, fight and vindicate any dishonour they encounter.

Rescuing Damsels in Distress: Masculine Valour

Bordo states that ideal men are gentle with women (Jorgensen, 2018). This gentleness is complimented by their physical abilities to ensure women are respected and protected under all circumstances. Gender norms reinforce specified roles for men and women, wherein boys may take it upon themselves to protect and defend women (Carter, 2006). Fairy tales render and uphold a prototypical notion wherein male protagonists always possess the ability and means to rescue women. The inability to defend women and preserve their honour is a blemish male characters in fairy tales cannot sustain. Even beyond tales, a community's manhood depends on preserving women's honour, and invoking masculinity would hypothetically safeguard women from 'others' (Gupta, 2011). Such tales are laced with obstacles for their heroes, who, despite all odds, protect and defend women under all circumstances. This trait stands integral to their masculine sense of self. Unsurprisingly, physical strength and ability succour them in doing so.

Cekiso (2015) uses the Xhosa-language fairy tale *Untonganayentsimbi* (Iron-rod) as an example where the male protagonist, Bhuzalusiba, rescues his sister from the orges. When the Pandavas' uncle Dhritharashtra's son-in-law Jaydratha passed by their hermitage and saw Draupadi, he urged her to leave the brothers and become the queen of his heart. On her refusal, he snatched her and fled the scene. The Pandavas pursued his army, vanquished them, and shaved Jaydratha's scalp as retribution, leaving him alive for the sake of their cousin sister Dushshala (Rajagopalachari, 2021). In *Hatim*, Jasmine does not doubt for even a moment that Hatim will rescue her from the shrinking magical bubble Dajjal has confined her to and would punish the latter for doing so. In his quest to save her, Hatim is ship-wrecked and lands in a distant land, pronounced dead by the rest of the world, yet he manages to locate and save Jasmine. He ensures she is safely returned to Paristan before continuing his journey.

The Martial Essence: Masculine Aggression

The hero's robust and charismatic physicality complements and does not subdue his fighting skills as a reflection of his heroism. In fairy tales, masculinities are associated with autonomy, competition, lack of emotion, aggression, and violence (Cekiso, 2015). According to Lowe et al. (2012), aggressiveness is a respectable way for men to assert control over their surroundings and avoid shame, and men battle to maintain their honour and respect. Since ancient times, the display of fury and physical power, particularly in violent activities such as warfare and the confrontational attitude, have been recognised as attributes associated with masculinity (Sahgal, 2009). Brodbeck (2017) writes

that in battle, the Kshatriya must fight without regard for his survival. His natural occupations are valour, energy, resolution, skill, benevolence, mastery, and not escaping a conflict. This valour of a fairy-tale hero is accompanied by his boastful ability, which denotes ‘the assertion of superiority over their opponents in advance of battle’ (Brodbeck, 2017). The narratives here make no exception to these beliefs.

Krishna tells Arjuna that if the latter declines to fight, great warriors will believe he withdrew from the field out of fear and will be slighted despite his previous high reputation. Even his adversaries will also say numerous unsavoury things about his ability (Brodbeck, 2017). Hatim is not only an able sword-wielder who swirls it along to handle multiple opponents together but also a skilled warrior who takes part in a gladiator-like fight barehanded. He is a skilled archer who hits the bullseye, just like Arjuna does in the *Mahabharata*, to win Draupadi’s hand in marriage (Rajagopalachari, 2021). Upon learning his fate, where he is told he will meet his doom fighting Dajjal, he says, ‘Since I have left Yemen, I have been playing with perils’ (Ep. 44). Ready to sacrifice his life to protect the goodness in the world, he tells Dajjal that he hates him and that it is his fate to kill him.

Physique and Charisma: Masculine Allure

Physical fitness has been integral to the idea of a complete man since ancient times in India (Sahgal, 2009). The dominance of Christian manliness over the effeminate babus in colonial India was asserted by a definable muscularity, among other factors (Banerjee, 2005; Sinha, 1995). As the reverse is true, this translates into an attractive body and handsome appearance, usually expected of princes (Hönekopp et al., 2007). Skin colour and other transient traits are becoming more prominent in the perception of ‘facial masculinity’, a marker of attractiveness (Scott et al., 2010). Fairy tales have demanded their men to be ‘to a large extent strong, dashing and fearless’ (Meland, 2020, p. 2) for quite a long now. Male protagonists of the tales in general, and the ones considered here, are charming men of definable physical build and attractive appearance. These given tales place equal, if not more, emphasis on the appearance of the male characters, upholding prototypical notions of male beauty.

Ravana’s sister Surpanakha was charmed by Rama’s alluring beauty. His broad shoulders, big arms, conch-shaped throat, complexion like a black lotus flower, dreamy eyebrows, and coppery eyes combined with a friendly demeanour cast a magical spell on her (Narayan, 1977). While in exile, Arjuna visited his Lord Indra’s palace. Urvashi, a nymph, was drawn to his charming, handsome appearance and declared her love for him. However, Arjuna referred to her as his mother because of their shared ancestry, making her curse him, only to eventually reduce it. Usually covered by his golden armour, Hatim has a fair, hairy and muscular body, with defined pecs and strong muscles that add to the appeal of his fanciable face. Hatim’s youthful handsomeness makes the female character Mallika-a-Husn (literally - Empress of Beauty), who has the power to make any man fall on her feet, fall in love with him. Her obsession extends to the point where she even attempts to impersonate and harm Jasmine.

Ethical Paragons in Narratives: Masculine Virtues

The structure of personal values has systematically changed in the modern era, as have people's interpretations of what they mean. Although the general value circle is still present, its details vary depending on age and gender (Borg, 2019). However, with a disregard for individual differences, the male protagonist of any epic or fairy tale is supposed to be a living embodiment of truth, fairness, kindness, generosity, compassion, and simplicity. The characters are designed to be a mix of sweet, simple, and humble (Jorgensen, 2018). Ancient Indian beliefs on gods, such as Shiva being virile and aggressive yet compassionate and giving (Sahgal, 2009), percolate into the epics too. Generosity is one of the two foundations of the *Kshatriya* reputation. Such ideal qualities help the leading male characters secure a unique place in the hearts of others, who go out of their way to help these heroes fulfil their objectives and vanquish their enemies. This model sets the heroes apart from their narrative opponents.

Narayan (1977) states that while describing why Ram should succeed him as the ruler, his father, King Dashratha of Ayodhya, stated that Ram, the epitome of all perfection, will make an excellent ruler as he has compassion, a sense of justice, and courage and sees no disparities between humans—old or young, royal or peasant; he treats everyone equally. Justice was so dear to Yudhishtira's heart that when all his brothers lay petrified at the edge of an enchanted pool, just so that the justice scales would be level, he decided to bring his father's second wife's first-born Nakula back to life, instead of his mother's second born Bheem. Likewise, Hatim, as the model of justice and benevolence, on hearing Teesta's pathos as a mother separated from her child, vows (and eventually fulfils the vow) to get her son back to her. He refuses to take help in a way that may cause harm to others and aid the evil powers, even if this means a longer, more challenging route for him.

Malevolent Counterparts: Resonating 'Antagonist Masculinity'

Born without a heartbeat, Dajjal, as an adult, is introduced as *Jadugar Badshah* (Sorcerer-Emperor), who is revered and respected among all believers of evil power as their overlord. His lust for power knows no bounds, and he is completely drained of affection. His only quest is to acquire more land, power, and respect by becoming the unchallenged evil ruler of the world. Drowned in pride and power, he believes if Hatim succeeds in even finding the seventh question, 'Before the wind changes its direction, I will strangle it to death and stop the trajectory of the moon and the stars' (Ep. 41). It is imperative to look at his menacing nature to develop a sense of his antagonist masculinity, drawing parallels from the villainous males from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

For one, these characters have strong faith and are ardent followers of the power they worship. Ravana in the *Ramayana* is a devotee of Lord Brahma, who blessed him with partial immortality, rendering him invulnerable to beings above humans (for he considered humans meek and unworthy). Though not wholly devoted to a single lord or power, Duryodhana was a faithful believer who had

respect for divine beings. Dajjal, who cuts off his head to appease the supreme evil power and gain favour, is frequently shown bowing before it. However, this worship could not teach humility to show respect to others or any of these antagonists. Duryodhana wanted the Gandharvas (a tribe) to vacate the lake he wanted to bathe before his arrival as he considered them below himself, but they overpowered him. Dajjal also does not deal with people he considers below him due to the air of superiority his name carries in the evil world and is thus cheated often.

In the tales discussed, greed is the root cause of villainy by the antagonists. They are led astray by believing they can have everything they ever desire and finally end up with nothing. Avarice leads Ravana wrong, who then falls victim to a particular fantasy of power: the goal of continuous dominance. Until his eventual doom, he could not be convinced otherwise. Duryodhana's lust for property and power drove him wild enough to deny the Pandavas only five villages out of the vast share of land, for his answer was that he would not give them even a needle-size portion of land. Similarly, Dajjal wants to marry Sunaina only to acquire the power to indicate to the sun when to set and to the moon when to rise. His greed, too, has a fateful ending at the hands of Hatim. However, he has no realisation of it till the end.

All three ignored warnings of their impending dooms. Besides greed to acquire more land and become more powerful and respected throughout (as the case may be), all three are drowned in pride and do not heed any reprimands to mend their course. Their *amour propre* is deeply embedded within their masculinity and makes them undervalue any opponent they may face till the point of doom. Hanuman preached about Ram, advising Ravana to change his ways and forewarning him of Ram's impending devastation. Duryodhana was repeatedly requested by one and all to avoid war with the Pandavas, for it was to bring unforeseen destruction and loss to his clan, but he did not heed a single advice. Dajjal, who likes to insult his opponents to establish his credibility, does not consider Hatim a match and ignores every warning despite it being foretold that he is cursed to die at the hands of the latter.

Duryodhana is not one to forget any humiliation. When Draupadi makes fun of him and terms him the blind son of a blind man, he takes the insult in as tasting blood and humiliates her after 'winning her' as a wager in the fateful game of dice. In the *Ramayana*, When Lakshmana chopped off Surpanakha's nose, she hurried to Lanka to apprise Ravana of the horror. 'Gods held their breath, unable to gauge the upheaval that would follow when Ravana struck in revenge', writes Narayan (1977: 149). Similarly, Dajjal cannot get to grips with humiliation at the hands of Hatim or failure by his henchmen. He kills one of his supporters for failing him once in deceiving and killing Hatim and Hobo. Similar in spirit to the proactivity of their nemeses, their masculine ideals do not allow any negotiation with ignominy and spur them into revengeful action.

Masculinity, for these characters, is about apodictic dominance, unlimited power, no opposition, and no fear of death, for dishonour is worse than death, and every means to circumvent it is justified. They express a solid adherence to the hegemonic model of masculinity (Howson & Hearn, 2020;

Myers, 2012), showing excellent abilities in battles, asserting their dominance and pre-eminence through boasts and exhibiting their sovereignty by fighting till the very end. In contrast to the heroes' traits, these antagonists represent an expression of masculinity characterised by unwavering pride, insatiable greed, and an aversion to humility. Their unwavering quest for dominance and their unwillingness to heed advice or change direction highlight a strict and harmful ideal that finally brings them to an end. Though scholarly attention has not investigated the depths of their qualities, possibly owing to a dearth of negative male characters in fairy tales, they provide a deep understanding of masculinities among men.

Conclusive Musings: On Imagery and Beyond

'Someday you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again', said C. S. Lewis, who defended fairy tales against allegations of promoting escapism and frightening children and subtitled the last of his space trilogy books as *A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups*. Like how fairy tales weave beautiful concoctions and inspire children, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* continue to influence multiple aspects of quotidian practices of individuals across the Indian subcontinent at various levels. Different authors have affirmed 'the power of these tales to speak to current affairs' (Brodbeck, 2017, p. 125). *Hatim* and the epics skilfully channel the essence of heroic masculinity as these tales cross over to the fabric of societal values, highlighting their enduring significance in shaping cultural ideals. The male protagonists in these tales honour their responsibility to protect women and thus excel in combat against multiple opponents.

As an exemplary fairy-tale male hero, *Hatim* embodies a fanciable physicality, is active in overcoming hurdles that try to thwart him and is a living testimony to the virtues that heroes in Indian epics are revered for, shining as 'a man of god' who is just, kind, and worthy of honour. Like the epics, *Hatim's* story, though originally Arabic, stands out with pronounced notions of masculinities that have defined for audiences the way of being an idealised man for ages. Though rarer in fairy tales, the male antagonists are sunk in the sea of pride and greed, flying along an air of superiority that makes them devalue the protagonists. Their value systems are morally corrupt and convincingly complicit to the standards of hegemonic masculinity. *Ravana*, *Duryodhana* and *Dajjal* continue to show how one can stray from their path to invite their doom nearer with abhorred qualities.

In contrast, an exemplary man who is truthful, physically handsome, capable, strong, loved by all and who never leaves the ways of righteousness culminates into what *Rama*, the *Pandavas* and *Hatim* are. In the case of either set of characters, there is a strictly defined set of features that they are limited to, reaffirming notions of masculinities that have been dawning for ages. They suggest strict boundaries in which men should operate and describe any deviance as sinful, ultimately punished with mortal perishing. Such stories, mainly aimed at children or exposed during childhood, are potentially impactful and impressionable on young minds, as substantiated by Myers (2012) and Wood (1994). Such allegiance to idealised notions may inspire impersonation by audiences and prohibit

breathing grounds for contemporary, alternative notions of masculinities. The recurrent themes of idealised masculinities in the symphony of the stories presented highlight the enduring influence of narrative traditions in shaping cultural norms.

End Notes:

1. Episodes of the show *Hatim* were downloaded from the website *Dailymotion*. Observations and interpretations made here are based on the forty-five episodes available there.
2. Multiple renditions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are available, across multiple formats, for reference. Text versions of the same have been considered and cited below for reference.
3. Indian renditions of *Hatim* have always focused on the character's journey to find answers to seven questions. Hatim learns through these experiences by undertaking gnarly tasks involving multiple demanding stages and detours.

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