

Imagining Digital Despair: Exploring the Teen Masculinity Crisis in Adolescence

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Abstract: *This article seeks to explore the tragic consequences of toxic teen masculinity in the widely acclaimed 2025 Netflix series, Adolescence directed by Philip Barantini. This series is an honest portrayal of teenagers getting easy access to toxic male cultures in today's digital environment, resulting in their personalities getting moulded by the ubiquitous misogynistic ideas around them. By exploring several critical issues like cyber bullying, toxic online content and the need for right parenting— in the light of the Netflix series, Adolescence— this article makes a fervent plea to educators, policy makers, families and communities to stand together and work for the well-being of the youngsters, especially those teenagers rendered vulnerable in today's toxic digital environment.*

Keywords: *Adolescence, toxic masculinity, misogyny, virtual environment, manosphere, social media, incel culture*

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been many works of art - both verbal and visual - dealing with the highly sensitive, yet often ignored theme of adolescence and its varied implications. This transitional phase of physical and psychological development accompanied by its vast gamut of emotions, confusion and anxieties has found expression in various genres. The 2025 British television mini-series created by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne and directed by Philip Barantini is the latest addition to this. What makes this series distinctive is the searing portrayal of the toxic masculinity in a teenager, Jamie Miller and its tragic consequences. AS Paul McNamara and Nicholas Dunn notes, “*Adolescence* offers a stark reminder of the dangers of under-regulated and unmonitored social media use in young people” (320).

The fact that the horrific crime — murdering a classmate — is committed by a supposedly normal child from a conventional family debunks many myths. The excessive focus on the social background of the perpetrator and many other factors such as discrimination of various hues and deprivation of many kinds do not hold much significance in *Adolescence*. The teenager in question, Jamie Miller is an unassuming thirteen-year-old boy who goes through his life in a seemingly normal manner. The shocking crime he commits under the influence of social media — shocking both because of the nature of the crime and the nonchalance with which he acts — has come as a rude shock for many that social mediation has such persuasive powers, especially on teenagers.

At the centre of the series is the deeply disturbing question of the circumstances which led Jamie to do what he did. The factors that influence and prompt a teenager to commit unimaginable brutality definitely have significance as it helps the society at large to understand the mindset of the present generation.

The series brings into question how the ideas that can be summarised as ‘manosphere’ (an umbrella term for misogynistic ideologies) mislead impressionable minds towards hate and violence. The societal expectations and pressures that manifest through social media deny the central character Jamie a normal childhood. Sucked into the vortex of social media and its influencers, who largely promote misogynistic ideas and views, the central character starts to exist only in the virtual world. His connection with the real world gets severed as he begins to navigate virtual reality completely shunning the real world. The virtual environment Jamie finds himself in is a ruthless world devoid of any ethical considerations. Here he is bullied and humiliated, bringing out the toxic masculinity inherent in him which ultimately leads to disastrous consequences.

Toxic masculinity refers to aggressive and often violent behaviour in men which can be the result of harmful societal and cultural expectations prompting men to act in a regressive and often unacceptable manner. These expectations involve suppressing emotions, misogyny, homophobia and aggressive behaviour often leading to mental health problems, discrimination, violence and abuse. The adherence to traditional masculine norms can cause great harm to one's mental and physical well-being often leading them to unacceptable and even violent behaviour. A study in the *Journal of School of*

Psychology provides the following definition of toxic masculinity: “The constellation of socially regressive masculine traits that serve to foster dominations, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence” (Ingram et al.,139).

The series follows the emotional upheaval a family goes through after their teenaged son is arrested on suspicion of murdering his schoolmate. The social and emotional consequences of this dastardly act as the perpetrator Jamie and his family navigate a public trial and his detention form the storyline. Themes such as problems faced by adolescents exacerbated by the influence of social media, incel culture and dissociation from the real world, slippage into a virtual environment are all explored in excruciating detail. The family dynamics and the complexities involved especially while encountering a crisis are also dealt within a realistic fashion, giving the series a kind of authenticity one seldom comes across.

The first episode begins with the arrest of Jamie on suspicion of murdering his schoolmate, Katie Leonard. The rest of the episode deals with the struggle of the family to cope with the extraordinary situation. The second episode deals with the murder investigation with Detective Inspector Luke Bascombe and D.S. Misha Frank searching for the murder weapon and questioning students including Jamie’s and Katie’s friends at school. Questioning Ryan, Jamie’s close friend, reveals that it was he who gave Jamie the murder weapon providing sufficient evidence for the investigators to charge Jamie with Katie’s murder. The third episode which takes place seven months after the murder focuses on Jamie’s psychological sessions with Briony Ariston, a clinical psychologist. This episode sheds light on the troubled psyche of Jamie, his relationships and views on women and also his deep-seated rage. The misogynistic ideas he has imbibed at such a tender age and the toxic masculinity that is on display is shocking to say the least. During the session Jamie gets aggressive and hostile, challenges the psychologist repeatedly giving one a glimpse of his mental makeup. It also becomes clear that he idolizes his grandfather who held misogynistic views.

The misogynistic ideologies that held sway in the virtual world like “eighty percent of women only want twenty percent of men” and the incel culture influence the young Jamie to such an extent that he is even ready to commit murder. In fact the trigger for the gruesome act was Katie labelling him an “incel” (involuntary celibate). His outburst leads to the confession, “I had a knife...but I didn’t touch her!” Jamie seems to be suggesting that he should, in fact, be lauded for not assaulting Katie even though he had the opportunity to do so. The session ends rather abruptly with the psychologist calling it off realizing that Jamie had no remorse. The final episode deals with the tumultuous life of the Miller family thirteen months after the murder. As the family tries to maintain a semblance of normality amidst all the chaos and confusion engulfing them, Jamie’s father, Eddie’s van is vandalized by a group of teenagers throwing him into a fit of rage. The episode explores the emotional toll the events have taken on the family even as Jamie informs his parents that he plans to plead guilty. The series ends with Eddie apologizing to Jamie for not being a better parent.

It is evident that Jamie’s toxicity is the result of a deep-seated rage and antagonism towards the opposite sex. The influence of social media in instigating such a mindset in him cannot be overlooked. In fact, one can conclude that the virtual environment Jamie is part of is almost solely responsible for the misogyny and toxicity he has imbibed at such a young age. He mentions controversial influencers like Andrew Tate who preaches that women belong in the home and that they are men’s property. It is hardly surprising that a teenager fed on such misogynistic and regressive ideas would even go to the extent of murdering someone from the opposite sex as the only emotion guiding such an individual is antagonism and hatred. There is a lack of respect, let alone, love and affection for females in Jamie as his mind is clouded with ‘manosphere’ ideas and incel culture. The rejection he experiences at school from his female schoolmates and the subsequent cyberbullying he is subjected to definitely adds to his sense of alienation.

The fact that Jamie does not have any female friends, perhaps, prompts him to perceive male- female relationships from an angle of hierarchy and domination. For him it is always ‘us versus them’ and never a relationship based on mutual respect and admiration. It is quite natural in his case as Jamie does not get many opportunities to interact with girls his age and all the information he gathers about them is from the social media and other online sources.

In the series it is not just Jamie who is subjected to cyberbullying but also his victim, Katie, whose intimate images are shared by a male classmate without her consent. This incident clearly indicates the dangerous extent to which toxic masculinity has engulfed the teenage community resulting in such totally unacceptable conduct. Again, in the first episode the viewers get a sense of Jamie’s inappropriate social media behaviour when he is questioned by police about the sexualized images of adult women he has shared on his *Instagram* page. The ease with which teenagers can access pornography and their addiction to it is a highly concerning trend as it prompts them to view women not as individuals but as objects to be consumed. The objectification of women arising out of a complete lack of respect, in a way, makes it easy for someone like Jamie to commit horrendous crimes against them.

In today's virtual environment, the young people especially, have very easy access to toxic male culture and their personality gets moulded by the misogynistic ideas floating around. Coupled with this are many misguided and stereotypical gender notions creating in them a completely distorted perspective about women and their basic human rights. It is to be noted that Jamie never really acknowledges Katie's right to reject him if she feels so. On the contrary, Jamie seems to hold the view that a girl or a woman has to meekly submit to the advances of males like him or face the consequences.

It is evident that the murder is not something that took place under exceptional circumstances. In fact, it is the tragic culmination of everyday expressions of misogyny, often ignored or not taken serious note of. Jamie's conversation with the psychiatrist is an eye opener as all his manosphere ideologies spill out shocking the viewers. The callousness with which Jamie describes his actions without even a trace of remorse is a chilling reminder of the complexities of Jamie's inner world.

Though it is rather easy to lay all the blame at the doorstep of the current digital landscape, the role of patriarchy with its set of regressive ideas about women cannot be overlooked. The central character has internalized the patriarchal values to the extent that he adores his abusive grandfather, a misogynist who held traditionalist views. Coupled with this is resentment towards girls who rejected him or showed lack of interest. This becomes a deadly combination—quite literally in this case—and Jamie does what he does in a fit of rage. But one should not think of this as a senseless act of violence but as something that was the result of deep seated rage and hatred towards the opposite sex. The inability to see women as equals but as someone to be trampled upon, dominated and conquered is the unfortunate culmination of the deep misogynistic ideologies teenagers like Jamie are influenced by. The toxicity generated by influencers like Andrew Tate with their anti-feminist rhetoric and inflammatory views on women goes a long way in perpetuating violence and discrimination against women. The incel culture and the infamous 80-20 rule (the flawed theory that 80 percent women find only 20 percent men attractive) promoted by the likes of Andrew Tate in the 'manosphere' groups instill in the impressionable minds a highly distorted view of man- woman relationship. Quite often, the person in question—in this case Jamie—absorbs toxic values, unconsciously sometimes, oblivious of the massive impact it has on their mental makeup.

The exploitative nature the 'manosphere' ideas inculcates in young minds is evident in Jamie's interaction with Katie. In the third episode he relates to the psychologist the circumstances under which he asks Katie to go out with him. He was under the impression that since Katie was weak because of a topless photo of her that has been shared in a *Snapchat* group she would agree to his proposal. Jamie seeks to exploit the perceived weakness in Katie to establish a relationship and when it does not materialize stabs her to death. It is also notable that Jamie has no qualms, whatsoever, about the heinous act, suggestive of the extent of indoctrination from 'manosphere' ideologies of which toxic masculinity is the underlying principle. Such groups promote the misconceived notion that the world is excessively favourable to women and men are unfairly treated which has a profound influence on young minds.

Adolescence reminds us that the patriarchal values and misogyny intrinsic to the male dominated world we exist in, find its manifestation in various ways. As bell hooks says, "There is only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men; that emotion is anger. Real men get mad. And their mad-ness, no matter how violent or violating, is deemed natural—a positive expression of patriarchal masculinity. Anger is the best hiding place for anybody seeking to conceal pain or anguish of spirit" (7). What hooks says becomes evident in the ruthless manner in which Jamie reacts to Katie's rejection. His senseless anger—stabbing Katie multiple times resulting in her death—bears testimony to the fact that the only emotion Jamie is capable of or his patriarchal mindset allows him to show is anger. The uncontrollable rage he succumbs to, seems to make him oblivious of the consequences of his action.

In today's virtual environment, where one is constantly exposed to harmful online content, for example, misogynistic hate speeches infused with senseless rage, the risk is substantial. The growing link between online normalisation and even glorification of violence against women and real world violence is a deeply disconcerting, yet well-established trend. One realizes that Jamie, in the final analysis, is as much a victim of the toxic online environment as he is a perpetrator. Parenting plays a critical role in moulding an individual and, in Jamie's case, though his parents try really hard, they are unable to realise and appreciate his delicate mental state and his anxieties and insecurities as a teenager. The callousness of the education system failing to comprehend the abyss to which Jamie has plummeted, and of course, the toxic ideas he has imbibed and internalized all contributed to his undoing.

Adolescence, while tackling several issues like the devastating consequences of cyberbullying, toxic online content and the need for right parenting, is primarily about toxic masculinity and its potential to wreak havoc on the lives of young people.

The series, while focusing on the cataclysmic consequences of toxic masculine behaviour on Jamie and his family, at the same time, is a harrowing document of the distressing effects of such behaviour on the society as a whole.

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