

Masculinity in Laura Dave's The Last Thing He Told Me

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Abstract. This research is entitled "Masculinity in Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me*." The purpose of this study is to analyze the reflection and identify the types of masculinity presented in the story. This research uses a qualitative method and a sociological approach. This research aims to understand the reflections and types of masculinity experienced by the characters in the story. The theory used is Connell's theory of gender relations and masculinity to analyze how masculinity is portrayed in the story. The results show that masculinity is reflected in Hannah and Owen. The types of masculinity identified Hegemony, Subordinate, Complicity, and Marginalized. Hannah's character experiences problems, such as searching Owen's missing whereabouts, which makes her masculinity emerge. Likewise, Owen's character faces problems that prompt him to leave and protect his family. Moreover, this study shows that masculinity is not only associated with biological males, but can also be represented by female characters, challenging gender traditions. Hannah adopts male traits such as leadership, independence and emotional fortitude, demonstrating the fluidity of masculinity beyond gender boundaries. This study, by using Connell's framework, provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of masculinity in literature. Ultimately, the findings contribute to broader discussions about gender roles and how masculinity evolves in modern society.

Keywords: *complicit, gender, hegemony, masculinity, marginalized*

INTRODUCTION

This Gender is not an inherent trait but a construct formed through social interactions and cultural expectations. According to Butler (2025), gender is shaped and reinforced by behavior, movement, and presentation. This construct creates socially defined roles such as masculinity and femininity, which evolve based on context. Masculinity, often linked with traits like strength and leadership, is typically associated with male bodies, but it is not biologically fixed. As Connell (2005) emphasizes, masculinity emerges through social processes and can be performed by individuals of any gender.

In modern families, gender roles are shaped by cultural traditions and social structure. The family operates as a social system in which individuals perform roles influenced by societal expectations. Children, especially, internalize gender norms based on their family

experiences. In patriarchal settings, men dominate, while women are expected to be passive. This division reinforces hegemonic masculinity a concept where dominant male traits are positioned as societal ideals (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, not all forms of masculinity are hegemonic. Connell (2005) identifies various types: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized, each shaped by context and power dynamics.

This research explores how masculinity is reflected in the novel *The Last Thing He Told Me* by Laura Dave, focusing on two central characters, Hannah and Owen. Hannah, a female protagonist, displays masculine traits, challenging the binary view that masculinity belongs exclusively to men. This raises the central research questions: (1) How is masculinity reflected in Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me*? (2) What types of masculinity are portrayed through Owen and Hannah?

Previous studies on gender in literature tend to focus on gender discrimination (Febrianti, 2023), traditional roles (Ramadhani, 2023), gender dysphoria (Rahayu, 2023), and toxic masculinity (Rahayu et al., 2022). However, none address the nuanced construction of masculinity across genders in *The Last Thing He Told Me*. This study fills that gap by examining the complexity of masculine roles performed by a female character within a family and societal structure.

This research applies Connell's gender theory and uses a sociological-literary approach to reveal how masculinity operates beyond male identity. The analysis is expected to show how masculinity is socially constructed, fluid, and performable by women. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader gender discourse by highlighting how literature reflects evolving understandings of masculinity in contemporary society.

The aim of this research is to examine the reflections and types of masculinity performed by Hannah and Owen in Laura Dave's novel. It shows that masculinity is not exclusive to men and is shaped by experiences, culture, and relational power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of gender and masculinity in literature has been the focus of many researchers, with a particular focus on gender inequality, stereotypes, and the role of toxic masculinity in fictional characters. However, most studies are still fixated on the representation of masculinity in male characters, while exploration of masculinity played by female characters is still minimal.

One relevant study was conducted by Febrianti (2023) who examined gender discrimination in the novel *The Siren*. This study reveals how female characters experience marginalization and inequality in a society dominated by a patriarchal system. The main focus is liberal feminism and structural discrimination. This study provides the basis that literary works are able to reflect gender inequality in a complex manner, but does not discuss the role of masculinity inherent in the female characters themselves.

Another study by Ramadhani (2023) in her novel *Pachinko* also illustrates traditional gender roles, especially in Korean culture, which requires women to obey men. The main character experiences social and cultural pressures that rigidly shape gender roles.

Although this analysis underlines the reality of patriarchy, a critical evaluation of the possibility of shifting or resisting gender roles is not raised in depth.

Rahayu (2023) then explored the theme of gender dysphoria in the novel *When the Moon Was Ours*. The study focuses on how characters experience incongruence between gender identity and biological sex. This study is quite progressive in describing gender fluidity, but does not link it directly to the concept of masculinity in a broader social level.

Research by Rahayu, Romadani, & Suharwati (2022) in the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* highlights toxic masculinity using Terry A. Kupers' theory. They highlighted how male dominance not only suppresses women, but also becomes a burden for men themselves. However, the approach is still dualistic - between the dominant and the victim without accommodating the perspective of masculinity that can be present in women.

Although previous literature offers various perspectives on gender, none has explicitly examined how a female character can actively perform masculine roles. This research uses Connell's theory, which is divided into four parts on Hegemony, Subordinate, Complicit and Marginalized masculinity. However, Connell does not explicitly state that women can adopt them. However, Connell emphasizes that masculinity is a social construction and not a biological trait. In this study, female characters who display masculine behavior do not fall into these four categories, but are analyzed through the framework of gender relations and the way masculinity is performed in certain social situations.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design and a literary sociology approach to analyze the representation of masculinity in the novel *The Last Thing He Told Me* by Laura Dave. The main data comes from the content of the novel, while supporting data is taken from related journals and articles. Data collection was done through in-depth reading, marking of relevant quotes, classification based on the types of masculinity according to Connell (2005), and analyzed by looking at the narrative context and relationships between characters. The researcher acted directly as the main instrument without using special tools, and the research process lasted for approximately three months.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the society with create masculinity in the novel, while the second part focuses on the types of masculinity portrayed by the two main characters.

A. The Reflection of Masculinity

The reflection of masculinity is evident in Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me*. It is portrayed through various aspects, including social and cultural contexts, as well as how masculinity is constructed within the narrative. From the quotation, "I turn wood. That's what I do for work. People usually make a face when I tell them this is my job (Dave, 2021: 14)". The sentence reflects how stereotypes and negative social judgments often arise toward women who enter fields of work traditionally associated with men. Jobs that

require technical skills and physical strength, such as carpentry, are often linked to masculinity. When a woman chooses this profession, she may be perceived as not conforming to the traditional gender roles expected of women, such as being gentle or motherly. In this context, Hannah, who works as a woodworker, must overcome both technical challenges and gender stereotypes. Connell (2005) states, "Instead of trying to define masculinity as an object (a behavioral average, a natural character type, or a norm), we should concentrate on the interactions and processes that men and women use to carry out gendered lives." This statement suggests that masculinity is not something biologically inherent in men, but rather the result of social processes involving interactions between individuals and societal structures.

B. Type of Masculinity Reflected in Owen and Hannah

1. Hannah's Masculinities

a. Hegemony

"I need to talk to your father," I say. "And I'm asking my husband's friend to help make that happen." (Dave, 2021: 216)". "I have left myself alone in the lion's den. A sacrifice. In the name of Kate. Or Owen. Or Bailey" (Dave, 2021: 233).

With courage on her side, Hannah asks Charlie to take her to the home of her father-in-law, Nicholas Bell, a known criminal. Motivated by her commitment to family, Hannah decides to go to Nicholas Bell's home. In facing a major conflict rooted in her husband's past, she takes the initiative and demonstrates strong leadership. She confronts the source of danger directly an action that reflects dominance and bravery, two key components of hegemonic masculinity and does not rely on another male figure (such as Nicholas Bell) to solve the problem. Hannah shows that she is willing to put herself in danger to protect and save the people she loves, as expressed in her words: "A sacrifice. In the name of Kate. Or Owen. Or Bailey." This challenges traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity, which often assign women the role of being morally responsible or emotionally supportive, rather than protectors. In the criminal underworld, Nicholas Bell represents power and danger. By choosing to confront him, Hannah asserts control and authority in a space typically dominated by men. This is not only a personal act of bravery it is also a form of resistance against the patriarchal power structure that has oppressed and intimidated her for years.

b. Subordinate

"I lay awake most of the night on the living room couch, unable to face my bedroom without Owen. I wrap myself up in an old blanket and wait out the dark (Dave, 2021: 43)". Based on the quotes above, Hannah is in a state of suffering. For example, the quote "I lay awake most of the night on the living room couch" shows that her energy is drained by the emotional burden she carries. In the quote "unable to face my bedroom without Owen," she reveals a fear she cannot confront, reflecting emotional vulnerability. Meanwhile, "I wrap myself up in an old blanket and wait out the dark" expresses her sense of disappointment and hopelessness as she waits for something in the darkness.

c. Complicit

“She pours herself some more and moves my hand out of the way, topping me off. I smile at her, even though I have barely taken a sip of what I already have. I’m too stressed, too physically off — too close to standing up and busting into the living room, pulling Bailey by the arm into the kitchen with me just to feel like I’m accomplishing something” (Dave, 2021: 33). Hannah feels stressed and wants to take decisive action regarding Bailey, she chooses to hold back and not act impulsively. As R.W. Connell explains, Hannah’s behavior reflects a form of complicit masculinity. While she does not actively dominate or oppress others, she still benefits from the existing patriarchal structure.

d. Marginalized

“But, for just a moment, I wish I could be any of them as opposed to the person I am. Hiding in a hotel hallway, eight floors up. Trying to process that her marriage, her life, is a lie (Dave, 2021: 94)” She feels emotionally excluded and marginalized in this context, reflecting the concept of marginalized masculinity, which describes how individuals often men lose access to dominant forms of power. Although Hannah is a woman, this concept still applies, as she assumes a masculine social role. The line “hiding in a hotel hallway” suggests a state of isolation, powerlessness, and exclusion from others. These traits are typically associated with marginalized masculinity and indicate a failure to conform to expectations of power, control, or influence. Hannah experiences an identity crisis, expressed through her wish to be “anybody but herself”, highlighting her inability to fulfill the role she once believed was right.

2. Owen’s Masculinities

a. Hegemony

“The other reason someone creates a false identity, which is the working theory here, is that he’s involved in some sort of criminal activity,” he says. “And he ran to avoid trouble, to start a new life, to protect his family. But, almost across the board, the criminal gets in trouble again, which is his undoing.” (Dave, 2021: 119) One of the core tenets of hegemonic masculinity is that men are socially positioned as protectors and are responsible for the safety of their families. Owen creates a false identity and disappears not out of weakness, but as a means to protect his loved ones. He makes a very difficult decision abandoning his life and identity to ensure the safety of his family.

b. Subordinate

“He lay down, again, put his hand on my stomach. And I could feel him relax again. I could feel him come back to me. So I didn’t want to press him. I didn’t want to press him right then on what he’d almost chosen to share” (Dave, 2021: 73). In the sentence “So I didn’t want to press him. I didn’t want to press him right then on what he’d almost chosen to share,” Owen does not control the conversation or the situation, and Hannah gives him space. This shows Owen’s role as the more vulnerable or emotionally centered partner in the relationship at that time. Owen demonstrates subordinate masculinity through his tenderness, emotional dependence, and openness to intimacy. Contrary to hegemonic

standards of masculinity, he is more passive and receptive to his partner's emotional support.

c. Complicit

² “And I picture Owen standing behind me, leaning down to whisper in my ear, Wait it out. That’s what he says when Bailey is dismissive of me. Wait it out. Meaning — she’ll come around one day. Also meaning — she’s leaving for college in two and a half short years” (Dave, 2021: 22). In the quotation above, even though Owen is not physically present in the story, his wife Hannah suddenly imagines his presence when she is in conflict with Bailey and this is something Owen always does when he is with his family. The quote explains that Owen handles the tension between Hannah and Bailey gently and patiently. Owen advises Hannah to “wait,” showing his belief that their relationship will improve over time rather than imposing his authority as a husband or stepfather. From this perspective, Owen does not actively challenge traditional gender norms, nor does he reinforce hegemonic masculine dominance. Instead, his approach reflects complicit masculinity.

d. Marginalized

“But I think Avett was looking for an angle. He wanted someone he could control, if it turned out he needed that control. And it turned out he did (Dave, 2021: 201)”. Hannah finds out what really happens to her husband, Owen, who works at The Shop and becomes involved in a case of embezzlement. Avett exploits his employees, especially Owen. This information is revealed by Carl, Owen’s close friend. Coercion and oppression reflect a power dynamic where someone in a dominant position holds control, while those beneath them are marginalized. In this structure, Owen is merely used as a pawn by Avett and does not have full control over the situation at The Shop. The phrase “someone he could control” shows that Owen is not the one in power but someone who is prepared to be used. The words “if it turned out he needed that control” further indicate that Owen is positioned as a protector who is ready to sacrifice himself if necessary. This confirms Owen’s marginalized position, as he has no real power over his own fate within Avett’s power structure.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis from each chapter described above, it concludes that masculinity is reflected and takes various forms in the characters of Hannah and Owen in the novel *The Last Thing He Told Me*. Although masculinity is traditionally associated with male roles, women who are considered non-dominant can also adopt masculine roles. The way individuals express masculine roles is influenced primarily by society, culture, and social views. For example, Hannah works as a carpenter, a job typically seen by society as men’s work. Behind this, Hannah’s character expresses masculine roles due to a difficult background in her family and social environment. The types of masculinity such as hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized appear in both Owen and Hannah due to similar backgrounds: Hannah is left by her parents, and Owen leaves his family for their safety. Traits like leadership, responsibility, and strength are shared by both characters. This study also emphasizes that although Connell’s four types of masculinity are explicitly designed to describe male social structures, the idea that masculinity is

socially constructed allows for an analysis of female characters who perform masculine roles. Therefore, the female character in this novel is not classified under hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, or marginalized masculinity, but is analyzed based on how she performs masculine practices within her social context, using the gender relation framework. In conclusion, both male and female characters in *The Last Thing He Told Me* demonstrate masculinity, especially Owen and Hannah. Although masculinity is usually associated with men, Hannah demonstrates masculine roles through qualities such as leadership, responsibility, and resilience. Family background, culture, and societal perspectives influence how these characters express masculinity. Hannah and Owen exhibit characteristics of hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalize masculinity stemming from family trauma and responsibility. Thus, masculinity does not belong only to men but can be reflected by anyone who adopts strong, dominant, and responsible values in the face of social and family pressure.

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