

DOMINATION, DECEPTION, AND DESTRUCTION: TOXIC MASCULINITY IN DELIA OWENS' *WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING*

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ABSTRACT

Toxic masculinity remains a persistent issue in society, shaping harmful patterns of behavior and reinforcing gender inequalities across various social and cultural settings. The study examines how toxic masculine behaviors are represented in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens. Using Makhanya's (2023) theory on the hazardous effects of masculinity as a framework, the study focuses on the various forms of toxic masculinity and their impacts on the characters. The findings reveal four types of toxic masculine behaviors in the novel: overcompensation through risky behavior, ineffective conflict resolution strategies, domestic abuse and power dynamics, and sexual assault. Among these, domestic abuse and power dynamics emerge as the most dominant form. The analysis highlights how male characters embody these harmful traits to assert dominance and control, perpetuating cycles of violence and trauma. In conclusion, the novel suggests that toxic masculinity can operate as a deeply rooted cultural problem, reinforcing patriarchal structures and leaving lasting emotional scars on its victims. By portraying how male characters in the novel use control, violence, and manipulation to assert dominance, the narrative highlights how toxic masculine behaviors may contribute to cycles of trauma, fear, and the silencing of women. This portrayal demonstrates that toxic masculinity is not merely an individual flaw but a systemic issue that perpetuates control, violence, and the silencing of women in both private and public spheres.

Keywords: *domestic violence, power dynamics, toxic masculinity*

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INTRODUCTION

Masculinity refers to the set of attributes, behaviors, and roles traditionally associated with being male, often shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts (Arandjelović, 2023). While masculinity itself is not inherently harmful, it can become toxic when certain traits—such as dominance, emotional suppression, aggression, and the rejection of vulnerability—are idealized and enforced as defining characteristics of manhood. Building on this understanding, toxic masculinity can be defined as



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a set of norms and behaviors associated with traditional male gender roles, often emphasizing dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression (Sculos, 2017). Toxic masculinity manifests when societal expectations pressure men to conform to norms that emphasize power and rationalize violence as a means of asserting dominance (Udasmoro, 2022). This construct not only harms men by restricting their emotional expression but also reinforces gender inequalities by legitimizing male control over women. In extreme cases, toxic masculinity contributes to gender-based violence, emotional abuse, and unequal power dynamics between men and women (Gray, 2021).

Toxic masculinity has become a visible and urgent issue in contemporary society, influencing how men are expected to behave and how gender relations unfold in everyday life (Zhao & Roberts, 2025). Stories of emotional suppression, aggression, and dominance often appear not just in news reports or social commentary, but also in personal experiences that many people can relate to, whether in workplaces, schools, relationships, or families. This phenomenon pressures men to conform to rigid ideals of toughness and control, often discouraging vulnerability and empathy. At the same time, it sustains gender inequalities, normalizing behaviors that harm both men and women (Allen, 2025). Despite growing awareness through social movements and public discussions, toxic masculinity remains deeply rooted in cultural expectations, making it a critical issue to explore and address, particularly through the lens of literature.

The consequences of toxic masculinity are far-reaching and often destructive. Men who conform to these ideals may struggle to express their emotions, leading to issues such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Parent et al., 2019). They may also develop unhealthy relationships, using control, aggression, or entitlement as a way to assert their masculinity (Rosida et al., 2022). The effects are not only personal but also societal, as toxic masculinity reinforces structural inequalities and limits opportunities for more progressive gender roles (Siagian, 2021). If not addressed, toxic masculinity can reinforce harmful stereotypes that normalize aggression and violence. The rise of feminist discourse and gender studies has brought increased attention to the issue, yet its impact remains deeply ingrained in cultural narratives, making it a crucial area of academic inquiry (Agung, 2024).

Literature serves as a powerful medium for exploring and critiquing toxic masculinity, as it reflects and challenges societal norms (R. Rahayu et al., 2020). Through narrative storytelling, literature can uncover the implications of toxic masculinity. The study of toxic masculinity in literature is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender dynamics. As movements such as #MeToo and feminist activism continue to challenge systemic sexism, literary analysis provides a means of tracing the roots of these issues in cultural narratives (Urcaregui, 2023). Literary representations of toxic masculinity not only highlight its harmful consequences but also propose alternative forms of masculinity that value gender equality (Hernandez & Macaluso, 2024). Recognizing these alternative models is essential for fostering more equal gender relations.

The novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* provides a reflection of toxic masculinity by demonstrating how domination, deception, and destruction through aggression are presented in the male characters and their interactions. The novel serves as a literary representation of the ways in which toxic masculine behavior reinforces power imbalances, often resulting in manipulation and aggression. This study examines how *Where the Crawdads Sing* reflects and critiques toxic masculinity through the portrayal of male characters who exhibit patterns of domination, deception, and destructive behavior. The research is guided by the following questions: How is toxic masculinity manifested through the actions and relationships of male characters in the novel? What are the consequences of these behaviors on the female protagonist, and how does the novel critique them? Using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, this study analyzes selected passages that illustrate emotional manipulation, physical violence, and gendered power dynamics, interpreted through the framework of hazardous effects of masculinity (Makhanya, 2023). By exploring toxic masculinity in this context, the study contributes to discussions of gender and literary studies by demonstrating how fiction reflects and challenges harmful social behaviors. This research highlights the importance of literature in fostering a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and encouraging more critical engagement with gender representations in literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into the origins of male aggression and violent behavior in the society reveals that such conduct is often driven by the pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021). These expectations dictate that a man should be physically strong, protect and provide for his family, adhere to his principles, engage in male-dominated activities, and achieve success in all endeavors (Eisend, 2019). When a man's views regarding masculinity yield detrimental effects on himself and people around him, this phenomenon is referred to as toxic masculinity (Kupers, 2005). Male behaviors linked to toxic masculinity include intense competition, insensitivity or disregard for the experiences and emotions of others, a constant need to show dominance and control, a strong tendency for violence, and the marginalization and oppression of women (de Boise, 2019).

Toxic masculinity has been explored across various literary and media texts, with scholars frequently examining how patriarchal values shape harmful male behaviors and gender dynamics. Ayuretno & Kinasih (2024), in their study of the TV series *Euphoria*, highlight the representation of toxic masculinity through the character Nate Jacobs, who embodies dominance, control, emotional repression, and insecurity. Using Kupers' toxic masculinity theory, they analyze how teenage male aggression becomes a form of asserting masculinity within a high school setting. Waruwu & Wahyuni (2023), through their analysis of Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*, emphasize the cyclical nature of domestic abuse and male dominance. Their research, grounded in Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, identifies how toxic traits manifest in romantic relationships through manipulation, control, and violence. Similarly, Rahayu et al., (2022) examine the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its*

Shell, focusing on the intersection of toxic masculinity and postcolonial patriarchy in Afghan society. Their study demonstrates how deeply entrenched gender expectations normalize male violence and female subjugation.

In literary texts with darker psychological themes, Arini & Nirmalawati (2025) explore toxic masculinity in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Their analysis reveals how masculine traits such as violence, alcoholism, and emotional instability are portrayed through Gothic male figures, reflecting internalized oppression and dominance. Meanwhile, Nurfitriah et al. (2025) conduct a detailed analysis of *The Power of the Dog*, showing how the protagonist, Phil Burbank, embodies traits such as domination, homophobia, misogyny, and emotional violence. Applying Kupers' theory, they highlight the psychological toll toxic masculinity takes on both the perpetrator and those around him. Shifting to a digital context, Anwary & Istiadah (2024) explore how masculinity is represented and reconstructed on Instagram through the account @Thegentlemanrising. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, their study reveals how social media content can either reinforce or resist toxic masculinity, particularly among younger male audiences.

These studies collectively highlight toxic masculinity across genres and media forms—ranging from teen dramas and romantic fiction to Gothic literature, film, and digital platforms. However, a clear research gap remains in the literary examination of toxic masculinity from the perspective of a female protagonist who experiences psychological and physical harm as a result of male control. Existing studies tend to foreground the male characters' internal struggles or the surface-level enactments of toxic traits, while neglecting how those traits are experienced and interpreted by female characters in contemporary fiction. Moreover, the intersection of toxic masculinity with themes of abandonment, social exclusion, and emotional manipulation, especially in natural or rural settings, is rarely addressed.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing toxic masculinity in Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018), a novel that centers on the life of Kya Clark, a marginalized female protagonist. Unlike previous works that focus on male-centered narratives, this study foregrounds the victim's perspective, showing how toxic masculinity manifests not only in physical aggression but also in more covert forms such as emotional abandonment, deception, and social intimidation. By applying Makhanya's (2023) framework on the hazardous effects of masculinity and conducting a thematic analysis of the text, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of how fiction critiques masculine power structures and their long-term effects on female agency. The novel's unique setting in the marshes of North Carolina further enriches this analysis, revealing how masculinity is shaped not only by gender expectations but also by isolation, poverty, and societal judgment. This research offers conceptual novelty by linking literary form, gendered trauma, and social critique, ultimately demonstrating literature's role in challenging normalized patterns of harm.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Makhanya (2023), toxic masculinity has been associated with numerous harmful consequences that affect men and those around them. These established gender norms often contribute to a range of negative outcomes, shaping behaviors and expectations in ways that can be detrimental. Presented below are several examples which illustrate the negative impacts of toxic masculinity:

Overcompensation through Risky Behavior

Men who embody toxic masculinity often go to great lengths to distance themselves from anything perceived as feminine. This avoidance stems from a deep-seated fear of being associated with femininity (Sanders et al., 2024). This overcompensation often manifests in aggression and an unwillingness to back down when their sense of masculinity is challenged. Tredinnick et al. (2023) argue that men who strongly adhere to rigid masculine norms often subscribe to the belief that heterosexuality is a defining aspect of their identity. In this context, frequent sexual encounters become a way to validate their masculinity, sometimes leading to reckless behavior. Research shows that men with more traditional views of masculinity are more likely to engage in unsafe sexual practices (Merdassa, 2024), excessive alcohol consumption (Yang & Sohn, 2022), and reckless driving (Brady et al., 2018), putting themselves and others at risk.

Competition Driven by Limited Resources

In situations where resources are scarce, men's sense of masculinity can become particularly fragile. Men often express frustration or resentment toward women when they perceive their masculinity is being undermined—especially in cases where women become the primary earners or achieve higher career positions. This shift, driven by women's increasing participation in traditionally male-dominated fields, has led scholars to describe the phenomenon as “threatened masculinity” (Jones et al., 2022). As a response to these societal changes, men have increasingly focused on physical appearance, with muscularity becoming one of the few remaining symbols of traditional masculinity. Among adolescent boys, the desire for a more muscular physique is often linked to support for rigid masculine ideals. However, body image concerns among men can lead to negative psychological effects, including depression, low self-esteem, unhealthy weight control practices, and even steroid use (Lennon & Johnson, 2021).

Beyond body image, competition among men remains a deeply ingrained expectation. From an early age, men are encouraged to pursue dominance, power, wealth, and success, often framed as essential to securing resources and attracting women. Failure to meet these competitive expectations can be seen as a sign of weakness or cowardice. A man who possesses both wealth and women—becomes an idealized standard of masculinity. In this framework, women are often objectified, as their dehumanization reinforces men's perceived social status and reaffirms their dominance (Bareket & Shnabel, 2020).

Ineffective Conflict Resolution Strategies

Men who adopt traditional masculine norms often struggle with effective conflict resolution. Their methods tend to be driven by anger, withdrawal, denial, and avoidance, with little regard for others' needs (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021). Unlike women, they are more likely to get into conflicts over issues related to status and power. They deliberately avoid conflict resolution approaches that might be seen as feminine, favoring traits such as toughness, dominance, and even the use of violence as key markers of masculinity (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). Furthermore, men who have deeply internalized traditional masculine roles often view themselves as sole providers for their families. They believe they must remain self-reliant and avoid being cared for by others. This mindset leaves men with inadequate coping mechanisms for handling internal struggles or resolving conflicts with others. Without healthy strategies, they are more likely to resort to aggression or violence when faced with tension or disputes.

Domestic Abuse and Power Dynamics

In patriarchal societies, men are traditionally associated with the public sphere, while women are confined to the private sphere. This deeply ingrained patriarchal system socializes men to adopt notions of authority and control, where violence and dominance are used to assert and affirm masculinity. Under this framework, men are encouraged to be dominant and aggressive, while women are conditioned to be submissive (Mshweshwe, 2020). According to Hopkins et al. (2021), women are frequently viewed as less assertive and unreliable because the society has been conditioned to believe that leadership and authority are inherently male roles. The perception of women as lacking the qualities deemed necessary for success serves as the foundation for gender bias in many assessment and decision-making processes. Men often justify controlling and coercive behavior by portraying women as incapable of self-regulation. This control is sometimes framed as an act of protection, with men restricting women's movements to "safeguard" their physical safety and preserve their reputations. However, these behaviors are ultimately strategies for domination and oppression (Başkan & Alkan, 2023).

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault and rape often occur within relationships due to the unequal power dynamics between men and women. The link between toxic masculinity and sexual violence has been well-documented, with many scholars attributing it to men's desire for dominance, power, and the need to punish women whom they perceive as emasculating them (Fahlberg & Pepper, 2016). Society often blames female rape victims due to deeply ingrained gender norms that associate women with submission and passivity. Victim-

blaming narratives suggest that women are somehow responsible for the assault, whether through their behavior, clothing, or choices. This continues a culture of silence, where many female rape survivors feel too ashamed or afraid to report their experiences (Hamid, 2021). This form of violence reinforces the perpetrator's power and dominance while stripping the victim of autonomy and dignity. Female survivors frequently endure intense stigma and shame, rooted in societal perceptions that frame them as "damaged" or "tainted," which further isolates them and discourages them from seeking support (Catton et al., 2023).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using thematic analysis to explore the representation of toxic masculinity in Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 2018. The story is set in the marshes of North Carolina and follows the life of Kya Clark, a young girl abandoned by her family and grew up in isolation. Through its exploration of survival, gender inequality, and social exclusion, the novel presents various male characters whose behaviors reflect toxic masculine norms. The novel was selected as the data source due to its portrayal of complex gender dynamics and various aspects of toxic masculinity through its male characters. The data was collected through intensive reading of the novel, focusing on passages that depict emotional manipulation, aggression, domination, and other traits associated with toxic masculinity. Relevant sections were highlighted, and detailed notes were taken to document instances where toxic masculine traits were evident. Once the data were gathered, they were analyzed using the theory of hazardous effects of masculinity proposed by Makhanya (2023). This theoretical framework provided the basis for interpreting the data and understanding the novel's portrayal of harmful masculine behaviors and their consequences. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns across the narrative and to interpret their social implications. This method allowed for a deeper understanding of how toxic masculinity functions within the novel and how it impacts the characters, particularly the female protagonist.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* reveals that toxic masculinity manifests in three major patterns: domination, deception, and destruction. Domination is portrayed through male characters asserting power and control over women by using physical violence, emotional manipulation, and social intimidation. Deception appears in the form of manipulation, broken promises, and emotional betrayal, where male characters use deceit to maintain dominance over vulnerable individuals. Destruction is reflected in the characters' violent and aggressive actions, including physical assault, emotional abuse, and acts that directly cause harm to others. These behaviors demonstrate how domination, deception, and

destruction intertwine to create systemic patterns of harm, leaving lasting impacts on the novel's characters, particularly Kya.

The analysis further explores how domination, deception, and destruction are manifested through specific toxic masculine behaviors in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. These behaviors are categorized into four distinct forms based on Makhanya's (2023) framework on the hazardous effects of masculinity: overcompensation through risky behavior, ineffective conflict resolution strategies, domestic abuse and power dynamics, and sexual assault. Among these, power dynamics and abuse emerge as the most dominant form, reflected primarily in the actions of Pa and Chase, who assert control and dominance over Kya through aggression, violence, and manipulation. Overcompensation through risky behavior is evident in Chase's reckless behavior, driven by his desire to maintain dominance and social status. Ineffective conflict resolution strategies are reflected in Tate's decision to leave Kya without explanation, only to return years later and apologize after realizing his feelings had not changed. This abandonment deeply affects Kya, reinforcing her mistrust and sense of isolation. Domestic violence is central to Kya's early life, with physical and emotional abuse from her father, shaping her perception of relationships and safety. The cycle of abuse continues with Chase, whose power and privilege allow him to escalate his control into sexual assault, further emphasizing the destructive consequences of toxic masculinity. These findings highlight how these behaviors are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern of patriarchal control that leaves lasting psychological trauma.

While both Pa and Chase embody toxic masculinity, their forms of control manifest in different ways, revealing varied expressions of patriarchal power. Pa's dominance is rooted in overt violence and intimidation, characterized by physical abuse and emotional neglect that destabilize Kya's early life and sense of security. In contrast, Chase exercises a more subtle form of control, using charm, social status, and deception to manipulate Kya into emotional dependence. Unlike Pa's direct aggression, Chase's toxic masculinity is more hidden, concealed behind promises of love and social validation before escalating into coercion and sexual assault. These contrasting behaviors demonstrate that toxic masculinity can operate across a range of actions, from obvious abuse to quiet manipulation, while producing equally harmful consequences. Tate, however, represents a different pattern. His early decision to leave Kya without explanation reflects emotional withdrawal, a behavior often shaped by masculine discomfort with vulnerability. Yet his eventual return, marked by sincere remorse and a willingness to reconnect, indicates a shift toward a more empathetic and self-reflective form of masculinity. This change suggests that while toxic masculinity is present in the novel, there is also room for transformation. The differing portrayals of Pa, Chase, and Tate show that masculinity in the narrative is not fixed but can develop through personal growth and moral awareness, highlighting the possibility of moving away from harmful gender norms. The detailed discussion is presented as follows.

Overcompensation through Risky Behavior

Men who embody toxic masculinity tend to reject anything associated with femininity due to an underlying fear of appearing weak, which drives them toward aggressive and risky behavior to prove their masculinity. This need for validation often leads to risky behavior which poses serious risks to themselves and others.

Data 1

"Sneaking out to her shack, running through the dark and tagging it, had become a regular tradition, an initiation for boys becoming men. What did that say about men? Some of them were already making bets about who would be the first to get her cherry." (Owens, 2018, p. 113)

The excerpt in data 1 reflects overcompensation through risky behavior. The boys in the story engage in reckless activities, sneaking into Kya's shack under the cover of darkness, as part of a ritual that serves as a rite of passage into manhood. This initiation highlights their desire to prove their masculinity through bold and daring actions. The conversation about *"who would be the first to get her cherry"* underscores the toxic masculine trait of viewing sexual conquest as a way to validate masculinity. This kind of talk dehumanizes Kya, reducing her to a target for competition among the boys. Such behavior is often driven by the belief that frequent sexual encounters and dominance over women are essential markers of traditional masculinity. This scene vividly illustrates how these boys internalize and act out harmful masculine norms, using risky and predatory behavior as a way to assert power and status among their peers.

Data 2

"Just last week Tate had watched Chase, in his white dinner jacket, at the Christmas gala, dancing with different women. The dance, like most Barkley Cove events, had been held at the high school gymnasium. As 'Wooly Bully' struggled from a too-small hi-fi set up under the basketball hoop, Chase whirled a brunette. When 'Mr. Tambourine Man' began, he left the dance floor and the brunette, and shared pulls of Wild Turkey from his Tar Heels flask with other former jocks. Tate was close by chatting with two of his old high school teachers and heard Chase say, 'Yeah, she's wild as a she-fox in a snare. Just what you'd expect from a marsh minx. Worth every bit a' the gas money.'" (Owens, 2018, p. 176)

The excerpt in data 2 provides a clear example of toxic masculinity, specifically under the categories of overcompensation through risky behavior. Chase's actions and language reflect his attempt to assert dominance, reinforce his status, and objectify Kya in front of his peers. His behavior embodies the toxic masculine traits of entitlement, aggression, and the dehumanization of women for the purpose of enhancing his own reputation. Chase's public boasting about his sexual relationship with Kya, calling her a *"marsh minx"* and

comparing her to a wild animal, reduces her to a mere conquest, a symbol of his control and power. The crude statement, *“Worth every bit a’ the gas money,”* not only objectifies Kya but also trivializes their relationship, framing it as nothing more than a transaction for his pleasure. Such language reinforces the toxic notion that women exist for male gratification and that a man’s status can be elevated by his sexual conquests, especially when it involves women who are seen as vulnerable or different from societal norms.

Chase’s behavior at the Christmas gala also reflects overcompensation through risky behavior. He moves effortlessly from dancing with multiple women to drinking with his former jock friends, showing off his Tar Heels flask and embracing reckless indulgence. His need to perform and maintain his “alpha male” persona aligns with Makhanya’s theory of men engaging in risky behavior to validate their masculinity. Drinking in public and making derogatory comments about Kya serve as social cues to reinforce his dominance in the male hierarchy. Ultimately, this scene underscores the broader impact of toxic masculinity on both its direct victims and the social environments that enable it. Chase’s actions are not isolated; they are part of a larger system of male entitlement and dominance.

Ineffective Conflict Resolution Strategies

Men who adhere to masculine norms often struggle to resolve conflicts. They act out of anger, withdrawal, denial, and avoidance without considering others. This mentality makes men unprepared to handle internal battles or external disputes. They are more likely to use violence or hostility in conflicts without adequate coping mechanisms.

Data 3

“Oh, really! YOU are the one who left me, who didn’t come back when you promised, who never came back. You are the one who never wrote to explain why or even if you were alive or dead. You didn’t have the nerve to break up with me. You were not man enough to face me. Just disappeared. You come floating in here after all these years . . . You’re worse than he is. He might not be perfect, but you’re worse by a long shot.” (Owens, 2018, p. 175)

The excerpt in data 3 reveals a critical moment where Kya expresses her deep anger and hurt towards Tate, confronting him for abandoning her without explanation. This interaction aligns with the ineffective conflict resolution strategies category, which highlights how toxic masculine norms often prevent men from addressing emotional situations openly and honestly. Kya’s words, particularly *“You didn’t have the nerve to break up with me. You were not man enough to face me,”* expose Tate’s emotional avoidance, a behavior commonly associated with traditional masculine ideals. Instead of confronting their relationship’s challenges, Tate disappears, choosing silence and absence over emotional vulnerability. According to Makhanya (2023), men influenced by these toxic ideals often see vulnerability or open

communication as weaknesses, opting for avoidance and emotional detachment rather than resolving conflict directly. This behavior leaves women like Kya in emotional ambiguity, forced to process abandonment without closure. By comparing Tate to Chase and declaring, “*You’re worse than he is,*” Kya draws attention to the emotional damage caused by Tate’s abandonment, suggesting that psychological betrayal can be just as painful, if not worse, than physical harm.

In this context, Kya’s outburst serves as a powerful critique of emotional cowardice, which is identified as a consequence of toxic masculinity’s suppression of vulnerability and emotional expression. Rather than being a moment of weakness, Kya’s confrontation represents a reclaiming of her voice and agency. Her anger is not irrational but justified, fueled by a desire for accountability and an acknowledgment of the emotional harm Tate caused. Ultimately, this scene exemplifies how ineffective conflict resolution, rooted in emotional avoidance and silence, can cause lasting emotional trauma. Tate’s failure to confront Kya openly and honestly reflects the toxic masculine tendency to withdraw from difficult emotional situations, leaving unresolved wounds that resurface years later.

Domestic Abuse and Power Dynamics

In patriarchal societies, men are associated to the public sphere, while women are assigned to the private sphere. This patriarchal system teaches men to embrace authority and control, where violence and dominance are used to reinforce masculinity. This framework promotes male dominance and aggression, while conditioning women to be submissive.

Data 4

“Pa had beat all of them, mostly when he was drunk. He’d be all right for a few days at a time—they would eat chicken stew together; once they flew a kite on the beach. Then: drink, shout, hit. Details of some of the bouts were sharp in her mind. Once Pa shoved Ma into the kitchen wall, hitting her until she slumped to the floor. Kya, sobbing for him to quit, touched his arm. He grabbed Kya by the shoulders, shouted for her to pull down her jeans and underpants, and bent her over the kitchen table. In one smooth, practiced motion he slid the belt from his pants and whipped her. Of course, she remembered the hot pain slicing her bare bottom, but curiously, she recalled the jeans pooled around her skinny ankles in more vivid detail. And Ma crumpled into the corner by the cookstove, crying.” (Owens, 2018, p. 66)

The excerpt in data 4 illustrates the harmful effects of toxic masculinity, particularly in relation to domestic abuse and power dynamics. Kya’s father, Pa, embodies the deeply ingrained patriarchal values that equate masculinity with control, power, and violence. His unpredictable behavior, shifting from moments of calm, such as eating chicken stew and flying a kite, to sudden violent outbursts, creates an unstable and unsafe environment. This cycle of

temporary peace followed by abuse conditions Kya and her family to live in constant fear, never knowing when violence will erupt again. The scene highlights how Pa asserts his dominance through physical punishment, leaving a lasting impact on both Kya and her mother. The gendered power dynamics in this scene are particularly significant. Kya's mother's reaction further illustrates how women in such environments are stripped of agency, even in moments of crisis. Rather than being a place of safety, the domestic sphere becomes a site of oppression and fear, where violence is the dominant force that maintains control and reinforces Pa's toxic authority. This traumatic experience has a profound effect on Kya's understanding of relationships and trust. Growing up in an environment where violence and emotional suppression are normalized shapes her perception of herself and the world around her. For Kya, the memory of this event becomes a defining moment that contributes to her emotional isolation and distrust of others, showing how the consequences of toxic masculinity extend far beyond the immediate act of violence.

Data 5

Ma and Kya were leaving the kitchen with their baskets of eggs and chocolate bunnies from the Five and Dime, just as Pa rounded the corner from the hall.

Yanking Kya's Easter bonnet from her head and waving it around, he screamed at Ma, "Whar ya git the money for these fancy thangs? Bonnets and shiny leather shoes? Them prissy eggs and chocolate bunnies? Say. Whar?"

"Come on, Jake, please hush. It's Easter; this is for the kids."

He shoved Ma backward. "Ya out whoring, that's what. That how you git the money? Tell me now." He grabbed Ma by the arms and shook her so hard her face seemed to rattle around her eyes, which stayed very still and wide open. (Owens, 2018, p. 203)

The excerpt in data 5 provides a striking example of how men's insecurity and toxic masculinity intertwine to create patterns of abuse and control. According to Makhanya's (2023) theory on toxic masculinity, men who feel disempowered, especially in their roles as providers, are more likely to resort to violence and coercion to reassert their dominance. Kya's father embodies this insecurity-driven aggression when he lashes out at Ma after seeing her with Easter gifts for their children, items he perceives as symbols of financial independence beyond his control. Pa's inability to fulfill the traditional role of a provider, due to his alcoholism, irresponsibility, and financial struggles, creates a deep sense of inadequacy and wounded masculinity.

In patriarchal systems, men are often socialized to equate their worth with their ability to control resources and maintain financial authority within

the household. When Ma brings home “fancy” items such as Easter bonnets, shoes, and chocolate bunnies, things Pa likely could not afford to provide, it threatens his fragile sense of masculinity. Rather than confronting his own shortcomings, Pa projects his insecurities onto Ma, accusing her of obtaining the money through immoral means, specifically through “whoring.” His accusation is rooted in an effort to demean and disempower Ma in response to his perceived loss of control. This tactic reflects a classic behavior within abusive dynamics, where insecure men seek to reassert power by degrading women, framing their independence or success as morally corrupt or dishonorable. According to Makhanya (2023), this reaction is common in men who experience feelings of inadequacy, particularly in situations where traditional gender roles are challenged or reversed.

The physical violence that follows—the shaking and shoving—serves as a physical manifestation of Pa’s emotional turmoil and need for control. The fact that he escalates from verbal abuse to physical assault after Ma tries to diffuse the situation with a plea to continue further illustrates his volatility and fragile ego. Rather than seeing Ma’s response as a reasonable attempt to protect the children and preserve a moment of joy, Pa interprets it as defiance, triggering a violent response to reassert dominance. His use of force is not just about punishment but about reaffirming his authority in a situation where he feels powerless. In summary, this scene is a powerful depiction of how toxic masculinity and male insecurity can manifest through control, degradation, and violence. Pa’s inability to accept his own failure as a provider leads him to weaponize his power against Ma, using accusations and physical force to mask his feelings of inadequacy. The emotional and psychological impact on both Ma and Kya is profound, illustrating how men’s insecurities, when left unchecked, can devastate those around them.

Data 6

“In the winter of 1956, when Kya was ten, Pa came hobbling to the shack less and less often. Weeks passed with no whiskey bottle on the floor, no body sprawled on the bed, no Monday money. She kept expecting to see him limping through the trees, toting his poke. One full moon, then another had passed since she’d seen him. “I guess he’s gone for good.” She bit her lips until her mouth turned white. It wasn’t like the pain when Ma left—in fact, she struggled to mourn him at all. But being completely alone was a feeling so vast it echoed...” (Owens, 2018, p. 72)

The excerpt in data 6 illustrates domestic abuse and power dynamics. Kya’s father, Pa, embodies the toxic masculine traits associated with control, neglect, and emotional absence, which are common in patriarchal systems where men hold authority in the household. His irregular presence and gradual abandonment reflect an emotionally abusive pattern, leaving Kya in an environment of instability and deep loneliness. His control over financial resources and neglect of his responsibilities place Kya in a vulnerable and dependent position, reinforcing the unequal power dynamics between them. In patriarchal societies, men are often positioned as dominant figures who

control the household while emotionally withdrawing from caregiving roles. Kya's experience reflects how this imbalance leaves her not only emotionally unstable but also deeply affected by the absence of meaningful support and care. This exemplifies Makhanya's theory that toxic masculinity and rigid power dynamics have far-reaching consequences, especially for those in subordinate positions within the family structure.

Data 7

"Finally, almost a year later, Ma became hysterical and told Rosemary she remembered she had left her children. Rosemary helped her write a letter to Pa asking if she could come get us and bring us to live with her in New Orleans. He wrote back that if she returned or contacted any of us, he would beat us unrecognizable. She knew he was capable of such a thing." (Owens, 2018, p. 207)

The excerpt in data 7 exemplifies domestic abuse and power dynamics described in Makhanya's (2023) theory. Pa's response to Ma's letter is a stark representation of how toxic masculinity relies on control, intimidation, and violence to maintain power. His threat to beat the children "unrecognizable" is a chilling display of coercion, reinforcing his dominance and ensuring that Ma remains helpless and cut off from her children. Pa's actions are not just an expression of personal cruelty but a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal norms where men are socialized to assert control over their families through fear and physical violence. In this case, Pa weaponizes the children's well-being to punish and silence Ma, knowing she will prioritize their safety over her desire to reunite with them. His response serves as a reminder that his power over the family extends beyond his physical presence.

Ma's fear and her decision not to return reveal how toxic masculine behaviors often leave women with no viable options. The threat of extreme violence traps her in a state of emotional paralysis, forcing her into a painful decision to abandon her children to protect them from further harm. This is consistent with Makhanya's theory that toxic masculinity creates situations where women are left isolated and powerless, unable to assert their rights or protect their families without risking severe consequences. This scene also highlights the long-term psychological impact on Kya, who grows up feeling abandoned, not fully understanding the dangerous circumstances her mother faced. The emotional void left by Ma's absence is a direct consequence of Pa's abusive control, illustrating how toxic masculinity affects not just the immediate victims of violence but also shapes the lives of the next generation.

Data 8

"It hadn't been a coincidence that Chase slyly mentioned marriage as bait, immediately bedded her, then dropped her for someone else. She knew from her studies that males go from one female to the next, so why had she fallen for this man?" (Owens, 2018, p. 188)

The excerpt in data 8 highlights power dynamics as described in Makhanya's (2023) theory. Chase's actions reflect a deliberate manipulation of Kya's emotions through promises of marriage, used as "bait" to achieve his goal of seducing her. This calculated behavior underscores the toxic masculine trait of viewing relationships as conquests rather than genuine connections, reducing Kya to a temporary object of desire before moving on to his next target. The mention of "*immediately bedded her, then dropped her*" captures the essence of performative masculinity, where sexual conquests are used to validate male identity and status. Chase's behavior aligns with Makhanya's assertion that men who embody toxic masculinity often seek to assert dominance through frequent sexual encounters, treating these relationships as fleeting and transactional. This pattern reinforces power imbalances, leaving women like Kya emotionally vulnerable.

Kya's reflection—questioning why she fell for him despite knowing the mating behavior of males in the natural world—reveals her attempt to rationalize Chase's betrayal through her scientific understanding of nature. This internal conflict reflects the broader impact of toxic masculinity on victims, who often blame themselves for being deceived. Makhanya's theory emphasizes that toxic masculine behaviors leave women not only emotionally hurt but also questioning their own judgment and worth, as seen in Kya's self-reproach. Ultimately, this scene illustrates how toxic masculinity manifests through manipulation and emotional exploitation, leaving lasting emotional scars on victims. Chase's calculated deception and abrupt abandonment are not isolated acts of selfishness but rather part of a larger pattern of behavior driven by entitlement and a desire for control, reflecting the harmful consequences of toxic masculine norms.

Data 9

"Jumpin', you know how it is. They'll take his side. They'll say I'm just stirring up trouble. Trying to get money out of his parents or something. Think what would happen if one of the girls from Colored Town accused Chase Andrews of assault and attempted rape. They'd do nothing. Zero." Kya's voice became more and more shrill. "It would end in big trouble for that girl. Write-ups in the newspaper. People accusing her of whoring. Well, it'd be the same for me, and you know it. Please promise me you won't tell anybody." (Owens, 2018, p. 267)

The excerpt in data 9 reflects how patriarchal systems and social inequalities silence victims of sexual violence. Kya's words reveal her deep understanding of how gender, social class, and prejudice intersect to perpetuate injustice and protect powerful men like Chase Andrews, while marginalizing and demeaning women who speak out. Kya's fear that no one will believe her and that the community will accuse her of trying to exploit Chase's family highlights the institutionalized bias that favors men in positions of privilege. She draws a parallel between her situation and the even more precarious position of Black women from "Colored Town," underscoring how

societal structures not only fail to protect victims but also actively punish them for seeking justice. Makhanya's theory emphasizes how toxic masculinity thrives within such power imbalances, where men in dominant social roles are shielded from accountability, while women who challenge them face severe backlash.

The reference to and accusations of "whoring" illustrates how victim-blaming narratives are deeply ingrained in society. These narratives frame victims as morally suspect and question their credibility, deterring them from speaking out. Kya's rising panic and insistence that Jumpin' not tell anyone reflect her awareness that her reputation and safety are at stake. Toxic masculinity creates an environment where women are silenced by fear of public shaming and retaliation, leaving them without avenues for justice. This scene powerfully portrays how Kya's silence is not born out of weakness but out of necessity for survival in a community that refuses to hold powerful men accountable. It highlights the emotional burden placed on victims, who are forced to navigate a system stacked against them, knowing that seeking justice may only lead to further harm. This aligns with Makhanya's assertion that the societal structures upholding toxic masculinity not only enable perpetrators but also isolate and silence their victims, leaving them trapped without support

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault in relationships is often driven by unequal power dynamics and toxic masculinity, rooted in men's desire for control and dominance. Victim-blaming narratives, shaped by gender norms that associate women with submission, hold women responsible for the assault through their actions or appearance. This stigma silences survivors, isolates them, and discourages them from seeking help, reinforcing the perpetrator's power while stripping victims of autonomy and dignity.

Data 10

"Let go of me!" She twisted, tried to yank away, but he gripped her with both hands, hurting her arms. He put his mouth on hers and kissed her. She threw her arms up, knocking his hands away. She pulled her head back, hissing, "Don't you dare."

"There's my lynx. Wilder than ever." Grabbing her shoulders, he clipped the back of her knees with one of his legs and pushed her to the ground. Her head bounced hard on the dirt. "I know ya want me," he said, leering.

"No, stop!" she screamed. Kneeling, he jammed his knee in her stomach, knocking the breath from her, as he unzipped his jeans and pulled them down. (Owens, 2018, p. 234)

This excerpt in data 10 vividly illustrates the harmful effects of toxic masculinity, particularly under the categories of sexual assault. Chase's

actions reflect a brutal instance of physical and sexual violence driven by his desire for dominance and control. His use of force and coercion exemplifies how toxic masculinity promotes aggressive behaviors that reduce women to objects for male gratification, disregarding their autonomy and consent. Chase's language and actions reveal a disturbing sense of entitlement and dehumanization. His comment, "*There's my lynx. Wilder than ever,*" trivializes Kya's resistance, reframing her struggle as part of a game and twisting her rejection into an imagined expression of desire. This aligns with Makhanya's (2023) assertion that toxic masculinity often conflates aggression with attraction, leading men to justify violence as a form of affection or validation. When Chase forces Kya to the ground and begins to assault her, it becomes clear that his primary goal is not affection but the complete assertion of power over her.

Chase's physical violence symbolizes his attempt to dominate and silence her. The imbalance of power is stark, with Chase exploiting his physical strength to subdue and humiliate her. Such actions stem from a toxic need to reaffirm masculinity through control and violence, particularly when a woman's independence or refusal threatens man's fragile sense of power. Kya's verbal rejection and physical struggle emphasize her vulnerability within a patriarchal context that normalizes male aggression and silences female voices. Chase's behavior exemplifies broader societal issues where toxic masculine traits—dominance, entitlement, and a refusal to accept rejection—manifest in acts of sexual violence. This kind of behavior reinforces the aggressor's perceived superiority while leaving the victim traumatized, stripped of autonomy and dignity. This moment not only reflects Chase's immediate threat to Kya's physical safety but also foreshadows the long-term emotional trauma she will carry.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of *Where the Crawdads Sing* reveals that toxic masculinity operates as a powerful force that shapes character relationships, reinforces patriarchal control, and causes long-term psychological harm. Through the portrayals of Pa and Chase, the novel demonstrates how behaviors such as emotional manipulation, physical violence, sexual coercion, and male entitlement are used to dominate and silence women, particularly the protagonist, Kya. These actions stem from deep-rooted insecurities and culturally constructed ideals of manhood, illustrating how fragile masculinity often manifests in aggression and control. The consequences of such behaviors are far-reaching, generating cycles of trauma, mistrust, and emotional isolation that limit female agency and reinforce gender inequality. By highlighting the patterns of domination, deception, and destruction, the novel critiques not only individual actions but also the broader cultural norms that sustain toxic masculinity. Literature such as *Where the Crawdads Sing* serves as a crucial site for exposing the emotional and societal costs of rigid gender expectations, prompting readers to reflect on the need for more empathetic, equitable models of masculinity. This study highlights the value of literary analysis in examining how gendered power operates and persists across time

and space. Future research may benefit from exploring how toxic masculinity intersects with other forms of structural inequality, such as race, class, and colonialism, to further uncover the complex ways in which identity, power, and oppression are represented in literature.

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