

Ajo Kawir's Toxic Masculinity Behaviors in Vengeance is Mine, All Other Pay Cash Novel

Ni Kadek Ayu Weda Tantri¹, I Made Perdana Skolastika^{2*}

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages, English Study Program, Mahasaraswati University, Denpasar, Indonesia

Email: ¹wetanno45@gmail.com, ^{2*}perdana.skolastika@unmas.ac.id

(* : coresponding author)

Abstract – Toxic masculinity has been a highly contentious subject in recent years due to the damaging conventional male standards that are placed on men. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyze the representation of toxic masculinity behavior by Ajo Kawir. A qualitative method is used for analyzing the data collected from *Vengeance is Mine, All Other Pay Cash Novel*. The qualitative method is applied to clearly describe the data according to The Man Box Theory: seven pillars of being men proposed by Heilman et al. (2017). The result of this research shows that there are four toxic masculine behaviors of Ajo Kawir depicted in the novel. Those pillars are 1) self-sufficiency 2) physical attractiveness 3) hyper-sexuality 4) power, aggression and control. This study aims to enrich the literary discourse, with a particular focus on the discourse of toxic masculinity. It also aims to inspire a redefinition of masculinity by encouraging the adoption of values such as compassion, kindness, love, mutual respect, and consent by moving away from rigid traditional norms.

Keywords: Ajo Kawir, Toxic Masculinity Behavior, *Vengeance is Mine All Other Pay Cash*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans live by obeying all societies' characteristics and the social construction of gender roles from birth. As a result, even when it is irrelevant to the circumstance and offers no informational advantages, either youngsters or adults automatically and unconsciously group unfamiliar persons by their gender (Bennett et al., 2000; Ito & Urland, 2003). The existence of roles assigned by society to men and women raises gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalized assumptions about people who belong to certain social groupings. Moreover, according to (Ellemers, 2017), a gender stereotype is an oversimplified belief or assumption about the traits, roles, and distinctions that people of a certain gender should exhibit. It maintains the idea that men and women are different and produces prejudices that are generally held about specific qualities or features.

According to gender stereotype theory, men are generally perceived as possessing more power and authority than women (Kachel et al., 2016). They are often expected to fulfill roles as providers, protectors, or heads of households. However, this association can become problematic when masculinity is also linked with traits such as egotism, uncontrolled anger, and aggression. In many cultures, men are viewed as the guardians of society, responsible for defending women and children, particularly in situations that call for physical intervention (Young, 2003). While this expectation might seem noble, it reinforces a rigid and limiting notion of masculinity—one that discourages emotional vulnerability and often promotes dominance and violence. This restrictive and dominant form of masculinity has been conceptualized by scholars as toxic masculinity, frequently illustrated through the metaphor of the “Man Box”. The Man Box represents a set of narrow, socially constructed rules that dictate how “real men” should behave. As Kimmel (2008) explains, boys are taught from a young age that they must conform to these standards—showing toughness, competitiveness, aggression, and sexual dominance—to be accepted as true men. Failing to do so can result in being deemed inadequate or unmanly. This system is maintained through mechanisms of comparison, competition, and performance, enforced by men, for men. The emotional glue that holds it together is shame and the internalized belief of not being man enough. This understanding aligns with the Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men published by the American Psychological Association (2018), which defines toxic masculinity as the adherence to outdated masculine norms that are detrimental to both the individual and those around them. The term toxic masculinity gained popularity in the 1980s, largely through the work of American psychologist Shepherd Bliss, who distinguished between positive and harmful masculine traits, associating the latter with toxic behavior. Further, Kupers (2005:714) categorizes toxic masculinity into four dimensions: violence, male dominance over women, repression of traits

associated with femininity, and the suppression of vulnerable emotions such as fear, sadness, or helplessness.

Conversations surrounding toxic masculinity have become widespread across various fields, including literature. One prominent literary work that engages with this issue is *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, the English translation of Eka Kurniawan's acclaimed novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. The story powerfully highlights toxic masculinity through its protagonist, Ajo Kawir. This study seeks to explore the portrayal of Ajo Kawir's toxic masculine behaviors in greater depth. The topic is chosen due to the significance of toxic masculinity as a pressing social concern in today's world—it imposes restrictive, outdated expectations on men, fostering a damaging and unrealistic image of ideal masculinity.

To develop this scientific study, five previous studies have been reviewed. The studies were respectively conducted by (Rahayu et al., 2022), (Rosida et al., 2022), (Wahyudi, 2022), (Sinta & Siagian, 2021), and (Jufanny & Girsang, 2020). These studies found some types of toxic masculinity behaviors from the male characters of the literary works in the form of subordination to women, domination, homophobia, emotional control, and violence. All these actions are carried out with various motives: to maintain self-esteem; to mark territory; to show power, to prove their masculine side; to obey society's role regarding ideal manhood. Then the data involves numerous normalization practices of such toxicity, showing how toxic masculinity has long been subtly integrated and normalized within everyday social structures. Although the topic has been addressed in earlier research, this study sets itself apart through the use of a different theoretical perspective. Earlier research either relied on Terry A. Kupers' (2005) concept of toxic masculinity or Janet Salzman Chafetz's (1978) theory of masculinity, whereas this recent study used *The Man Box* published by Pramundo-US and Axe which contained in the book titled "The Man Box: A Study of Being Young Man in the UK and Mexico" from Heilman et al., 2017. The theory was chosen as it provides seven pillars of being man, that is a set of beliefs within and across society that place pressure on men. This research seeks to contribute to literary discourse on toxic masculinity. Furthermore, it aspires to encourage the rejection of conventional masculine norms, creating more space for men to openly express themselves.

2. METHOD

Descriptive qualitative is applied to this research. According to Bogdan & Biklen (1982), in descriptive qualitative research, information is gathered using words or images rather than statistics. The results of the study are presented using the information in the form of quotes from written materials, field observations, interviews, or extracts from video recordings, voice recordings, or digital communications. The researcher needs a research plan to carry out such a study. The term "research design" refers to strategies, methodologies, and specific processes for gathering and analyzing data (Creswell, 2009). The research design of this study can be seen in figure 1.

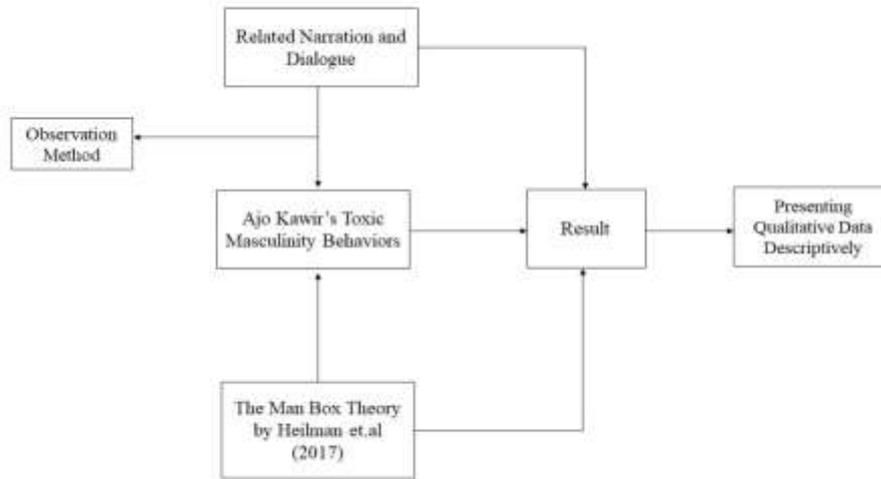


Figure 1. Research Design of the Study

The data presented in this study were taken from a long novel entitled *Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* by Eka Kurniawan. The protagonist, Ajo Kawir's Toxic Masculinity Behaviors was the object of the analysis. In the process of collecting the data, the researchers used the observation method, specifically a non-participatory to obtain detailed information. There are four steps in collecting the data as follows: (1) Reading *Vengeance is Mine, All Other Pay Cash* novel repeatedly. (2) Understanding the content of the novel. (3) Note-taking and marking the point by identifying all narrations and utterances of Ajo Kawir in the novel to get the data. (4) Selecting and organizing the data concerning the problem in this research. The data was described factually, systematically, and scientifically following *The Man Box Theory* from Heilman et al. (2017). The theory focused on 17 Gender Equitable Men Scale (GEM Scale) of the man box that is organized into 7 thematic pillars: 1) self-sufficiency and emotional control 2) acting tough and taking risk 3) physical attractiveness 4) rigid masculine gender roles 5) heterosexuality and homophobia, 6) hypersexuality 7) power, aggression and control. The narration is used to describe the data analysis qualitatively.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a detailed overview of the types of toxic masculinity behaviors found in the character of Ajo Kawir, the protagonist of *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*. The classification in this table is based on the “Man Box” framework, which outlines seven core pillars of toxic masculinity: self-sufficiency and emotional control, acting tough and risk-taking, hypersexuality, physical attractiveness, rigid masculine gender roles, heterosexuality and homophobia, and power, aggression, and control.

Table 1. Types of Ajo Kawir’s Toxic Masculinity Behavior

No	Types of The Man Box Pillar	Number of Frequency
1	Self-Sufficiency and Emotional Control	1
2	Physical Attractiveness	1
3	Hyper-sexuality	2
4	Power, Aggression, and Control	3
Total		7

Based on table 1, only four pillars were identified as present in Ajo Kawir's characterization. The first is self-sufficiency and emotional control, which appears once and reflects Ajo Kawir's tendency to suppress his emotional vulnerability. The second is physical attractiveness, which is also identified once and reflects how the character conforms to or is pressured by societal ideals of masculine appearance. Hyper-sexuality, appearing twice, represents his internalized belief that sexual dominance is a core component of manhood. The last and most frequently occurring is power, aggression, and control, which appears three times and highlights Ajo Kawir's use of violence or dominance as a means of asserting masculinity. The total number of identified data points is seven, indicating that these four pillars are central to how Ajo Kawir's toxic masculinity is constructed in the narrative. This table serves as a foundation for further qualitative discussion on how toxic masculine ideals are embodied and reinforced through the discussion below.

3.1 Ajo Kawir's Toxic Masculinity Behaviors

Ajo Kawir is the main character in the novel. He is a fearless street fighter from Bojongsang. He has a significant secret that is hidden behind his rugged exterior as a trustworthy fighter: he is impotent. The cause of his genital dysfunction is subsequently revealed to be the fact that he and his close buddy Gecko watched the brutal rape and murder of the mad widow of a former gangster by a pair of rogue cops while engaging in juvenile voyeuristic misbehavior. This traumatic experience as a teenager led to his ongoing sexual problems. Ajo Kawir views violence as a way to prove his manhood as a result and he even accepts offers as a contract killer.

In the midst of his brutal youth, Ajo Kawir meets the stunning martial artist and love of his life, Iteung. Even though Ajo Kawir's fear of inadequacy and Iteung's unquenchable hunger soon push the couple apart, romance and marriage blossoms do follow. Iteung who did not get sexual satisfaction from her husband, eventually had an affair with her friend who had a crush on her, Good Budi. This affair made Ajo Kawir coming back sets off on a quest for consolation through regular cruelty and does time in jail. He keeps talking to his sleeping penis throughout and thinks he can hear specific replies. In his life journey, a lot of Ajo Kawir's behaviors due to impotence are classified as toxic masculinity. Furthermore, a representation of Ajo Kawir's toxic masculinity behavior is presented with the following data.

3.1.1 Self-Sufficiency

The pillar places a focus on emotional restraint and pertains to how men handle stress, fragility, and sickness. One such stereotype is that males don't weep or express their emotions; guys who do talk a lot about their concerns, anxieties, and issues really should not be respected since they should solve their problems without seeking mental health assistance from others (Heilman et al., 2017:21-23). Men are frequently encouraged to be wholly independent by their masculinity. It is widely believed that males should not rely on others or ask for assistance for their mental and emotional well-being (McKenzie et al., 2018). It implies that many men believe they must do everything by themselves. Self-sufficiency behaviors appear several times in Ajo Kawir's character in *Vengeance is Mine, All Other Pay Cash*, one of which is portrayed in the quotation below.

Data 1

If any days were the most depressing in the life of Ajo Kawir, it could be said that those were the days. When the store was closed, he'd lock himself inside alone, drinking beers and crying.

(Kurniawan, 2017:70)

Data 1 demonstrates how Ajo Kawir's emotional responses are shaped by internalized ideals of being man, particularly the expectation of emotional self-reliance. At this point in the narrative, Ajo Kawir is portrayed as genuinely in love with Iteung. However, he becomes acutely aware that romantic affection alone may not suffice in fulfilling a woman's emotional and physical needs. His realization of his impotence triggers deep insecurity and fear that Iteung will eventually discover his condition. In response, Ajo Kawir deliberately distances himself from her—refusing to answer her letters, ignoring her radio greetings, and ultimately rejecting her when she appears at his home in the rain. These actions, although emotionally painful for him, are driven by a desire to protect his masculine image.

Rather than articulating his feelings or seeking emotional support, Ajo Kawir chooses to isolate himself, as described in the line, “He’d lock himself inside alone, drinking beer and crying”. This behavior reflects the toxic masculine norm of self-sufficiency, which discourages men from expressing vulnerability or seeking help. His resort to alcohol as a coping mechanism further exemplifies the destructive consequences of these norms. Prolonged alcohol use has been medically linked to a range of chronic health issues, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, liver damage, and neurological impairments. In this context, Ajo Kawir’s alcohol consumption is not only a symbol of his emotional repression but also a manifestation of self-destructive behavior encouraged by patriarchal gender expectations. Moreover, Ajo Kawir’s refusal to share his emotional struggles is consistent with the enduring social stigma summarized in the phrase “boys don’t cry”. This stereotype continues to limit men’s emotional expression by portraying public displays of sadness as signs of weakness. In many societies, it is more socially acceptable for men to admit to substance abuse and seek addiction treatment than to openly acknowledge mental health challenges. Ajo Kawir’s silent suffering and avoidance of emotional disclosure highlight his attempt to compensate for his perceived sexual inadequacy by performing other aspects of traditional masculinity. In this way, his behavior reinforces the notion that men must uphold stoicism and emotional restraint, even to the detriment of their own psychological and physical well-being.

3.1.2 Physical Attractiveness

This pillar covers concepts about men’s physical attributes and self-image. In various cultures, physical appearance significantly influences how individuals are perceived and socially categorized. Historically, women have borne the brunt of appearance-based judgment, but men are increasingly subjected to aesthetic scrutiny, especially when their presentation deviates from conventional masculine norms (Edwards, 2006). When men choose to dress stylishly, wear brightly colored or fitted clothing, or maintain a well-groomed appearance, these actions are often misread as signs of weakness or femininity. These perceptions do not arise from the actions themselves, but from societal constructs that have long assigned gendered meanings to clothing and appearance. For instance, neutral-toned suits are labeled as masculine and professional, while delicate fabrics and vibrant colors are deemed feminine (Entwistle, 2000). Such interpretations are closely linked to toxic masculinity, which upholds restrictive standards for how men should look and behave (American Psychological Association, 2018). Further, Ajo Kawir Toxic masculinity traits related to this pillar are shown by one data below..

Data 2

*The man came from Jakarta. He was wearing dark sunglasses when he first arrived, but then he took them off. **He had on a Hawaiian shirt with the top two buttons unbuttoned. I swear to God, Ajo Kawir said to himself, I will never wear a shirt like that.** He was wearing khaki-colored knee-length shorts and Adidas sneakers. He was with a driver who looked and acted like a bodyguard. “Call me Uncle Bunny.”*

(Kurniawan, 2017: 56)

Data 2 illustrates Ajo Kawir’s rigid and idealized perception of how men should present themselves, particularly in terms of physical appearance. This is depicted in a scene where Uncle Bunny, an old friend of Iwan Angsa, arrives from Jakarta and seeks assistance in killing a personal rival. Iwan Angsa, now retired from the world of violence due to family obligations, refuses the request but suggests Ajo Kawir as a replacement. He argues that Ajo Kawir needs a reason to fight and would likely accept the task enthusiastically. The toxic masculine ideal related to physical appearance is revealed through Ajo Kawir’s internal reaction upon seeing Uncle Bunny’s attire: “I swear to God, I will never wear a shirt like that”. Uncle Bunny’s choice of clothing—a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt with bold floral prints—is interpreted by Ajo Kawir as incompatible with his conception of masculinity. This reaction reflects the influence of rigid gender norms that dictate what is deemed acceptable or “masculine” in terms of dress. Traditionally, men have been expected to adopt understated, neutral, and utilitarian clothing, such as dark colors, tailored suits, and simple patterns, while avoiding styles associated with femininity, such as bright colors, intricate prints, and softer silhouettes.

Ajo Kawir's rejection of Uncle Bunny's attire stems from the perception that it deviates from traditional male fashion codes and aligns more closely with what society deems feminine. His disdain illustrates a toxic masculine mindset that equates masculinity with restraint, simplicity, and stoicism—even in appearance—and regards deviation from these norms as a threat to male identity. This restrictive view contributes to a culture in which men are discouraged from using clothing or grooming as forms of personal or creative expression. Such attitudes are emblematic of toxic masculinity because they limit the scope of male self-expression and reinforce the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. Rather than viewing fashion as a marker of gender conformity, it should be embraced as an individual's mode of self-expression, free from rigid societal expectations. Ultimately, what requires transformation is not how men choose to present themselves, but how society responds when that presentation challenges outdated norms of masculinity.

3.1.3 Hypersexuality

This pillar asserts that a guy is not just undeniably hypersexual, but also constantly ready for sex and eager to get another sex victim. The hyper-sexuality embodied by this pillar also contributes to the deterioration of male sexual health due to its tendency to promote forced sex and pay inadequate attention to sexual health. For instance, the idea of "genuine guys" implies that they should engage in sexual activity with as many people as possible and that they would never refuse to have sex. (Heilman et al., 2017:23). Gender role stereotypes, specifically the "sex role model", which reflects assumptions about the attitudes and actions generally assigned to males and females, have been considered as a component of masculinity. In general, the sex role model presents men's sexual desires as inherently uncontrolled, depicts power over women as normal, and views having several sexual partners as a sign of sexual competence (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Lynch et al., 2010). Further, Ajo Kawir's toxic masculinity behavior related to this pillar is shown by two data below.

Data 3

He thought about that girl. Iteung.

*You have to get up, he whispered to his bird again. For her! That girl wants you. She wants you to wake up and get big and hard, the way you used to. **You loser, get up. I'm out of patience. I want you to get up. Now!***

(Eka Kurniawan, 2017: 3)

Data 3 highlights the internalized pressure Ajo Kawir experiences to conform to hypersexualized standards of masculinity. In this excerpt, Ajo Kawir engages in a monologue directed at his penis, expressing frustration over his inability to satisfy the sexual needs of Iteung, the woman he deeply loves. His impotence is rooted in a traumatic event from his past, in which he witnessed two police officers rape a mentally unstable widow, Rona Merah. When the crime was discovered, one of the officers coerced Ajo Kawir into participating. Since that incident, Ajo Kawir has been physically incapable of achieving an erection, a condition that significantly impacts his self-perception and identity as a man.

His desperation is evidenced by the extreme measures he undertakes to restore his sexual function, ranging from applying chili to his genitals, smearing them with honey to attract bee stings, reading erotic literature, and frequenting brothels. None of these methods prove effective, and he ironically remarks that his penis continues to believe it is a polar bear in hibernation. The line "You loser, get up. I'm out of patience. I want you to get up. Now!" reflects his intense self-loathing and the internalized belief that sexual performance is essential to his masculinity. This moment exemplifies the toxic masculinity pillar of hypersexuality, which dictates that a "real man" must always be sexually potent and ready to perform. Such expectations are damaging, as they equate a man's worth with his sexual ability, creating undue psychological pressure on those who do not meet this standard. Ajo Kawir's struggle with impotence leads to diminished self-esteem and a perceived failure to fulfill the masculine ideal. As a result, he attempts to compensate for this perceived deficiency through acts of violence and aggression, channelling his frustration into hypermasculine behaviors to reassert his identity. The depiction of hypersexuality in Ajo Kawir's character not only reveals the personal toll of toxic masculinity but also critiques a cultural narrative that valorizes

sexual dominance while silencing vulnerability. A more inclusive understanding of masculinity would recognize that sexual performance does not define a man's value and that emotional healing should not be overshadowed by destructive societal norms.

Data 4

*“Shut up! I don’t want to hear you whine on and on about your wrongdoings. You didn’t do anything wrong. If it was anyone’s fault, it was mine. I was wrong and now I’m paying the price. But I’m the one who has the right to complain, not you. Just go live your life. **Sleep with as many women as you can**—think of me while you do them if you want, but I’m telling you, don’t waste what you have. **As long as your pecker works, take girls to bed. They need it. There is not one woman alive who doesn’t want to get laid.**”*

(Kurniawan, 2017: 7)

Data 4 shows Ajo Kawir advising Gecko to sleep with as many women as he wants as long as his genitals are still functioning. This situation occurred after Gecko said he would give his penis to Ajo Kawir if he could. Gecko realizes that his friend's genital dysfunction is partly his fault. He was the one who invited Ajo Kawir to peek at the blush that night. Therefore, Gecko felt really guilty, even though Ajo Kawir never blamed him. Gecko would have done whatever it took to atone for his mistake, but he knew that there was nothing in the world he could do to fix all the problems he had caused. Instead, he'd invited his friend out, to help him forget his troubles. He would fight by his side. If that would release all the pent-up adolescent desire that couldn't be released through Ajo Kawir's bird.

Toxic Masculinity trait in the term of hyper-sexuality is reflected in Ajo Kawir's utterance “Sleep with as many women as you can” and “As long as your pecker works, take girls to bed. they need it. There is not one woman alive who doesn’t want to get laid” as those shows the act of promiscuity. Toxic masculinity praises men for having multiple sexual partners. Ajo Kawir grew up in a regime full of violence and men used to go to brothels as a means of unwinding after work. When he was twelve years old, he and Gecko were described as small children who diligently went to the *surau* to pray. After returning from the *surau*, Ajo Kawir and Gecko often went to the village headman’s house to peek at the village head and his wife having sex through a crack in the window. He liked the size of the village head’s wife’s breasts and often daydreamed about it. He wondered who out of all his classmates would end up having boobs that big. He recited all their names in his head and thought that one day he’d propose to one of them. On their wedding night, the first thing he would do is place his bird in his wife's cleavage. The description of Ajo Kawir’s character clearly shows that if he is not impotent, he will wander around looking for as many sexual partners as possible. Therefore he advised Gecko to sleep with as many women as he wanted because Gecko was not impotent like himself. Ajo Kawir’s behavior is based on being toxic because being sexual promiscuity is linked with risks such as maternal deaths and complications, cancers, sexually transmitted infections, alcohol, and substance use, and social condemnation in some societies.

3.1.4 Power, Aggression, and Control

This Man Box pillar promotes males to keep control and exercise power over women and other men by using physical emotional, sexual, financial, and psychic aggression (Heilman et al., 2017:22-23). Violence is a serious violation of human rights that has various short- and long-term repercussions on a person’s bodily and mental health, and can even end in death in extreme cases. Accordingly, the act of the pillar can be found in the form of 1) Men resorting to violence to gain social esteem. 2) Men display their authority via violence 3) In a marriage or relationship, a guy should always have the last decision. 4) A guy ought to always be aware of the whereabouts of his wife or girlfriend. The representation of the pillar is shown by Ajo Kawir in the form of violence as follows.

Data 5

They were walking along the sidewalk, each with a clove cigarette between his finger. One was sucking on a Djarum, the other had never strayed from Gudang Garams. Gecko placed the clove in his mouth, let it hang there, and slipped both his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He bit the

cigarette a little so it wouldn't fall when he exhaled. The smoke slowly emerged from his mouth, and with the finesse of a longtime smoker he inhaled the plume back up through his nose and then exhaled it out his mouth again, in a smooth rolling circle.

Ajo Kawir gazed up at the sky and blew his own fragrant smoke into the air. Then, he looking over at Gecko, he said, "I want to beat someone up."

(Kurniawan, 2017: 5)

Data 5 highlights Ajo Kawir's aggressive tendencies, which emerge as a coping mechanism following the onset of his sexual dysfunction. In this scene, Ajo Kawir and his friend Gecko are walking along the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes, when Ajo Kawir suddenly declares, "I want to beat someone up". Gecko, already familiar with Ajo Kawir's temperament, points to two young men sitting on a motorcycle who are catcalling a passing girl. Without hesitation, Ajo Kawir and Gecko approach the boys, and Ajo Kawir flicks his lit cigarette onto one of their laps, triggering an inevitable fight.

The utterance "I want to beat someone up" functions as Ajo Kawir's habitual response to emotional distress. It becomes a habitual thing through which he asserts his masculinity and suppresses his inner vulnerability. Rather than confronting his psychological pain or acknowledging his impotence, Ajo Kawir redirects his frustration into physical violence. His resort to aggression serves as a substitute for emotional expression, reflecting how toxic masculinity discourages men from processing pain in healthy, communicative ways. This behavior aligns with the toxic masculinity pillars of Power, Aggression, and Control, which posit that physical dominance and violent expression are acceptable means for men to assert their identity and regain self-worth. Within this framework, violence becomes a distorted form of emotional regulation and self-affirmation. Ajo Kawir's reliance on brute force is further contextualized by his upbringing in Bojongsoang, a village steeped in a culture of street fighting and hypermasculine ideals, where young men are socialized to equate strength with aggression. Such behavioral patterns are not only psychologically harmful to the individual but also pose a significant danger to others. Violence, when used as a means of emotional outlet or identity construction, can result in severe physical injury and long-term psychological trauma, both for the aggressor and their victims. Ajo Kawir's story thus underscores the perilous consequences of a masculinity model that prioritizes dominance over empathy and aggression over vulnerability. Addressing such norms requires a fundamental cultural shift toward promoting emotional literacy, nonviolence, and alternative expressions of strength that do not rely on control or harm.

Data 6.

"I feel like I have to to kill this asshole—what's his name? Mister Lebe? He's going to become my first murder victim," Ajo Kawir said, "I like to fight, I miss fighting. I would gladly take his life."

(Kurniawan, 2017: 42)

Data 6 presents another instance of Ajo Kawir's aggressive behavior, this time directed not at a random individual, but at someone he perceives to be morally corrupt, Mister Lebe. Ajo Kawir learns of Mister Lebe's abusive conduct from Rani, a former classmate whom he encounters by chance at Wa Sami's store. According to Rani, Mister Lebe is a landlord who rents a house to a woman referred to as the "Young Widow". At thirty-two years old, the woman had lost her husband six months prior and was left with two children and no financial support. Two months after the husband's passing, Mister Lebe came to collect rent, fully aware that the widow was destitute. Exploiting her vulnerability, he coerced her into a sexual arrangement in exchange for rent.

Tragically, the situation deteriorated as Mister Lebe began bringing his friends to exploit the woman sexually, turning her into what Rani describes as a sex slave. Eventually, the Young Widow became pregnant, unsure of the father's identity. When she sought accountability from Mister Lebe, either through marriage or at least assistance with the child, he reacted angrily and evicted her from the house. This revelation enraged Ajo Kawir, prompting him to express a desire to kill Mister Lebe. He later sought out Mister Lebe at his fish pond and physically assaulted him by slicing his ear.

Ajo Kawir's statement to Rani, "I like to fight, I miss fighting. I would gladly take his life," exemplifies the toxic masculinity traits of power, aggression, and control. While on the surface, his reaction may appear as an act of vigilante justice in defense of the Young Widow, his words reveal deeper motivations. Ajo Kawir does not simply act out of moral outrage; rather, he uses the situation as a justification to engage in violence, a behavior that has become a coping mechanism for his unresolved internal struggles, particularly his sexual impotence. Fighting offers him a channel to assert a form of masculinity that his body no longer allows him to express through conventional sexual performance.

This case illustrates how toxic masculinity can manifest under the guise of heroism, masking personal frustrations with acts of aggression. Although the target of his violence is someone arguably deserving of punishment, Ajo Kawir's impulse to fight stems less from altruism and more from a need to reclaim masculine validation through domination and physical force. This reflects a broader issue in masculine identity formation, where violence becomes both an outlet for emotional repression and a distorted measure of self-worth.

Data 7

Ajo Kawir walked along the side of the street. A car accosted him with its loud horn, accusing him of hogging the road. Startled, Ajo Kawir looked over and stood directly in front of the car, which was forced to slow to a stop right at the tips of his toes. He walked around toward the driver's side and ordered him to open up. With an idiotic expression, the man opened the door and Ajo Kawir immediately grabbed him, yanking him out of the vehicle. He didn't say anything, he just let his fists fly at the man's jaw. Once, twice, three times. He pushed the driver against the car and kept on assailing him.

(Eka Kurniawan, 2017: 88)

Data 7 presents another manifestation of Ajo Kawir's violent tendencies, this time directed at a car driver who repeatedly honked at him for obstructing the road. Instead of resolving the conflict through communication, Ajo Kawir allowed his emotions to take control. He struck the driver with his fist, causing the man to fall to the ground, bloodied beside his vehicle. This aggressive outburst was not solely triggered by the incident itself, but was deeply rooted in Ajo Kawir's psychological state at the time. Prior to this event, he had challenged the Tiger to a duel, but received no response. Later, when Ajo Kawir began to find meaning in life again especially after Iteung accepted his impotence and expressed her willingness to marry him, he no longer desired to fight. The threat he believed he received from the Tiger's men thus instilled a mixture of fear and anxiety, disrupting the small peace he had just begun to experience.

Rather than confronting this fear directly, Ajo Kawir displaced his emotional turmoil onto someone he perceived as weaker. His violent response toward the driver served as a coping mechanism, allowing him to reassert dominance and mask his inner vulnerability. This behavior is representative of toxic masculinity, particularly aligning with the power, aggression, and control pillars. The social construction of masculinity has long equated strength with aggression and has delegitimized emotional expression in men, branding those who show fear or gentleness as "less masculine" or "not real men". Ajo Kawir, constrained by these norms, channels his fear through violence in an attempt to affirm a masculine identity that his physical impotence prevents him from expressing through sexuality.

Ultimately, this incident reveals how societal expectations around masculinity can drive men to harmful behavior, not only toward others but also toward themselves. Ajo Kawir's use of violence is less about the immediate situation and more about a desperate attempt to reclaim a sense of control and self-worth in a world that denies alternative expressions of manhood.

4. CONCLUSION

Masculinity is a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural expectations regarding how men should think, feel, and behave. Within this framework, men are often pressured to conform to a narrowly defined model known as the "man box", a set of prescriptive norms that equate

masculinity with emotional suppression, dominance, physical strength, and sexual prowess. This rigid ideal not only marginalizes alternative expressions of masculinity but also inflicts psychological harm on men who fail to meet these unrealistic standards. The novel *Vengeance Is Mine, All Other Pay Cash* by Eka Kurniawan exemplifies the manifestation of toxic masculinity through the character of Ajo Kawir, who embodies four out of the seven behavioral pillars associated with the “man box”: 1) self-sufficiency and emotional control 2) physical attractiveness 3) heterosexuality and homophobia 4) power, aggression, and control. Kawir’s self-sufficiency is evident in his refusal to express vulnerability, particularly in how he silently endures emotional distress after distancing himself from Iteung due to his sexual impotence. His concern with physical appearance is highlighted through his judgment of Uncle Bunny’s attire, which he perceives as lacking masculine credibility. Hypersexuality is portrayed through Ajo Kawir’s obsession with his non-functioning penis, treating it as the sole determinant of his self-worth and his wife’s happiness, as well as through his encouragement of Gecko to engage in multiple sexual encounters, thereby reinforcing a hypermasculine ideal. His aggressive tendencies manifest in recurrent violent encounters, which serve as outlets for his internalized frustration and emasculation. Ajo Kawir’s involvement in street fighting symbolizes his attempt to reclaim a sense of control and masculine identity through physical dominance. This portrayal underscores the pervasive harm of toxic masculinity, both to the individual and society at large. To mitigate these effects, it is imperative to challenge and reconstruct prevailing gender norms by promoting inclusive and positive models of masculinity—ones that value emotional openness, empathy, respect, and mutual consent.

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