

**TOXIC MASCULINITY IN
MONICA MURPHY'S *A MILLION KISSES IN YOUR LIFETIME***

S. Parimalah

Assistant Professor, Department of English

S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)

ABSTRACT:

Toxic masculinity is a behaviour of men that is alarming to society and causes a threat to people including the toxic person. It does not imply that the concept of masculinity is itself toxic but rather states that if the stereotypical concept and standards of 'man' set by society become a burden upon men then it leads to toxic masculinity. These standards set by society are also imposed on children (boys) from a young age. It highlights the behaviour and thoughts of men that could lead to problematic situations. This not only affects the men who are toxic but also their surroundings in a negative manner.

The term toxic masculinity emerged during the mythopoetic men's movement during the 1980s and 1990s. In Elizabeth W. Mechling and Jay Mechling's journal '*The Jung and the restless: The mythopoetic men's movement*' "the attractiveness of the "mythopoetic men's movement," especially represented by poet Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990), to the American "New Class" invites the rhetorician of social movements to account for the movement's appeal for the cultural revitalization of American masculinity in the late 1980s". This movement was a therapeutic workshop for men that helps to understand men's mental health.

This research paper aims to analyse the toxic masculinity traits that are reflected in the male characters of the novel. It highlights the situation where the characters in the novel express this toxic masculinity characteristic and how it affects their surroundings. It mainly affects Wren, the female protagonist of Monica Murphy's *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime* and tries to analyse the situation that she's put into due to this toxic masculinity. *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime* is a story of power, love, control, money, and relationships. As a young adult fiction, the story revolves around an eighteen-year-old young protagonist namely Crew Lancaster, male protagonist and Wren Beaumont, female protagonist of the story. This plot is about the blooming of love between Crew and Wren because of unexpected situation that forced them to stay close.

Jennifer Galvan in her research article '*Roots of Toxic masculinity*', highlights the statement said by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie which is "*By far the worst things we do to males – making them feel they have to hard – is that we leave them with their fragile egos*". Sarah Vallie in her article '*What is Toxic Masculinity*' mentioned that toxic masculinity is an attitude or set of social guidelines stereotypically associated with a manliness that often hurt men, women, and society in general as said in webmd source link.

In the novel '*A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime*' one could reflect certain toxic masculinity characters where the male protagonist showcases his inner self that "I've heard from more than one person that I [Crew] scare her. Intimidate her. I am everything she fears, as well as she should. I'd eat her up. Swallow her whole—enjoy every second of it, too. And

she knows it” (2). The crew feels delighted and satisfied that Wren is scared of him as he mentions that he enjoys it a lot. He already knew from other students that he was scared, and he enjoys and finds pleasure in making her feel small and scared of him. He also knows that she is attracted to him which feeds his ego where he feels superior to her. He wants to be the dominant person who controls her feelings for him like fear. “He’s dying to corrupt her. Steal all her firsts from that mythical future husband she’ll have one day. The one who won’t give a shit if she’s a virgin or not.” (4), “My friend isn’t wrong. That’s exactly what I want to do”. (5) The basic target for Crew is to break the virgin thread of Wren. She is the ‘little virgin’ in the school and some students aim to take away her virginity (being pure). Wren values her purity and wants to carry it along with her till her wedding, saving herself for her future husband. When Ezra explains the desires of Crew on Wren, he also accepts that he wants to corrupt her and steal her purity from her ‘future husband’.

Wren believes that Crew hates her because of his blank facial expression towards her and also, she is scared of him as he is a powerful person in the school premises, but she is also attracted towards him as she finds him physically handsome and gorgeous. Knowing she fears him, Crew is much more delighted and aims to get close to her to finally accomplish his goal. They do not speak to each other much and always avoided to converse but Skov, psychology teacher for the last semester assignment combines two children in a group for one-on-one project and pairs Crew and Wren in a team. The project had to be done within the winter break’s time where the students had to understand about their partner, psychology and present a project on it. Both Crew and Wren are displeased by the staff’s decision. Wren tries to change her project partner, but the teacher insists on staying along with him. Being forced into a situation where Wren and Crew have to spend time with each other, both of them start their work by questioning about their personal information and interest. While conversing and questioning each other they could find similarities among them even though they are two different personalities.

She shared a lot about her interest in painting to him as and she started to feel comfortable along with him in due course. One painting that caught her interest was a canvas full of lip prints with different lip colour called *A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime*. Crew after listening to her started gifting Chanel lipstick of different colours for her to paint her own canvas. All these kind gestures from him pleased her and slowly she started trusting him. Crew took her to beautiful places with his private plane and they shared some intimate movements and Wren’s promise to her father was finally broken by Crew and his goal was also finally accomplished but he couldn’t dump her as he planned for, instead he was drawn more towards her.

Wren’s father was protective over his child and disliked the Lancaster family for their grumpy, grouchy, and dark personalities. He feared his daughter would undergo heartbreak due to Crew and hence wanted to separate her from him. Knowing his daughter gave herself to Crew, Harvey was angry at his daughter and Crew. But Wren's mother supported her and genuinely felt happy for her daughter by encouraging Wren to decide for herself. Wren’s father cared for his daughter and became overprotective to save her from the reality of the world, he warned his daughter to stay away from Crew and his family, but she did not listen to him which increased his anger that led to a situation where he snatched her phone and

blocked all kinds of ways through, she could contact him. Wren was able to contact Crew again only after a great support she received from her mother. Harvey believed that Crew was not good for his daughter and would break her heart once his work was done.

Crew invites Wren to his home for dinner on her birthday where Crew's mother starts liking her and Wren had an enjoyable and peaceful dinner along with them. Finally, Wren and Crew get together after two years, Crew proposes to Wren during their family dinner, and she accepts him wholeheartedly. Crew then always wanted to protect Wren and make her comfortable and love her more. Figueroa is an English teacher who is working at the Lancaster Prep school. He is a person who tries to manipulate the students and tries to have a physical relationship with the students. He initially acts as a caring person for the girls to believe and develop to trust him, uses them for his needs and wants once he feels satisfied, he'll break the relationship and dump the student and start a relationship with another student. Maggie Gipson is one of the students in the school who's affected by Mr Figueroa's fake promises and relationship. She maintained a relationship physically with him and believed that he'll accept her after her confesses to him about her pregnancy but once she informs him about this, he fakes his promise that he'll take care of her and they'll live together in truth, he dumps her and targets another student named Natalie for him.

When Mr Figueroa warns Crew to "stay away from Wren and not to hurt her (59), it annoys him a lot as he already knew what kind of a staff Mr Fig is. When the accusation is made on Mr Figueroa that he's trying to trap Wren with his kind face acting, his facial expression only 'tightens but he doesn't say a word' which means that he planned to corrupt Wren through his charm. Crew states, "you're just mad because you know no matter what she'll never fall for tricks. She is a sweet little virgin who wouldn't dare to ever think of having sex with a guy who's old enough that he could be her father. Her teacher. Someone she looks up to and admires." We could therefore say that not only the students are lusting over Wren but also the teacher like Mr Figueroa is trying to make her fall for their tricks. Everyone looks at her as some possession, some trophy as she is the only girl who's still a virgin on the campus.

When Wren witnesses the three boys i.e., Crew, Malcolm and Ezra smoking weeds she rushes out of the place as she was already disappointed and doesn't want to get into trouble, Crew and the other guys chase after her thinking she would complain about their activities to their headmaster. While running away she is caught by Crew and he tightly holds her, not letting her move. "I loosen my grip and she makes a move, trying to lunge out of my arms. I slip my hands beneath her uniform jacket, cupping her right breast" (89), he inappropriately touches her. To make her stay in one place and not escape from his hold, he holds her against him and touches her in a bad way making her still and shocked because of his action. To make things act according to his control touching a woman or girl in an unsuitable manner can also be said to be a toxic masculinity trait.

One of Crew's friends Malcolm is known as a great flirt who also doesn't value girls and respect them. It is also evident that he had made a video of him and a girl having sex with each other and even sent a copy to his friend Crew. Filming private moments without a girl's consent is completely a wrong act. It is clear that Malcolm flirts with girls and traps to satisfy their sexual desires and pleasures. "Women are only good for one thing Crew don't you think,

Crew? That's what you've said before. Fucking and that's it. Oh, and cooking. Guess that makes two things" (99). Malcolm also believes that women are only meant to fulfil men's physical pleasures and to cook and take care of them. They have the stereotypical concept of the qualities of women being listed in their brains. He doesn't respect the girls around him and always tries to make them fall for his charms by flaunting them and later having an intimate moment once or twice. Malcolm names these girl students around him as 'whores' (9), saying that they all are craving these boys' attention. The words he uses to describe the girls are filthy and inappropriate, degrading their respect as he finds pleasure in it. Crew and his friends have a very low opinion of girls on the Lancaster school campus.

"If she's afraid of us, maybe she won't say anything" (100), Malcolm is worried that Wren will spill the beans about their smoking habit and suggest to Crew that if they try to threaten or scare her then she won't speak about it to anyone and they'll have no problem. He finds Wren a threat to them and doesn't believe her actions hence he tries to take control of her. Making her feel scared of them and threatening her, they are trying to dominate her and make her powerless and expose them as powerful people. It can also be categorised as one of the toxic traits among students. "He (Larsen Von Weller) puts on this – sweet act for girls. Like he wouldn't harm a fly. He works his wholesome act on an unsuspecting girl, and the next thing she knows, she finds herself on her knees... while he records the entire transactions" (112).

Larsen is also one of the toxic personalities who can manipulate girls for his entertainment by selling their videos to their friends. "He (Franklin) is always pressuring her to do things with him sexually" (15), Wren is worried for her best friend Maggie when she says he got into another argument with Franklin last night. He is also their classmate and Maggie's 'on-again, off-again boyfriend'. Wren also states that he is very 'demanding' and forces Maggie to have things with him sexually where he is only concerned about him and not about her thoughts and emotions. In the novel, '*A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime*', the female protagonist Wren is being subjugated by her parent's thoughts and opinions. Wren states that 'I don't know what is to be liberated. To feel free. It's a foreign concept. I am told what to do, where to do it, and when I should. My entire life, I've been completely controlled' (152), from her childhood till her young adult age the actions that she has done is either said by her father or her mother, she is always been told what to do and when to do by her parents. She is not given the space to think what she really wanted and her rational thinking capacity has been suppressed and control by her parents mainly her father.

This paper reflects the characteristics that represent the toxic masculinity and women subjugation in Monica Murphy's '*A Million Kisses In Your Lifetime*'. In this novel it could be said that the characters Crew Lancaster, Malcolm, Ezra, Harvey Beaumont, Mr. Figueroa, Larsen Von Weller are toxic in nature due their idea of viewing women around them as a subject. Crew Lancaster and Harvey Beaumont prefer to hold an upper hand in other's thoughts and decisions, making them toxic..Therefore, it is evident that people respect others according to wealth and money power. Men from westernized culture or present modern times also have the same thoughts of overpowering others whom they considered to be weak that include other men and women. Even though the prominent theme of this novel is

romance, toxic masculinity is also experienced in many ways that the women characters suffer at the hands of such men.

WORKS CITED

Murphy, Monica, “*A Million Kisses in Your Lifetime*”. Penguin books Ltd. 1 September 2022. Print

E JOURNALS CITED

Carpenter, M Laura, “*Gender and Society*”. JSTOR. June 2002. ([Gender and Society on JSTOR](#)).05/03/24

Galvan, Jennifer, “*Roots of Toxic Masculinity*”. Poosh. ([The Root of Toxic Masculinity - Poosh](#)).04/03/24.

Kupers, A Terry, “*Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison*”. Research gate. June 2005. (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Terry-Kupers/publication/242665336_ToxicMasculinityasaBarriertoMentalHealth_TreatmentinPrison/links/56f00ac708ae01ae3e70eee7/ToxicMasculinityasaBarriertoMentalHealth-TreatmentinPrison.pdf). 11/3/23.

Lawson, Robert, “*Language and Masculinities History, Development Future*”. Birmingham City University. ([Lawson Language and Masculinities History, DevelopmentFuture.pdf](#)). 17/03/24.