

COPPOLA'S Godfather: Seeing Through A Feminist Lens

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Abstract

This paper examines The Godfather as a cinematic text that constructs and legitimises a specific form of hegemonic masculinity rooted in patriarchy, power, and controlled violence. Rather than reading the film merely as a crime saga, the study argues that the Corleone family operates as a microcosm of patriarchal social order in which authority is inherited, masculinity is proven through dominance, and women are systematically excluded from decision-making processes. Drawing on theories of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power, the paper analyzes how male identity in the film is shaped through loyalty, emotional restraint, and the capacity to command fear. Michael Corleone's transformation from a reluctant outsider to an authoritarian patriarch becomes central to understanding how masculinity is not innate but socially produced through rituals of power, silence, and control. The argument of this paper is that this film not only represents the patriarchy inherent in Italian-American cultural history, but it also glorifies patriarchy through its cinematic language, narrative strategies, and character formation.

The paper also foregrounds the gendered division between the public and private spheres, where men monopolize economic and political authority while women are confined to domestic, emotional, or symbolic roles. Female characters such as Kay Adams and Connie Corleone are used to reveal the costs of this masculine order, as their autonomy is repeatedly undermined through exclusion, silencing, and violence. Methodologically, the study employs close textual and visual analysis of key scenes and character arcs, situating the film within broader historical and cultural discussions on masculinity in mid-twentieth-century Western society. By doing so, the paper argues that The Godfather does not simply depict patriarchy but normalizes it by presenting masculine domination as both inevitable and necessary for order and survival.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Masculinity, Hegemony, Power, Dominance

Introduction

Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film is *The Godfather*. This film marked a turning point in the history of world cinema. It was a movie that created a worldview about mafia, masculinity, and family authority. The narrative style and symbolic form of this film have a distinct patriarchal nature. Women are considered a marginalized and oppressed group in this film. This movie wholly represents a patriarchal masculinity.

Films such as *The Godfather* emerged during the 1970s at a moment when there was renewed scholarly and popular interest in the cultural origins of European immigrant communities in the United States, often grouped under the category of "white ethnicities." Within this context, *The Godfather* played a significant role in reshaping how Italian Americans were imagined in American popular culture. Rather than reproducing earlier stereotypes, the film situated Italian-American identity within broader post-countercultural debates about belonging, ethnicity, and masculinity in the United States.

Masculinity

Masculinity cannot be understood as a self-contained category. It gains meaning only through its opposition to femininity. In societies where men and women are not conceptualized as embodying sharply opposed and polarized character types, masculinity—as it is understood in modern European and American contexts—does not exist as a distinct concept. Historical evidence indicates that even within Europe prior to the eighteenth century, gender difference was not framed in terms of fundamentally separate character structures. While women were seen as different from men, this difference was interpreted hierarchically rather than categorically: women were perceived as lesser or incomplete versions of men, rather than as carriers of an alternative kind of personhood. The notion that men and women possess qualitatively different natures took shape much later, particularly alongside the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology that divided social life into male and female "spheres."¹

The forms that masculinity takes are not dictated by male biology, despite claims made by biological essentialism or popular psychological theories. Rather than determining masculinity, men's bodies are shaped, regulated, and given meaning through social gender arrangements. Social institutions intervene in how bodies are trained, disciplined, and experienced—whether through sport, labor, leisure, or regimes of pleasure—so that the body becomes a medium through which gender norms are imposed and reproduced.²

At the same time, bodies cannot be treated as infinitely malleable surfaces. The social performance of masculinity encounters physical limits, particularly evident in contexts such as industrial labor, where the demands of masculine work may result in bodily exhaustion or damage. Moreover, when gendered behavior is expressed through bodies deemed socially incongruent—such as masculine practices associated with female bodies or feminine practices associated with male bodies—these combinations are often marked as deviant or transgressive. Research on gender crossing demonstrates that sustaining such non-normative gender expressions

requires considerable social effort, revealing the strength of normative pressures that bind masculinity to particular bodily forms.

Gender, therefore, operates as a historical process through which bodies are drawn into social meaning. Bodies function as arenas in which gendered patterns are enacted, contested, and stabilized. Earlier discussions of fixed “male roles,” and even some contemporary research, have tended to understate this dynamic relationship between bodies and gender. To understand the politics of masculinity fully, it is essential to attend to practices such as violence and bodily discipline, as well as to forms of body culture, all of which play a central role in shaping masculine identities and power relations.

Plural Forms of Masculinity

Contemporary social research makes it increasingly evident that masculinity does not exist as a single, universal pattern. Instead of speaking about masculinity in the singular, it is more accurate to recognize the existence of multiple masculinities. Gender is constructed differently across cultures and historical periods, shaped by distinct social, political, and cultural contexts rather than by any fixed or natural essence.³

Comparative research, particularly ethnographic studies, provides substantial evidence for this diversity. These differences highlight the culturally contingent nature of masculine norms and challenge assumptions that link masculinity to a single sexual or behavioral standard.⁴

In multicultural societies, it is therefore reasonable to expect the coexistence of multiple definitions and practices of masculinity, each shaped by factors such as ethnicity, migration, class, and national history. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of ethnic identity in shaping masculine experience, demonstrating that masculinity is not only gendered but also racialized and culturally embedded. Studies from diverse national contexts consistently show that masculinity is produced through the interaction of gender with other social identities.

Moreover, diversity in masculinity is not confined to differences between communities. Multiple forms of masculinity also emerge within the same social environment. Within a single institution—such as a school, workplace, or military unit—men may enact manhood in different ways, learn masculinity through varied social processes, and develop distinct understandings of the self and the male body. Research on educational institutions has documented these variations particularly clearly, but similar patterns are visible in occupational settings and military cultures, where competing models of masculinity coexist and interact.

These different masculinities do not exist on equal terms. Rather than forming a neutral collection of styles or identities, masculinities are organized through structured social relations. Central among these are relations of power, in which certain forms of masculinity are socially privileged while others are devalued, marginalized, or subordinated.

The Godfather and Italian-American Identity: Rewritten Analytical Sections

Films such as *The Godfather* emerged during the 1970s at a moment when there was renewed scholarly and popular interest in the cultural origins of European immigrant communities in the United States, often grouped under the category of “white ethnicities.” Within this context, *The Godfather* played a significant role in reshaping how Italian Americans were imagined in American popular culture. Rather than reproducing earlier stereotypes, the film situated Italian-American identity within broader post-countercultural debates about belonging, ethnicity, and masculinity in the United States.

Urban space plays a crucial role in this construction of identity. Italian Americans in *The Godfather* are consistently depicted as urban subjects whose lives are shaped by tightly knit residential communities governed by strong familial and communal codes. Within this framework, women occupy a highly traditional and conservative role. Italian-American women are represented primarily as caretakers of the home and moral guardians of the family, valued for their loyalty, endurance, and capacity for self-sacrifice. Their importance lies not in public authority but in their emotional labor, which sustains male power and social cohesion.

This gendered dynamic is especially visible in the character of Connie Corleone. Even when she challenges her brother Michael, her resistance is framed not as a pursuit of personal autonomy but as a defense of familial bonds that Michael himself has violated. Such portrayals reinforce the idea that women’s agency is legitimate only when it serves the preservation of patriarchal family structures. The emotional support provided by these women is so central to the male protagonists that its loss—real or imagined—becomes a critical source of narrative tension in films such as *The Godfather* and its contemporaries.

In addition to their dependence on women’s emotional labor, Italian-American men in *The Godfather* are defined through intense homosocial relationships within the male community. Bonds between brothers, friends, and associates provide strength and solidarity, particularly in conflicts with outsiders. However, the same intensity that sustains these alliances also generates the conditions for extreme internal violence. Loyalty, when betrayed, leads not to reconciliation but to fratricidal conflict, revealing the fragility underlying the ideal of masculine unity.

The Godfather : An Analysis

All the female characters in The Godfather are subjected to patriarchal control. Mama Corleone is portrayed as a conventional housewife. Beyond family matters, she has no role either in the business or in the public sphere. In the absence of the father, it is her sons who manage all affairs. This clearly indicates that she is given no participation whatsoever in decision-making processes.

Similarly, their daughter Connie becomes a victim of her husband's domination and physical violence. There is a dialogue in the film in which it is stated that there is no need to interfere in conflicts between husband and wife.⁵ Even though Connie's brother eventually intervenes, Connie herself continues to remain a largely submissive character.⁶ The main male protagonist of the movie, Vito Corleone is a symbol of patriarchy. The name Godfather itself a symbol of patriarchy. He takes everything personal like God. Corleone is a character that protects everyone he loves like God. Even though Kay Adams is presented in a way that makes her appear educated and liberated, she too is ultimately portrayed in the film as a woman positioned under patriarchal authority. Michael Corleone does not regard his wife as an equal partner. He does not allow her to intervene either in his business or in any matters outside the domestic sphere.⁷

Because of her opposition to Michael and his work, he expels his wife from the family after she undergoes an abortion. She is later denied even the right to see her children. The central male character of the film shows no willingness to compromise in any way with those who question or challenge his authority.⁸ The dialogues in The Godfather function as powerful linguistic markers of patriarchy, repeatedly reinforcing the idea that authority, rationality, and control are inherently masculine traits. Statements such as "Women and children can be careless, but not men" explicitly naturalize male dominance by presenting emotional restraint and decisiveness as exclusively male virtues, while simultaneously positioning women and children as irrational and unreliable.⁹

Similarly, the command "Act like a man" reduces masculinity to a rigid code of toughness, emotional suppression, and unquestioned obedience to patriarchal authority, implying that deviation from this code is a form of weakness or moral failure. Several other dialogues in the film echo and strengthen this patriarchal worldview. "A man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man" outwardly appears to valorize family, yet it ultimately reinforces male authority by defining the man as the unquestioned center of the family structure. The statement "Never let anyone know what you are thinking" promotes emotional secrecy as a masculine ideal, discouraging vulnerability and reinforcing a culture in which power is exercised through silence and intimidation. Likewise, "It's not personal, it's strictly business" reflects a masculinist logic that justifies violence and moral transgression by framing them as rational, emotionless decisions—again distancing men from empathy, a quality implicitly feminized and devalued.

Even dialogues that seem advisory carry a deeply gendered tone. “A friend should always underestimate your virtues and an enemy overestimate your faults” reinforces a masculine worldview built on suspicion, dominance, and strategic manipulation, traits repeatedly coded as male strengths in the narrative universe of the film. Together, these dialogues do more than advance the plot; they normalize a patriarchal moral order in which masculinity is synonymous with control, authority, and emotional hardness, while femininity remains marginalized, silenced, or confined to the private sphere. Through such dark and commanding lines, The Godfather transforms everyday speech into an instrument of patriarchal power, making masculinity appear natural, inevitable, and unquestionable.

Conclusion

The Godfather ultimately constructs a world in which masculinity is inseparable from authority, control, and the capacity for violence. Patriarchy in the film is not limited to the oppression of women alone but functions as a rigid system that regulates all relationships, demanding absolute loyalty and emotional suppression from men while denying agency and voice to women. Michael Corleone’s rise to power illustrates how hegemonic masculinity consolidates itself by eliminating dissent, whether it comes from rivals, family members, or intimate partners. His refusal to treat Kay as an equal and his disciplining of Connie’s suffering reflect a masculine order that perceives autonomy and questioning as threats to authority.

At the same time, the film reveals the contradictions of this patriarchal masculinity. While it promises stability and protection, it produces isolation, fear, and emotional estrangement within the family. Women become the silent witnesses to male power, bearing the emotional consequences of decisions from which they are excluded. In this sense, The Godfather serves as a powerful cultural text that exposes how masculinity is sustained through patriarchal structures that normalize domination and silence resistance. Reading the film through the lens of masculinity and patriarchy allows us to understand it not merely as a narrative about crime and family, but as a commentary on the enduring power of patriarchal values in shaping social and familial hierarchies.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R.W Connell, *Masculinities*, University of California Press, 1995, pp 67-72
2. *Ibid*
3. *Ibid*
4. R.W. Connell, *The Men and The Boys*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000 ,p.1

5. See Francis Coppola, *The Godfather*, Paramount Pictures, Los Angeles, 1972
6. *Ibid*
7. *Ibid*
8. *iIbid*

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