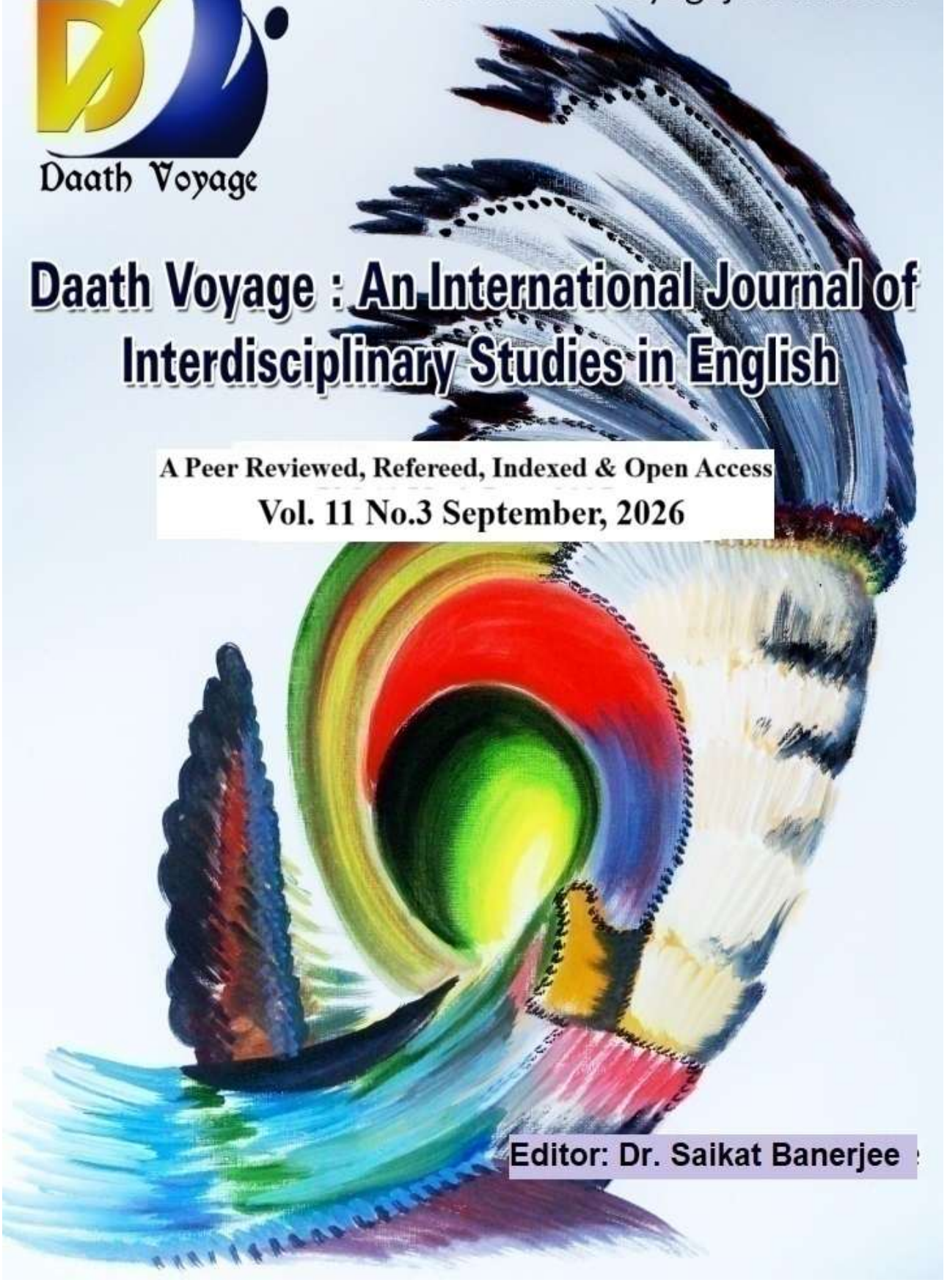
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The Flower Bull and the Arena: Re-imagining Masculinity in Carlos Saldanha's *Ferdinand*

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Abstract: This article examines the changing perceptions of masculinity in twenty-first-century media through a reading of the animated film *Ferdinand.* The landscape of the film serves as a crucial figure in pondering how contemporary animation can function as a site of resistance against traditional gender archetypes. Set in the Spanish bullfighting tradition, the film foregrounds how violently masculine ideals are enforced through the system of training, behavioural regulation, and peer surveillance. Through the theoretical frameworks expanded by R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt on hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this article argues that the protagonist of the film, Ferdinand, resists the hegemonic masculine ideals by refusing to participate in cultural violence and instead provides another version of strength rooted in kindness and emotional intelligence. The article highlights the film's attempt to de-gender stereotypical traits that were once weaponised to exclude or shame, and thereby offer a more expansive, healthy, and realistic definition of manhood for the younger audience. This reimagining resonates with Connell's concept of reformist masculinities. By ending with the abolition of the arena, the film rejects the institutionalised structure and signals a social order that becomes a metaphor for a society that no longer needs the hypermasculine beast to preserve the order. Ferdinand, the flower bull, is not a contradiction, but a promising shift in masculine identity, for his strength lies in refusing to reproduce a violent past.

Key Words: Masculinity, hegemonic, bull, gender performativity.

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Animated films have always been a powerful tool in guiding young audiences in shaping their understanding of identity and behaviour. From its literary origins to its cinematic adaptations, Munro Leaf's *The Story of Ferdinand* has been a profound cultural presence. Published just two months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the book was widely associated with pacifism and was banned in many countries. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler reportedly ordered its copies to be burned by condemning them as "degenerate democratic propaganda" (Antracoli). Later, the possible allegories associated with the book were dismissed, asserting that the text is about "being true to one's self" (Hearn).

Carlos Saldanha's *Ferdinand* (2017), a computer-animated adaptation of Munro Leaf's book, produced by Blue Sky Studios and 20th Century Fox Animation, is about Ferdinand, a gentle bull raised on a Spanish ranch, who refuses to fight in the bullring and perform the violence expected of him. Instead, he escapes and joins a flower-filled farm, where he develops tender bonds with humans and animals. Ultimately, he disrupts the bullfighting ritual by simply sitting in the bullring rather than confronting the matador. The film was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the Academy Awards and the Golden Globe Awards.

Despite the diverse academic discourse surrounding *Ferdinand,* moving from Mehmet Biçer's "Analysis of the Animated Film Ferdinand According to Psychoanalytical Theory" to Arifka Noor and Supeno's "Morality Aspects in the Film *Ferdinand* by Carlos Saldanha" and linguistic analyses of "The Positive Politeness Strategies," the film remains underexamined as a text regarding masculinity. This article addresses this gap by combining the theories of hegemonic masculinity and gender performativity.

Bull imagery has always been closely related to masculinity. Dr. Smita Sahgal, in her article "Power of Animal Symbolism," analyses how the Vedic corpus associates the bull with masculinity. Terms such as bull, male, and mighty are fused into a single concept, a masculine one that is built on virility, leadership, and generative force. Similarly, another study, "I am a Bull!," offers a lens to examine the parallelism between bull imagery and masculinity, and the subsequent naturalisation of male violence in the Spanish culture. Since the film is set in a Spanish landscape, it provides a case study of how the bull and hegemonic masculine ideals are interpreted through certain characters, and how the protagonist tries to disrupt the existing hegemonic script. Thus, the article argues that the film stages a careful deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity through the protagonist's active unwillingness to conform.

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Furthermore, the article also discusses how the film's visual and narrative grammar offer what Connell and Messerschmidt identify as the historical possibility of change in gender hierarchies.

Connell and Messerschmidt discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity, describing it as a cultural configuration of manhood that represents power, strength, and the subordination of both women and non-hegemonic men. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where dominance is attained through cultural consent rather than regular force, Connell and Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity "required all the other men to position themselves in relation to it and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (832). In practice, hegemonic masculinity is embodied by relatively few men, while a larger group remain complicit, benefiting from and helping to preserve its authority. Meanwhile, the subordinated groups are subjected to marginalisation, policing, and exclusion from institutional structures and everyday practices.

Connell identifies bodies as both objects and agents in social practice, and places sports as an area that embodies hegemonic norms. The bullfighting tradition and bullring in the film represent a space that institutionalises domination, aggression, and competitive ruthlessness as the natural expression of the male body. Yet Connell and Messerschmidt recognise the hegemonic ideals as mutable, and a genuine ideological shift is possible through women's resistance and men's embrace of alternative masculinities (846).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a complementary framework for this analysis. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler identifies gender as neither a natural nor a pre-given essence and argues that it was constructed through a "stylized repetition of acts" that produces the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" ("Performative Acts" 520). Gender is the outcome of the "forcible citation" of certain norms that are interwoven with "discipline, regulation, and punishment" (*Bodies That Matter* 177). Individuals who fail to meet the gender expectations face ostracism, bullying, and violence. However, since gender is neither real nor natural, it remains open to revision through subverting dominant gender norms, thereby destabilising the hegemonic regimes.

These theoretical frameworks constitute the understanding of *Ferdinand* as a case study for reimagined masculinity. The bulls on the ranch are compelled to perform the aggressive masculine script, and Ferdinand's defiance of it creates a form of gender subversion. As the film concludes, the institutional order of the bullring itself is destabilised.

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In the film's opening scene itself, Ferdinand's nonconformity is established. While the other bulls on the ranch train their bodies, compete and display their strength, young Ferdinand tends to a flower that he considers his "buddy" (00:01:54). When he attempts to console Bones, a bullied peer, his kindness is rejected and is labelled a "weirdo" (00:03:47). The other bulls insist that fighting is what "bulls do" (00:04:26), highlighting aggression as a biological and cultural inevitability rather than a choice. When Ferdinand's peers enforce compliance through mockery and naming, dubbing him a "flower bull" (00:04:22), a gesture that weaponises femininity as a slur, Butler's forcible citation (*Bodies that Matter* 177) of masculine norms is being operated.

His father's response is equally revealing. When Ferdinand wonders whether there is any chance for him to be a champion without fighting, his father replies that the world "does not work that way for them" (00:06:45). The father's response supports Connell's view that most men do not freely choose hegemonic ideals, but are compelled and habituated to do so. The ranch in the film is presented as an institution that normalises violence, enforces compliance through surveillance and peer pressure. Those who fail to perform are discarded, and once they lose their utility, they are sent to the chop house.

Ferdinand's escape to Juan's farm offers him a counter-space. In contrast to the ranch, the farm is presented as an alternative with its round, lush green and vibrant appearance. Ferdinand is able to thrive in this flower-filled farm. Ferdinand's encounter with the pet dog Paco reveals his ideological position. When Paco insists that "dogs are dogs and bulls are bulls, and that is normal" (00:17:31), Ferdinand rejects this species-role essentialist logic. He articulates a performative politics of self-definition by redefining weirdness as the "new normal" (00:17:50).

Ferdinand's understanding of his body is central to the reworking of masculinity in the film. He is enormous and imposing, but, instead of equating his giant stature with domination and violence, he believes that being large allows him to become a "big helper" (00:19:20). This re-appropriation of his body as a site of care rather than aggression engrosses Connell's idea that bodies are active participants in social practice. Ferdinand reconceptualises his massive body as an expression of altruism, and this redefinition disrupts the conventional association of masculine physique with aggression.

The bullfight sequence at the climax gives the film's argument its clearest expression. Constantly provoked by El Primero, Ferdinand is pushed to his limits. The sight of the flower, rescues him from the verge of violence and brings him back to his senses (01:31:45). His final act of defiance is expressed when

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he refuses to retaliate and stubbornly sits down before El Primero's sword (01:33:30). By refusing to fight, Ferdinand denies the matador a heroic status and exposes the violence of the bull ring as gratuitous rather than dignified. The shifting response of the crowd from hostility to approval vocalises Butler's perception that sustained deviation from gendered norms can transform the normative landscape.

The film's commentary on gender is extended to the supporting characters whose experiences and responses vary according to the positions they occupy. Their portrayal strengthens Connell's argument that the hegemonic model of masculinity harms not only those it excludes but also those who are pressured to perform it.

Among Ferdinand's peers on the ranch, Valiente shows the most aggressive expression of hyper-masculinity. His aggression is the outcome of his father's ultimatum that he either "go down" as a weakling or "better bull up" (00:09:00). This scene shows the dangers of conforming to the intergenerational transmission of hegemonic norms. He even looked down upon Ferdinand's pacifism as delusional. His worldview is elucidated when he states that "bulls fight or they go down. That's how the world works" (01:07:20). However, when he loses one of his horns in a fight with Ferdinand, his symbolic castration is completed, and he is discarded by the ranch to a chop house. Thus, the hollow promise at the heart of hegemonic aspiration is revealed by the ranch's indifference. Valiente's ideological shift is marked when he acknowledges Ferdinand as "flower bull" as a badge of respect in the climactic scene (01:35:41).

Guapo and Bones are the manifestation of complicit masculinity. Guapo's bodily anxiety is expressed when he regularly vomits from fear, constituting what Butler points out as the biological rejection of the aggressive roles he is compelled to perform. Bones, who is physically puny, works tirelessly to compensate through his performance. Both the bulls are victims of the exhausting, damaging nature of hegemonic compliance. It is in a dance competition that Bones experiences genuine joy when he realises that he has not "laughed like that in years" (00:58:10). His performance of toughness for a prolonged period of time stifled his authentic self.

Lupe, the calming goat, is the only female character in the hyper-masculine environment of the ranch. By assigning her the task of managing the emotional volatilities of the violent bulls, the film reproduces the familiar societal perception that emotional labour is a female responsibility. She is both indispensable and marginalised. Though the ranch relies on Lupe's emotional labour, she is continuously subjected to verbal abuse, thrown into trucks, and denied a proper place to sleep. By the end of the film,

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Lupe's role is transformed from a mere tool of the ranch to a valued member of the family. This transformation supports the film's broader argument about the flexibility and inclusivity of the reimagined gender identities.

El Primero, by positioning himself at the apex of the hierarchy of the ranch, subjugates subordinate masculinities, as indicated by his collection of bull horn trophies. When a spectator throws a flower at him, he sniffs it briefly and discards it, indirectly stating that within his system of power, beauty and softness have no value. Even though his nodding acknowledgement of Ferdinand at the climactic scene appears ambiguous, it opens a possibility that even the most firmly established hegemonic subject can accept the force of gender subversion.

The film's ideological arguments needed to be extended to its visual design. Art director Tom Cardone comments on the design of Ferdinand's body to the rolling hills and sweeping curves of the Andalusian landscape; "Ferdinand is at one with nature, so he's got these sweeping curves" (qtd. in Mellor). This visual similarity between the character and environment articulates Ferdinand's ecological and emotional belonging outside the ranch. In contrast to Ferdinand, characters such as El Primero, Señor Moreno, and Valiente are rendered in more angular, geometric designs, connoting rigidity.

The differences in the spatial design of the ranch and Juan's farm are a stunning visual metaphor. The ranch and the bullring appear arid, angular, and lifeless, symbolising a patriarchal institution that enforces hegemonic ideals through constant surveillance and threat. Juan's farm, on the other hand, is characterised by round, lush green, flower-filled hills that offer Ferdinand a sanctuary to thrive as himself. In the final shot, all the bulls and Lupe rest together under a cork tree on a luminous hillside (01:37:40), and this scene visually enacts the deconstruction of the hegemonic hierarchy, as the arena is replaced by the pastoral, and dominance by companionship and solidarity.

Another symbolic opposition plays in the film between horns and flowers. In the film's semiotic landscape, horns function as the primary phallic signifier of hegemonic masculinity. It becomes the instrument in violence, makers of worth, and in El Primero's souvenir collection, trophies of conquest. Valiente's loss of horns is comprehended as a loss of his manhood by the community. But when Ferdinand assures him that he is "more than a set of horns" (01:11:38), it effectively fractures the association of physical attributes and masculine identity. Flowers appear as the symbolic counterpoint to horns and are culturally coded as feminine in the film: "a little feminine touch" (00:34:49). Ferdinand's attachment to

the flowers disrupts the conventional coding by transforming them into a symbol of selfhood. By integrating the feminine traits of care and nurture into his masculine physique, Ferdinand challenges the binary structure of gender and models a subjectivity that goes far beyond the rigid gender categories.

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