



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The New Insights Of Masculinity On Digital Platform

Dr. Himakshi Kalita

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Assam

Abstract: The dichotomy between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ has always been a topic of debate in every society. An alleged claim prevailing in the feminist circle is that these very ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ prevent women from entering their desired domains as ‘masculinity’ is always associated with rationality and intelligence and ‘femininity’ with irrationality and emotions. Such claims have given birth to numerous branches of feminism which attempt to deconstruct the societal and cultural factors behind the ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. In the process, condemnation of the males for cherishing masochistic ideals is a common practice among the feminist critics. The feminist critics aspire to safeguard the identity of the women from the clutches of male ego and superiority in the patriarchal society. But with the advent of new thinking, a section of men and women tend to view the idea of ‘masculinity’ in a different light. According to them, in a patriarchal society where men and women are prone to be judged by the socially and culturally constructed definitions, the women are not the sole victims but the men also suffer. In such a society, the men are robbed of their natural emotional instincts which ultimately lead to their suffocation. Since the men are always taught to suppress their emotional sides, it creates a lacuna in the psyche of some males. The men feel trapped. They secretly carry the burden of loneliness and anxiety wearing a mask of indifference. They are forever haunted by the societal and familial pressures of being a perfect and responsible man. The present paper attempts to analyze the poems, speeches and other performances both by males and females on digital platform which frankly addresses such issues. The paper brings to forefront the biases embedded in the very idea of masculinity.

Key words: male, female, society, masculinity, gender, victims.

A historico-cultural mapping of the myriad representational tendencies of feminism brings to light some remarkable debates regarding construction of gender in the society. A deep and thoroughgoing study into this matter reveals that the debate regarding ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ is more problematic than it seems. Simple binarism cannot provide definite insights into the prevailing dichotomy between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. The critical discourse with respect to the construction of gender challenges the essentialist assumptions about ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and argues that ideas about these categories are not immutable. The new insights of ‘masculinity’ discussed in this paper call into question the toxic gender roles which are traditionally accepted.

Feminism has always promoted women's liberation from being the subordinate gender in a patriarchal society in which men usually set the rules. The dominant idea of 'masculinity' is always being questioned but a time has come where the thought should be given to reconstruct the very category of 'masculinity'. The present paper attempts to show that the social constructedness of gender is equally harmful to both males and females. The stereotypical portrayals of gender in society have always prevented both the men and the women from becoming their real selves. Even in both marketing and academia, women and the female gender roles are usually called for attention and seen as a challenge to overcome, while discussions about men and the male gender roles are being somewhat overlooked. The present paper aspires to address the issue of 'masculinity' in a new light. In the process, the paper deals with poems and speeches performed by males and females on digital platform which articulate the unspoken things of a male psychology and are vocal about defending men's position in the society.

There is no denial of the fact that women have been suffering in this patriarchal society since time immemorial. Men are often portrayed as superior to the women when it comes to power, status, authority and physical control. Women are usually seen as a passive participant while men are pictured as the active participant in imagery. Such kinds of perceptions are detrimental to the cause of women. The main focus is that such perceptions may prove inimical and unwholesome to the male cause even. Gender has long been seen as a social construction, where women and men have been seen as each other's opposites. Gender is always created by social surroundings. Behind the idea of gender, social constructions are operational. 'Masculinity' is defined by Connell as thus: "Masculinity is socially constructed and has a material existence at several levels, in culture and institutions, in personality, and in the social definition and use of the body. It is constructed within a gender order that defines masculinity in opposition to femininity, and in so doing, sustains a power relation between men and women as groups. Strictly speaking there is no one thing that is masculinity" (p. 454). Gender roles are an "achieved status in a social environment, which implicitly and explicitly categorize people and therefore motivate social behaviours" (Lindsey, p.4). The prescribed norms of the society are burdensome for males. Anubhav Agrawal's poem *Main Ek Ladka Hoon* ("I am a Boy") performed on his own YouTube Channel raises some important questions regarding the status quo that every male has to maintain at the cost of his feelings and emotions. Anubhav Agrawal, through his poem, has disclosed the feeling of deprivation lurking in every man's heart in a very poignant manner. He describes how he has been taught to be tough by his friends and family members since his childhood. He has been trained to suppress his tears and not to cry in every step:

"But why? Why don't boys cry?

Don't they have any emotions

or the emotions of boys don't have any value?

Why since childhood boys are taught to suppress

their tears? Why are boys made so strong?

If boys cry, society makes ridicule of them....."

(Translation own)

His frustrated self throws numerous questions to the society. He laments over the fact that the society always imposes numerous burdens on men's shoulders; a man has to look after his parents and has to be the bread-earner of the family. A man is expected to bear the mental and emotional burden faced by him in a stoic manner. The society always neglects the emotional side of a man:

“Who will understand the boys?

Their feelings, their emotions, their dreams,

who will understand these things?.....

What about the happiness of boys?

They are made to understand that

they themselves have to search for their own happiness.....”

(Translation own)

Anubhav Agrawal, through his poem, requests everyone to change this perception as a man can also feel emotional needs at some point of life:

“Sometimes try to understand our responsibilities,

sometimes try to feel our pains too.....

We are expected to respect all but none respects us.

Boys too feel like crying sometimes.

Don't say anymore that boys don't cry.”

(Translation own)

The prescribed norms of a patriarchal society not only stereotype women but also attempt to mould the behaviour of men in a particular manner. Gender refers to the social, cultural and psychological traits linked to 'males' and 'females' through particular social contexts. Whether 'sex' makes one 'male' or 'female', 'gender' makes one 'masculine' or 'feminine'. 'Sex' is an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but 'gender' is an achieved status because it must be learned. Gender refers to “meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to male and female categories” (Eagly, p.4). Notions of gendering have pervaded every aspect of society. If a man does not fit into the assigned behavioural framework of 'masculinity', he has to face humiliation and embarrassment in the society. Anushka Sharma's poem *Kyunki Main Ladka Hu* (“Because I am a Boy”) on The Social Tape records the burdens that a man has to undergo due to the social constructedness of society. Many males grow mature before their age because they have to and they cannot even express their feelings because they are 'men'. No seats are reserved for boys in a metro. Once a boy child is born, he is declared as the heir to the family and it is expected that he has to sacrifice his own dreams, wishes, desires and has to safeguard the prestige of the family till the last breath of his life: “No one thinks how a small child will carry so much burden of expectations” (Translation own). Though written by a female, the poem uses a male persona who is pitted against the constructed notion of 'masculinity' in the patriarchal society: “Why I am always gifted a car and my sister gets a doll to play with? Why does father always prevent me from eating *khatti-mithi panipuriyan*” (Translation own). In this patriarchal society, gender roles define “prescribed behaviours that are deemed appropriate for women and men” (Lipman, p.2). The poem of Anushka Sharma rebels against the gender-biased perception of society:

“If someone would have told me
 that as a boy you are free to do anything.
 You don’t have to become an engineer,
 rather pursue the goals of your choice.
 You can choose to do *kathak* and cooking.
 Your liking for the colour pink won’t diminish your maleness.
 You don’t have to be strong like a mountain,
 just flow like a river.....”

(Translation own)

The poem clearly depicts that ‘gender’ roles, differing from ‘sex’ roles which are physiological differences based on sexual genitalia, are social constructs, and they “contain self-concepts, psychological traits,...[and] family, occupational, and political roles assigned dichotomously to members of each sex” (Lipman, p.2). Social roles are learned over time and are subject to constant reinforcement. Deepika Narayan Bhardwaj, a journalist, anchor and documentary filmmaker, speaks about the dangerous consequences of such reinforcement in her speech on “Men--- The Forgotten Gender” on TEDx Talks. She comments on the issue of Men’s Rights and abuses of one-sided gender centric laws in the Indian Penal Code. Bhardwaj talks about how men in the Indian society are suffering due to the draconian Indian Penal Code which is made for the protection of women but ignores men and their issues. She addresses the Indian Dowry Act from the perspective of men. Bhardwaj talks of men who are victimized and systematically abused by laws that are made for women but are abused to victimize men. She forcefully asserts her conviction that true gender equality is when both women and men have a voice. Bhardwaj’s documentary film “Martyrs of Marriage” also centres on such themes.

The process of socialization is “the lifelong process through which individuals learn their culture, develop their potential, and become functioning members of society” (Lindsey, p.53). There are numerous writings which depict the injustice meted out to women but the injustice faced by a man always remains unsaid and don’t find any place in any literature. Literature is “social evidence and testimony. It is a continuous commentary on manners and morals. Its great moments, even as they address themselves to the external existential problems which are at the root of the perennial tensions between men and their society, preserve for us the precious record of modes of response to peculiar social and cultural conditions” (Coser, p.xv). The concept of gendering has historically influenced the production, dissemination, consumption of literature where ‘masculinity’ is always projected as courageous, brave, unemotional, strong, resistant and many more. A text written by a male author addressing the male readers demand a specific code of conduct from every male and thus circulates the prevailing ideology of ‘masculinity’ in the society. A man feels pressurized by patriarchy’s demand to achieve the ideal standards of ‘masculinity’ which may lead to inner anxieties and frustrations. The poem *Hum Ladkon Ka Bas Dil Rota Hain* (“As Boys Only Our Hearts Cry Out”) by Amritesh Jha on Voice of Surat focuses on the inner crisis of men. A boy from the moment of his birth is reminded of his career. An empty pocket on the part of a male child earns taunts and insults from the parents. In a moving manner, Amritesh Kha says, “We are the servants of life, we incessantly search for jobs to sustain ourselves” (Translation own). In this struggle for livelihood, a man may feel like being a *jinda laach* (“living dead body”) as the society does not permit him to share this struggle with anyone. The society restricts him from bringing tears into his eyes and consequently his heart cries silently. According to Musse, “It is a banal truth that an individual’s sex role is the most salient role directs more of his overt behaviour, emotional reactions, cognitive functions, covert attitudes and general psychological and social adjustments....Nor is the ascription of any role more fundamental for the maintenance and continuity of society. Activities, tasks, characteristics and attitudes are assigned differently to men and women in all cultures” (p. 707). The poem *Ladko Ki Kahani* (“Stories of Boys”) by Akriti on The Social House Poetry describes the ‘male-tale’ of hardships, often untold and unfolded. This piece of poetry breaks all

myths of what a male actually is. When a boy child is born to the family, he is called by names like *Krishna*, *Arjun*, *Bhole-Bhandari* etc. These names carry the mythological connotations of male supremacy. Everyone wants him to be either a doctor or an engineer or an architect without even thinking about his personal choices. Everything is pre-decided about his life and future. And if he cannot match up to those expectations, he is made to feel low and inferior in his own eyes. The poem acutely describes how a boy has to struggle between his mind and brain, between his vocation and his passion. The poem describes how the society always reminds a boy about his achievements in life and tries to drag him down by comparing his achievements to those who are superior to him in societal rank.

The socialization of a child comes in stages and that the parents are the primary agents of socialization. For effective socialization, the role of the father for the sons and the mother for the daughters is the proper role for emulation. In this process, “dependent behaviours are less rewarded for males, and physically aggressive behaviours are less rewarded for females” (Mischel, p. 75). As a child observes dependent behaviour in the mother and aggressive behaviour in the father, she or he begins to associate these two behaviour traits with other females and males. Positive rewards are attributed to emulating the behaviour of males if the child is a boy and the behaviour of females if the child is a girl. Identification continues with the parent’s choice of clothing, hairstyles, toys, games, playmates, and finally through “nonpermissive parental reactions to deviant sex-role behaviour” (Mischel, p. 215). Children who did not conform to their respective roles were considered “abnormal or even psychologically unhealthy by doctors or clinical psychologists” (Singleton, p.4). Helly Shah in her poem “What Society Says to Men” on Spoken Word Poetry shows how men are prone to be judged “with the shackles of misogyny, patriarchy, chauvinism, and ten other jargons.” She deconstructs five overrated jargons regarding men constructed by the society: “Men don’t cry”, “All men are dogs”, “Be a man”, “Real men finish last” and “Men will be men”. She laments over the fact that how these “commonly misinformed” quotes are widely used “to define an entire freaking gender”. She forcefully urges:

“A man should be a man when he sheds his first tear,
when he cries his eyes out.
A man should be a man and not a dog or a pig or any other animal
you could possibly generalize.....
A man should be a man when he is in bed with the woman
he loves, cherishes and appreciates.....
And before everything else, a man is a human too.
So don’t get me wrong. I am not trying to change any definitions.
This is me trying to fix the misconceptions.”

A child’s gender identity or the categorization of boy or girl is the first basic building block. From there, the child begins to comprehend what being a boy or girl meant with regard to his or her behaviour. Helly Shah, through her poem, appeals to the society to change such a perception:

“This one is for all the young boys becoming predators.
Forgetting they were victims first, victims of society’s norms,
from the moment they were born.
So don’t get me wrong. This is not about feminism or a million other -isms.
This is about unlearning years of conditioning and apathy,
and instead learning kindness and empathy.

We need to liberate our souls from what it is to be he or she,
and see what it is to be you and me.
So this time, let's make it about humanity."

The patriarchal norms of the society establish the values of 'gallantry' and 'coquetry' in social practices for 'males' and 'females'. Due to such societal practices, the man wears a mask even against his will sometimes. Jyoti Mamgain and Anish Bhat's poem "A Man's No" on Suno Jam Poetry beautifully captures the inner crisis and dilemma of a man when he is in love. The female persona in this poem cherishes her dream of an ideal lover constructed and imposed on her mind by the society. As a result, the male lover suffers silently as he falls short of her expectations:

"So I never told her that I could not sleep at night.
Even the weakest of the voices, they woke me up.
The all that I wanted at that time was her to make me feel
better about myself. But instead, I tried. I tried to be strong for her.
As strong as a sleep. But I realised, if I didn't feel safe,
I can never make her feel safe."

The girl exclaims with joy: "He was exactly how I imagined him to be, my dream man, my prince charming... He was my knight". The boy bemoans: "But she didn't love me, she loved the armour. She loved the metal but not the flesh. She loved the knight but not the scars." The poem shows that the idea of a 'perfect masculinity' is illusive. The boy maintains silence whereas the girl is vocal in expressing her feelings. The boy feels threatened in the relationship and ultimately, he runs away feeling suffocated. Ruby Gupta's poem "Dear Boys"---*Apna Dard Chupana Zaroori Hai Kya?* ("Is It Necessary to Hide Your Feelings?") on @RubyGupta states that from an early age, men are conditioned to believe that expressing their feelings is out of character with the male identity. They are taught that doing so can ruin their image of being strong and stoic. But such behavioural pattern builds up tension in the psyche of a man, isolates him, increases stress, creates more problems, makes him feel out of control, creates tension in his body and puts strain on his health. But expressing feelings can help him to feel connected, empowered, understood and relieved. She states that too much suppression of emotions may lead to porn addiction as well as drugs and alcohol addiction in some males. Ruby Gupta, through her poem, requests every man not to suppress his emotions as it causes dysfunctionality in his behaviour. Zakir Khan's poem *Sabko Sambhalne Walon ko Sambhalne Wale Kam Hote Hain* ("Very Few are Supportive to those Who Supports Everyone") on MensXP proclaims that men should try to spend time talking to himself to relieve mental stress as men rarely share their feelings with others. Puneet Dixit's poem *Hum Ladke Hain Janab* ("We are Boys") on GTALKS professes how willingly a boy sacrifices his own happiness for others; they stumble but still walk relentlessly in the race of life. Puneet Dixit points out that when a boy is publicly beaten on the road, everyone enjoys the sight but no one questions whether his crimes are genuine or not, no one thinks whether it is just to beat him or not. When a boy raises his voice for his rights, his voice is suppressed by the society using the tag "All men are same". The poem comes with the appeal that boys are not made of stones; they suffer too.

Change of an oppressive condition hinges upon changing how the condition was labelled by the society. In case of males, they have to realise that they are fighting the way previous generations have described things. Ayushman Khurrana's poem *Gentleman Kise Kehte Hai?* ("How to Define a Gentleman?") attempts to break the stereotypical notion regarding 'masculinity':

"Who should be called a gentleman? You know, there is a
stereotype regarding men. Such a macho-type guy! A man

will handle the family matters, he will save ladies in distress.

He will not cry, he won't be weak. I feel all these are not okay.

I neither want to be a hero nor the saviour nor the superman.

I want to be a man who can cry or sing or save people within my capacity.”

(Translation own)

Everyone advises a man to be a gentleman but also warns him not to nurture gentle qualities as it goes against his ‘masculinity’. The media platforms, entertainment industries, advertisements have popularised the perfect idea of ‘masculinity’ that comes with achieving six-pack abs and strong muscles. Khurrana protests through his poem against such negative circulation of ‘masculinity’ and attempts to re-build the stock-image of ‘masculinity’:

I know that the ads told you to play it too cool, and Fathers

asked you to be disciplined as if you are always in school.....

There are differences between boys and girls and these differences

are beautiful but to discriminate between boys and girls based

on these differences is a crime.....”

(Translation own)

The poem records that boys are abused and traumatised too and boys also become prey to socialized gender patriarchy. The maladies of patriarchy have also impacted the existence of men in an adverse and unfavourable manner. The poem urges every man to nurture gentle qualities inside his heart for an all-round development of his personality and not to situate himself in the pre-defined category of ‘masculinity’ constructed by the society.

Individuals live in groups and how the group reacts to the actions of an individual is important to an individual member's development of meanings and subsequent future actions. People take into account their words, objectives and self-images in order to structure the self. Therefore, it is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the values and ideals of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Plummer noted that societies were comprised of multiple voices and concluded that “all voices need hearing: it is just that some are heard less than others” (p. 82). Unlike ‘female’ voice, ‘male’ voice always plays the dominant role in mainstream discourse. But the projection of ‘masculinity’ in mainstream literature embodies such traits and ways of feeling, perceiving and acting which aggrandise aggressive ‘male’ selves and do not take into account the genuine desires, issues and interests and reasoning which truly define ‘males’ as real human beings with shortcomings and imperfections. The poems and speeches on men and his issues herald a new era in the area of ‘masculine’ areas and enterprises as such a platform provide an opportunity to both ‘males’ and ‘females’ to communicate the innermost thoughts and feelings irrespective of the norms and standards set by the patriarchal mind-set of the society. The ‘males’ should not be labelled by social stereotypes or have their level of ‘masculinity’ intrusively measured. As individuals, they have the right to self-expression and the undeniable influence of patriarchy should not define them.

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