IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Tracing Subjugated Masculinities in Gajendrakumar Mitra's *Ekti Galpa*

Savyasachi K G

PhD Research Scholar

Department of Humanities and Management

Dr B R Ambedkar National Institute of Technology Jalandhar, Punjab, India

Abstract: Gajendrakumar Mitra's short story *Ekti Galpa* (trans. *A Story*) (1954), translated from Bengali to English as *The Family Retainer* (2006) by Aruna Chakravarti, depicts the miserable life of a subjugated man who is exploited and dehumanised by his own family. The gendered positioning of an average Indian man balancing his identity and existence between ideal masculinity, male honour, pride, privilege, and oppression is explored throughout the short story. The article examines the major male characters in the story, including Haran, his neighbour, Rai Bahadur, and Bhupati Babu (Bahadur's second son-in-law), using Connell's concept of 'Hegemonic Masculinity', to decipher the categorisations and subjugations within male communities that create constant hierarchical structuring of male gender. Drawing upon Mimi Scippers' idea of 'Hegemonic Femininity', the article addresses the serious issue of female-on-male domination that is often trivialised or sidelined, through the prominent female characters of the story, Rai Bahadur's wife and Rajbala. The article finds that masculinity is not a homogenous unit but a heterogeneous variable that is constantly constructed and reconstructed under the influence of many material things, abstract ideas, and value systems.

Keywords: Subjugated Masculinities, Hegemonic Masculinity, Hegemonic Femininity, Indian men, Bengali Literature

Gajendrakumar Mitra's short story *Ekti Galpa* (trans. *A Story*) (1954), translated from Bengali to English as *The Family Retainer* (2006) by Aruna Chakravarti, follows the tragic life of a subordinated man who gets degraded and exploited by his own family. It explores multiple aspects of the gendered positioning of an average Indian man juggling his identity and existence between ideal masculinity, male honour, pride, privilege, and oppression. Haran, the central character of the story, is introduced as the son-in-law of the wealthy Rai Bahadur, who served as the medical advisor of some large business firms in Burma. He was brought to the Bahadur family when he was a schoolboy as a suitable groom for Rajbala, Bahadur's elder daughter. Haran's father sold him for ten thousand rupees to the Bahadur family. In between the economic and business transactions of the two dominant men, Haran lost his boyhood and dreams. The story is narrated through the perspective of his neighbour, and Haran is given a voice only at the end of the story, reflecting his long-repressed plight of being a servant in his own home. Through the neighbour who tries to understand Haran's pathetic life and help him escape from the space to lead an independent and dignified life, the story points towards the role of power, money, and position in the marginalisation of men.

The article examines the major male characters in the story, including Haran, his neighbour, Rai Bahadur, and Bhupati Babu (Bahadur's second son-in-law), using Connell's concept of 'Hegemonic Masculinity', to decipher the categorisations and subjugations within male communities that create constant hierarchical structuring of male gender. Drawing upon Mimi Scippers' idea of 'Hegemonic Femininity', the article addresses the serious issue of female-on-male domination that is often trivialised or sidelined, through the prominent female characters of the story, Rai Bahadur's wife and Rajbala.

Masculinity can be perceived as an identity and ideology, driving towards the idea of it being biopsychosocial, even when it is considered not to be something that is inherent or innate in a human being. The present article considers masculinity as the cultural interpretation of maleness, learnt through participation in society and its institutions (Leach, 1994). It analyses the role of family in the man-making process in India through the life and events of Haran. Connell broadly categorised masculinities into four main groups, they are hegemonic, complicit, marginalised, and subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is the ideal masculinity that is considered to be supreme in a given cultural set-up. It embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Marginalised masculinity is in

opposition to the hegemonic traits of masculinity. It is the masculinity that is insignificant in front of the dominant masculine norms based on class, ethnicity, or status. Masculinity that lacks any of the characteristics of the hegemonic men in a given gender system at a given time and place is called subordinated masculinity. The relation of marginalisation and authorisation to hegemonic men can be found both in marginalised and subordinated masculinities (Connell, 2005). The posh and luxurious life of the Bahadur family was not suitable for Haran, who came from a financially weak background. Haran was perplexed by his altered circumstances and saw his father-in-law as a malignant man who used his power, position, and money to buy him and mould him to suit his needs. Bahadur wanted to create a hegemonic man out of fragile Haran, who had no say in his own life. The persistence of Haran's marginalisation and subordination was under the lordship of Bahadur, the patriarch who dominated everyone in the family with the authority and agency that he possessed. Masculinities do not exist in socio-cultural vacuums but are socially constructed within institutional settings (Hearn and Kimmel, 2006). The Bahadur family treated Haran very well in the initial years, but he was a rebel who was determined not to obey their elite rules. When Bahadur and his wife realised that they couldn't make him come to heel, they started othering him and treating him like a lowly creature. Haran was ready to accept his subservience and live accordingly, "I had actually willed myself to become a lowly, subhuman creature, they started treating me like one" (Mitra, 2003). In India, when the modern realities conflict with the traditional gender script, some men get squeezed into the newly emerged complexities of patriarchal societies. They undergo a psychological dilemma if the traditional order gets disrupted or reinstalled differently (Longkumer, 2015). When Haran's supposed inferior masculinity couldn't match the elite standards of the Bahadur's *jomidar*[1] masculinity, he felt deficient, insignificant, and diffident about his own manhood. The genderscape shift from his poor household to the wealthy Bahadur family made him more marginalised due to the increased proximity to hegemonic masculinity.

The masculinity of Rai Bahadur is the most dominant one in the story. His adamancy to change Haran's character and behaviour hardened the lives of many in the family. He couldn't let go of his male ego and pride, and that destroyed the chance for Haran to build an identity of his own. Not only that, his actions killed the joys of a happy matrimony for his daughter Rajbala, and they resulted in Haran's children treating him like a mere servant. Another minor male character is Bhupati Babu, who is the beloved second son-in-law of Rai Bahadur. He is a doctor by profession, but couldn't earn much from it and was dependent mainly on his father-in-law. As per Bahadur's wife, he was the only son-in-law they respected and considered to be part of their family. Masculinities constructed in ways that realise the patriarchal dividend without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy are complicit masculinities (Connell, 2005). Bhupati Babu is an apt example of complicit masculinity since he easily receives all the privileges of patriarchy by just showing solidarity with the hegemonic masculine authority of his father-in-law. Even though marginalised due to class and position, the neighbour in the story seems to be a rebel man revolting against the hegemony indirectly by helping Haran to escape from his subjugated life. He loses control and fiercely tells Haran, "What good can possibly come from staying with them? On the contrary, if you go away now, if you show them you have a spark of manhood left in you, they'll come to respect you in time" (Mitra, 2003). Notably, the neighbour is motivating him to 'show' them his 'manhood', and that itself suggests the fact that masculinity is a planned performance. The neighbour was empathetic towards Haran, and he considered it his moral responsibility to save Haran from the threats of hegemony.

As the story grows, Haran describes his blending in with the hegemonic gender system to his neighbour. He constantly tried to adjust himself to the authority and eventually became accustomed to it, and his entire life was defined by that. Through the 'repeated stylisation of the body' within a 'regulatory framework', Haran produced and practised his marginalised masculinity (Butler, 1990). Identity assertion or resistance was not the reaction mechanism employed by Haran to survive the hegemony. He sacrificed his position as the son-in-law of the family and turned completely into an obedient servant. Haran's decision was based on his adherence to societal norms and the related protection and privilege it provided him. He was completely helpless as he had nowhere to go, and it was too late to start a new life. He opens up about his willingness to get subjugated by superior men and women, "Instead of hitting back, I submitted meekly to their will. Somewhat like a dog–you know. An abused dog" (Mitra, 2003). Slowly, he lost his voice to express himself, and he turned completely into someone's slave, "So, like a caged bird, I clung to my perch. I had forgotten how to fly" (Mitra, 2003). In implementing hegemony and the dominant-dominated formula, along with consent and coercion, people use emotional dependency as an effective tool. When Haran sabotages the plan made by his neighbour to escape from the servitude in the Bahadur family, he reveals that he can't leave his children and wife. He says, "I can't live without them. The bonds are too strong for me to break" (Mitra, 2003). For the children, he is not their father but just 'Haran Da', their faithful servant. Even then, he believed that his entire existence was limited to being the caretaker of the Bahadur family. Out of the traditional roles of a man, he couldn't fulfil the roles of a provider or protector of his family. Though he achieved the procreator role, that alone didn't grant him the masculine integrity of the upper-class standards of the Bahadur family.

The female characters in the story contribute substantially to the maintenance and growth of patriarchy and gender inequality. Rai Bahadur's wife, who is not given a name in the story (symbolising her identity solely dependent on her husband), lives a lavish life with all the privileges that her husband's social position and authority gave her. When she pays a visit to the neighbour's house, she brags to his *Boudi*[2] about her princely life in Burma, the honour and dignity of her position, the luxuries her grandchildren had taken for granted, and how the Burmese governor respected her views. She represents the typical pompous and pretentious women in rich households who utilise their access to power to subordinate men and women below their status. As per Connell, the 'femininity organised as an adaptation to

men's power, and emphasising compliance, nurturance, and empathy is emphasised femininity, and they are not in a position to establish hegemony over other forms of femininity' (1987). Schippers uses the nomenclature of hegemonic femininity instead of emphasised femininity. For her, 'hegemonic femininity consists of characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (2007). In that sense, Rai Bahadur's wife is a hegemonic woman (performing emphasised and hegemonic femininities simultaneously) who establishes her superior femininity everywhere she goes, dominates whoever is below her social position, follows the instructions of her hegemonic man, Rai Bahadur, and makes sure not to transgress the limits of his masculinity. She degrades Haran, his manners, and his lifestyle in front of her neighbours and believes that it is better for her grandchildren not to know that Haran is their father. It is evident from her words that she doesn't consider Haran as her son-in-law: "He has neither self-respect nor the will to do anything else", "I'll tell myself I've kept a steward to look after the household" (Mitra, 2003). Rajbala is a miniature version of her mother, but she doesn't dominate her husband or anyone else in the household. She was kind enough to take her husband from the veranda to her bedroom when he was lying on the floor, suffering from fever. Haran acknowledges this and defends her in front of the neighbour, "She made up a bed for me with her own hands", "She loves me…perhaps…just a little" (Mitra, 2003). It is evident from the story that Rajbala was a meek woman who was under the protection of her father even after getting married to Haran. She had no influence on her father to change the conditions for her husband. For her, even her husband was not independent enough to protect her; he was also under the protection of her father. When the neighbour encourages Haran to leave the Bahadur family and live a life on his own with dignity, Haran replies, "This is my father-in-law's house after all", "I'm under his protection" (Mitra, 2003). Since he didn't fulfil the gender roles of an ideal man, she accepted his domination under her father and made her peace with it.

Masculinity is not a homogenous unit but a heterogeneous variable that is constantly constructed and reconstructed under the influence of many material things, abstract ideas, and value systems. In the story, Haran's manhood is controlled by many external factors, including his father-in-law's hegemonic masculinity, male ego, pride, money, position, etc. Haran's neighbour's interaction and support to uplift his marginalised masculinity trigger in him an urgency to leave the Bahadur family and go somewhere to lead a life of dignity. Even though he couldn't leave his family because of his emotional attachment, considering leaving them itself was a revolutionary step to redeem his subjugated manhood. Along with that, Haran's inferior class and status conflicted with the sophisticated lifestyle of the Bahadur family, which also affected his masculine identity and performance. The women associated with him, mainly his wife and mother-in-law, who were above him in the hierarchy, subjugated him as he was not respected by the head man of the family. According to the Bahadur family, Haran failed as a man when he couldn't achieve the qualities of ideal masculinity, as "men were expected to be strong, authoritative, decisive, disciplined and resourceful" (Beynon, 2002) in the patriarchal society in which they lived. Schwalbe reminds us that 'as per sociologists, men "do masculinity", and by that they are not referring to expressions of character but to practices that males do to identify themselves as men' (2015). In the short story, Haran enacts and embodies a marginalised masculinity that he believes is the most suitable for his condition. He continuously performs it and eventually gets entrapped in the same without being able to get out of it.

Notes

[1] Bengali word for landlord

[2] Bengali word for sister-in-law

Works Cited

[1] Beynon, J. (2002). Masculinities and Culture. Open University Press.

[2] Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge.

[3] Connell, R. (1987). Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics. Polity Press.

[4] Connell, R. (2005). Masculinities (2nd ed.). Cambridge Polity.

[5] Hearn, J. and Michael S Kimmel. (2006). Changing Studies on Men and Masculinities. In K. Davis, M. Evans, and J. Lorber (Eds.). Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies (54–70). SAGE Publications.

[6] Leach, Mike. (1994). The Politics of Masculinity: An Overview of Contemporary Theory. Social Alternatives, 12 (4): 36-38.

[7] Longkumer, L. (2015). The Third Sex: The Oppressed Man in Patriarchy. In N. Mukherjee (Ed.), Gendering the Narrative: Indian English Fiction and Gender Discourse (15–23). Cambridge Scholars Publishers.

[8] Mitra, G. (2003). The Family Retainer (Ekti Galpa). In A. Chakravarti (Ed.), & A. Chakravarti (Trans.), The Way Home (71–88). Penguin Books.

[9] Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony. Theory and Society, 36(1): 85-102.

[10] Schwalbe, M. (2015). Manhood Acts. Routledge.