



Gender Theory in Transition: Feminist Insights and Masculinity Studies in the Indian context

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ABSTRACT

Feminist theories have given rise to some of the strongest debates of current times, challenging inequality, power, and socially constructed gender roles. From its earliest struggle to get political and social rights to contemporary critiques of patriarchy, culture and identity, feminism has expanded visions of justice and human freedom. Gradually, this theory has also opened up ways to establish the study of other side of gender, masculinity. Masculinity studies emerged as a result of recognizing men too are affected by structures of societal expectation and pressure. The scope of feminist investigation has expanded with the incorporation of masculinity studies. This highlights that gender roles impact all identities, alongside creating new concerns about balancing between women and men experiences. This paper is an attempt to trace the trajectory of feminist theories to masculinity studies and how one gave the other its possibility. It discusses the ends, intersection, and contradictions between them and what all these transformations call out for the future of gender studies, especially in India. The aim is to bring gender as not individual fight but a shared challenge of both men and women..

Keywords:

Gender studies, Feminism, Masculinity, Patriarchy, Indian context.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist theories have given rise to some of the strongest debates of current times, challenging inequality, power, and socially constructed gender roles. Beauvoir has stated that a woman is not born but made and a woman is socially and culturally constructed and is continuously conditioned (de Beauvoir, 2011). Judith Butler broadened this idea with her theory of gender performativity arguing that, gender is not a truth but rather it is produced and maintained through socially determined expectations and practices. Such practices express fixed identity, which recreate and reinforces gender norms (Butler, 1990). This implies that gender roles including conventional masculinities are not inborn but are actually performed based on the societal expectations. The sex that one is determined at birth and the gender that one is taught to be, should not dictate how individual live their life.

Although feminist thought has largely talked about the experiences and marginalization of women but it has also triggered a broader way to analyze how patriarchy determines and shapes masculinities. R. W. Connell who coined the term of hegemonic masculinity, states that not every masculinity is equal. Meaning some culturally dominant forms of masculinity are privileged at the expense of women and other less celebrated masculinities. This stratification strengthens the power dynamics concentrates dominance in terms of gender, sexuality, and class (Connell, 1995), (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005).

While Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity gives a global framework, in India, the issue of masculinity construction is further complicated where caste and class intersect with religion. According to scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege the upper caste masculinities are closely connected to the preservation of Brahmanical patriarchy, which exercises sexual control and upholds caste purity. It's not solely about



sustaining patriarchal structure but also continuing caste based oppression. Furthermore, this system is not only limited to the higher castes but is replicated in marginalized communities and influence gender relations (Chakravarti, 2003), (Ambewadikar, 2016)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to textual analysis has been used in this paper. It combines feminist theory and masculinity theory with open-access empirical research and Indian scholarship.

MASCULINITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Masculinity traits are not something that is inborn but a process that is learned in the course of socialization. According to Todd W. Reeser (2010) in his book *Masculinities in Theory*, masculinity is a moving and controversial concept, which is shaped and constructed differently by different cultures, times and social contexts. This implies that there is no one and true definition of how to be a man. What society accepts as masculine is historically and socially constructed. The concept of hegemonic masculinity by Connell reveals how a particular type of masculinity meaning tough, competitive, unemotional are appreciated over others, forcing men to conform while marginalizing alternative masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These expectations are supported by expressions such as boys will be boys that justify aggression, harassment and violence as part of their culture other than cultural training.

The negative gender stereotypes and norms affect how children perceive themselves and how they shape their future in different ways (UNICEF, 2021). The Psychological studies find that restrictive emotionality (Wong, Pituch and Rochlen, 2006) is a powerful and harmful aspect of male socialization that restricts the expression of emotions or help-seeking in men. Similarly, Stella Carvalho (2021) demonstrates that restrictive



cultural norms prevent help seeking by Indian men and thus put them at risk of depression, stress, and even suicide.

From a very young age, men are taught to suppress emotions, fear or sadness, which leads them to use anger or violence as acceptable masculine behavior. Meanwhile, men who do not follow these norms are mocked. Boys who express tenderness or nurturing are taunted with insults that feminize them or associate them with identity as being marginalized identities. That is what is define as the concept of precarious manhood to state where masculinity is viewed as something precarious that has to be repeatedly demonstrated by denying anything feminine (Bosson, Caswell & Vandello, 2013). McGovern (2021) offer additional information that, feminist men tend to be evaluated as less masculine and more feminine and feminist women are perceived as more masculine. Hazel Biana (2019) applies a feminist theory of bell hooks and demonstrates that the study of masculinity is not only to criticize patriarchy but also to uncover how these strict rules are trapping and harming men themselves. In this context Kimmel (2022) states that patriarchy is a dual system where it privileges some men over women and other men.

According to Ashley Brown and Khalid Ismail (2023), the feminist approach to masculinity studies can enable a more critical analysis of the ways of how young men in colleges enact manhood and how these enactments may be modified. Similarly, in his work, Wesley D. Imms (2000) demonstrates how the education of boys tends to generate a variety of masculinities, dominant ones rewarding toughness and competitiveness and penalizing cooperation and sensitivity. This process of schooling rises generations of men who are under the pressure to outdo others. So, masculinity is not natural but is a set of social expectations.



MASCULINITY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

In Indian context, masculinity has been always influenced by complicated cultural, historical, and social factors. In contrast to the Western model of masculinity that tends to prioritize individualism, Indian masculinity has traditionally been built around family, community, and national identity. The analysis of the data provided by the International Center on Research on Women (ICRW) and UNFPA, where the researchers engaged more than 9,000 men and 3,000 women in seven states, reveals the extent to which gender norms form a male identity in India. The results show that the preference of sons, restrictions upon the movement of women, and the normalization of violence are strongly correlated with the concepts of manhood (ICRW & UNFPA, 2014). These observations indicate that masculinity in India is not just about an individual identity, but it is also a shared cultural norm, which is usually supported by tradition and social validation.

Masculinity in India has also traditionally been contextualized in terms of nationalist thinking and leadership. Two opposite models of Indian manhood can be drawn from Gandhi and Savarkar. Gandhi promoted a type of masculinity that is moral, restrained and ascetic wherein self-control and nonviolence mark's strength. In contrast, Savarkar depicted a militant, physically strong and martial vision where ideal of masculinity is more closely linked with Hindu nationalism (Gopi, 2014). These contrasting visions reveal how masculinity served as a political and cultural category, and its role in influencing how generations of men were able to conceive themselves as being a part of the nation. Indian masculinity today is connected to nationalism, sexuality and consumerism, where they perform dominance in order to get status in both private and public life (Srivastava, 2010). The other dimension is the continuation of toxic masculine norms. Research indicates that the Indian society tends to rationalize the concepts of



aggression, domination and emotional suppression as only accepted traits of masculinity. Such behaviors are strengthened by the media, family and peer groups, which provide the context in which violence, particularly intimate partner violence, becomes normalized (Gavin & Kruis, 2021).

Another perspective on the development of masculinity in India is the depiction of masculinity in its media. Popular culture and advertising tend to reproduce and redefine masculinity (Lemon, 2022). For instance, Bollywood glorifies aggressive and controlling or hyper masculine men through lead characters. A semiotics analysis of Indian print advertisements shows that older ads associated masculinity with power, financial prosperity and social superiority, but nowadays advertisements are more concentrated on body image, hygiene, and lifestyle of consumers (Negi & Mandalaparth, 2019). For instances, a teenager name Priyanshu died by suicide in Ujjain in 2022. He was being bullied on social media for wearing makeup and expressing his desire to become a makeup artist (Hindustan Times, 2023). This tragedy clearly shows how strict societal norms punish people who do not follow. In India the mental health and masculinity intersect strongly. As per figures released in The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia, there has been a growth in suicide amongst Indian men and the incidence of male to female "ratio of suicides has increased from 1.9 and 2.5 to 2.4 and 3.2, respectively, during 2014-2021" (Yadav et al 2023). The community institutions also reinforce male domination and authority. Such an institution is Khap Panchayat, a traditional male dominated form of social order in Haryana. The Khap Panchayat strengthens the patriarchal norms and promotes masculinity that consolidates male dominance. It demonstrates hegemonic masculinity, as the position of head of these Panchayats are reserved exclusively for men, which reasserts patriarchal power dynamics and sustains the belief that men are natural leaders and decision makers (Singh, 2024).



Thus, Indian masculinity is shaped by multiple strands of threads. Traditional caste and family structures, nationalistic pride, consumer culture and community authority; all these forces work together to reinforce a single and narrow idea of manhood.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how feminist theories naturally led to the study of masculinity. The evolution highlights that gender is not fixed, but is always changing with society, culture and power. Feminist theories at first have provided the essential tools to understand how gender is constructed and how patriarchy works. This gradually paved the way for masculinity studies.

The analysis shows that patriarchy is not only suppressing women alone; but it also oppresses men as well. Women face systemic discrimination while men go through internalized pressure of being an ideal man. Recognizing this duality does not necessarily mean rejection of women's sufferings but rather strengthens the scope of gender analysis. This emphasizes that, patriarchy is a pervasive system that damages the society as a whole.

In conclusion, the way forward for gender studies in India is to work together. The struggle for a fair society cannot be won alone by a part. It is a shared challenge for both the sexes. It requires both to stand against harmful masculine ideals, deep rooted caste patriarchal system and support diverse ways of being a man or a woman.

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