Masculinity Studies and Feminism
Othering the Self

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Masculinity studies emerges from a conversation with feminism rather than either political activism that equates to feminist endeavours or reaction against the historical experience of oppression. But can men as social beings take part in a "conversation" that seeks to dismantle their social selves?

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Masculinity refers to the "socially produced but embodied ways of being male." Dominant masculinity stands in a relationship not just to its perceived antithesis, femininity, but "also to those ways of being male" that are seen to deviate from the ideal. It is also for this reason that we speak of masculinities rather than "masculinity." It is important, however, to remember that "masculinity" and "femininity" are not simply opposite and equal categories, such that (as is frequently asserted) "each has its own sphere of activity." Rather, each stands in a hierarchical relationship to the other and the "feminine" acts as complement to the masculine, defined in a manner that produces "masculine" identity as a superior one.

It is important, also, to differentiate the linked concepts of "patriarchy" and "masculinity." Patriarchy refers to a *system* of organising social life that is premised on the idea of the superiority of all men to women. Masculinity, on the other hand, is not only a relationship between men and women but also between men. Hence we might say that while patriarchy "makes" men superior, masculinity is the process of producing superior men.

In the field of masculinity studies inspired by feminist approaches to gender, male scholars easily outnumber female ones. This is true for both the global and Indian contexts. The different histories of women's (or gender) studies and masculinity studies account for this situation. The political project of feminism sought to identify, contest and dismantle the naturalisation of gendered subjectivity across diverse contexts such as labour, religion, parenting, sexuality, the state, domesticity and creativity. The historical experience of being a woman has been fundamental to the project of feminism: personal experience has fuelled the politics of resistance and change that interrogates patriarchal structures.

In nuanced versions of feminist thought, the struggle against patriarchy has not been allowed to efface the imbrications of patriarchal frameworks with those that derive from, say, class and caste privilege, ethnicity and capital. The most significant participants in feminism's project of transformation have been women since their experience of power has been both immediate and lacerating. The sites of production of counter-discourses are those where the effects of power are directly experienced.

Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies emerges from a conversation with feminism rather than either political activism that equates to feminist endeavours or as a reaction against the historical experience of oppression. Masculinity studies is, in this way, a supplementary discourse to feminism. It is in this context that we might ask the following question: is it possible for men—produced as hierarchically superior through the processes and institutions described above—to step outside their worlds of privilege and question such privilege? That is to say, can men as social beings take part in a "conversation" that seeks to dismantle their social selves?

One answer to this might be of the kind that such conversations also take place across a number of registers such as caste and religion where those in positions of power seek to take part in processes of questioning privilege through engaging with the ideas of the historically marginalised. Hence, it could be argued, feminist inspired masculinity studies is part of a broader field of political activity. This, however, occludes a significant issue in our understanding of different forms of power and the specific nature of gendered power.

Gendered power is unlike other forms of power in its residual characteristic: we may, for example, eschew caste, class or race privilege but such disavowal does not affect the advantages of gender; the social learning through which we become male seem impervious to the critiques that are directed at other forms of power. Even in instances where there exists a strong

relationship between gendered power and discrimination—such as against homosexual men, who might be viewed as "effeminate" and hence inferior—those discriminated against may continue to subscribe to masculinist ideologies.

Men's involvement with critiques of masculinity is, then, unlike other forms of politics inasmuch as it requires intellectual pessimism: it suggests that various forms of "progressive" politics have, rather than make gendered power transparent, only served to reserve for it a special corner. This is the corner occupied by all men irrespective of their beliefs. The gender of the knower becomes significant inasmuch as irrespective of all that men do not share, they nevertheless share the experience of a certain form of power; while Dalit men may suffer from caste discrimination practised by upper caste men (and, frequently, women), the similarity of their social upbringing also engenders commonality between the two groups.

Further, the experience of shared power (across differing caste, class and ethnic positions, say) makes for specific strategies of dissimulation in a manner that is not relevant for the experience of shared oppression. Hence the difficult nature of the question: is the gender of the knower epistemologically significant? This also, of course, raises another important question: since all men are not equally privileged, are some men (gays and transgenders, for example) better able to engage with feminism?

A straightforward "yes" is not, however, without problems, for it assumes that sexuality is a politics in itself and does not require a detour through other forms of social awareness, such as those relating to class, caste and gender. It is hardly a remarkable observation that gay and transgendered men, while suffering one kind of oppression may not be sympathetic to other kinds that, in fact, prepare the grounds for discriminatory practices against them; a gay identity has never been a guarantee against misogyny.

We must recognise, however, the gender of the knower to be a significant aspect in the study of masculinities for at least two reasons: first, in order to avoid the intellectual conceit that power is transparent and, second, to explore the creative capacities of the recognition.

Men who study masculinities can make a significant contribution to the study of social injustice and power relations through recognition of the opacity of power, such that even as they seek to undo its effect, they cannot ever fully speak for the powerless; their task must be confined to undoing their own histories. To claim anything more is to dissimulate and assume that relinquishing power is a voluntary act and that the powerful actively seek to don the mantle of powerlessness. Male scholars, through recognition of their own impossible position as gendered beings nurtured within the crucibles of power might be able to take up a significant question within studies of power: how is power made? This is a question within masculinity studies that men—produced through power-machines such as families, schools and religious configurations—are well suited to address.

The task of undoing masculine histories, does not, however, translate into a dictate that men should not (or cannot) explore women's worlds. This would, clearly, militate against an understanding of gender as a relationship. What is important, rather, is to explore the ways in which masculinities are implicated in the making of "women" and the manner in which what comes to be seen as "women's world" might also be produced through collaboration with cultures of masculinities. This is a properly feminist concern and it is in this sense that feminist thought undergirds critical explorations of the cultures of masculinity. Masculinity studies employs insights from feminist thought in recasting analytical frameworks—on which more below—in order to comprehend not only the making of gendered power but also the normalisation of this process through quotidian acts of producing the universal subject of human history.

It is in this context that the ideas of "making" and "producing" are crucial to the study of gender identities, for they point to their historical and social nature. The gigantic archive of "proper" masculine behaviour—in novels, films, advertisements, and folk-advice—would clearly be unnecessary if it was a naturally endowed characteristic. The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of masculine identities; they must continually be reinforced. Following from this, we might also say that masculinity is enacted rather than expressed. For, when we say that something is "expressed," we are working with the idea that it "already exists," and gender identities in particular do not already exist (say, biologically). There is an entire task of building and rebuilding, consolidation, representation, and enforcement; in other words we must think of gender identities as works in progress.

The opacity of masculine power lies in the constant making and remaking of masculine identities and which, through the processes of reinvention, occludes its interest. The production of feminist knowledge will gain through critical awareness of the making of maleness as described by those whose historical experience makes them particularly suited to the task. This is not to suggest a "masculinist nativism," such that men are exclusively suited to providing insights on masculinity. Rather, that history of the self that arises from the critical historicisation of experience—seeking to interrogate the structures that gender experience—can, potentially, open up a field of inquiry through a more nuanced understanding of power than the catch-all rubric of patriarchy. The latter summarises an instance of power, whereas critical masculinity studies, additionally, open up the possibility of intervening in the quotidian workings of gendered power through a focus on enlisting the beneficiaries of power in the struggle against it.

Networks and Hierarchies

Historian Rosalind O'Hanlon nicely summarises the key reason for the study of masculinities. She points out that

> A proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too: at what psychic and social investments sustain their sense of themselves as men, at what networks and commonalities bring men together on the basis of shared gender identity, and what hierarchies and exclusions set them apart (O'Hanlon 1997: 1).

What, then, are the networks and sites that sustain "a shared sense of gender hierarchy" and how do they act to establish and maintain "hierarchies and exclusions?" This section will outline some of the crucial areas that feminist-inspired masculinity studies could focus on. While implicitly drawing upon scholarship for other parts of the world, I will restrict my comments to the specificities of local history and culture that call for interrogation through the lens of masculinity studies.

Customs, Religion and Masculinities: The formation of identities through religion and cultures of masculinity is a prevalent feature of our region. So, for example, debates about "our traditions" (and how to protect them) often sit alongside expressions of ethnic and religious nationalism based on the forging of a homogeneous cultural identity. In turn, cultural identities are sought to be defined in terms of a consensus that primarily derives from a power hierarchy where men's interests are placed above those of women as a group. Here, the "honour" of the community becomes coeval with that of men, and while both men and women might be punished for disobeying honour-codes, it is women who bear the greatest burden—sometime with tragic consequences—of upholding community honour.

Expressions of religious nationalism—represented through notions of honour, shame, valour, etc—are commonly based upon appeals to mythic and masculinised histories. In this mythic past, men and women—and hence the society of which they were a part—lived harmoniously since, the argument goes, they followed the rules of tradition and each knew his/her organic relation to the other; each acted in a way that was "proper" to it, biological imperatives having solidified into social norms to produce a well-ordered social machinery. According to such narratives, social dysfunction comes about as a result of different genders (and, in particular, women) not knowing their preordained roles.

Hence, in these ways, the politics of the household that oversees the everyday relationships between genders, becomes linked with national-level formulations of gender politics. The domestic, then, both draws upon and contributes to broader debates about gender and its manifestations. Ethno–nationalist movements and their gender politics are, therefore, significant sites of discourses of gender power in several ways. For example, ethno–nationalist movements frequently demand the implementation of "customary" laws that have particularly deleterious effects on the position of women in society. Such movements also contain within them both seeds and justifications of violence against women—frequently organised around notions of honour and shame—as well as non-dominant ethnic groupings.

The Gender of Institutions: The historic division of social life as "public" and "private" has simultaneously entailed a division of institutions as public and private. And, along with this, there has developed a logic of the gender of such institutions. According to this logic, public institutions are the "natural" preserve of men. Therefore, they are particularly sites of a variety of masculinist ideologies.

The kinds of questions we might ask here are of the following order: How is gendered power consolidated through civic associations such as clubs and societies that, either implicitly or explicitly, base themselves upon masculinist ideologies? How are the conjoined contexts of patriarchal privilege and masculinist ideals normalised through associations?

Legal institutions in the postcolonial South Asia are also significant sites for the unfolding of attitudes towards gender. In both India and Pakistan, "honour crimes" are a significant context for exercise of control of female sexuality. Warraich (2005) notes that though the instances of "honour crimes" in Pakistan —as reported through multiple sources—are on the rise, cases of conviction are nominal. The Pakistani state's adoption of the British Penal Code of 1860 with its masculinist and patriarchal biases, and the implicit endorsement by the contemporary legal system of customary attitudes towards women and the history of "Islamisation" under general Zia's rule have both contributed to the present state of affairs. So, in a case where an elderly man killed his much younger wife after finding her in a "compromising" position with another man, "the court did not criticise the practice of marrying young women to much older men,…and failed to be appalled at the customary conduct of the woman's own family—who had joined in the attack on her and subsequently disowned her body—rather considering this 'proof of the disgrace brought by her to the whole family by her conduct'" (Warraich 2005: 96). Judges, as Patricia Uberoi points out for India, "bring to their interpretation of the law very masculinist sex-role stereotypes while manifestly upholding the cause of women" (Uberoi 1995: 321).

Patriarchy, Masculinities and Sexualities: Since masculinity is not simply a biological state but an unstable process and a state that has to constantly be striven towards, this instability means that men have to constantly prove their manhood in various social spheres including their sexual lives. Performance therefore becomes the cornerstone of men's sexual practices and yet another arena that men have to negotiate within the context of experiencing power.

One aspect of masculine performance concerns the concurrent suppression of non-heteronormative histories, through which these histories are effaced and incorporated into a monolithic nationalist myth of heteronormativity. The history of colonial and postcolonial modernity in the region is, in fact, one of suppression and marginalisation of gender and sexual identities that did not (or do not) live up to hypermasculinist ideals that were produced through a collaboration between colonial discourse and a native elite that aspired to emulate colonial norms (Omissi 1991; Sinha 1997).

Sexual violence is another significant context of understanding masculinist identity politics. Rape, it has been recognised, is more than a physical act: it is also a means of perpetuating symbolic violence that seeks to establish the superiority of masculine identity. Further, in cases of rape in situations of war and other conflict, the act also seeks to assert the superiority of the rapist's group over that of the group to which the raped

women belong. This relates to the idea that if men are not able to "protect" the "honour" of "their" women, then it is their own honour that has been slighted. Increasingly, feminist thinkers have argued that the manner in which we think about rape—as "lost honour," for example—is itself problematic, as it significantly draws upon male notions of honour.

Nivedita Menon suggests that simultaneously as we seek to prevent and punish crimes of honour, we must also seek to problematise the notion that "rape is the worst thing that can happen to a woman." According to Menon, we must question the "*meaning* of rape" itself (Menon 2004, 156; original emphasis). For, she says, "'rape as violation' is not only a feminist understanding, it is perfectly compatible with patriarchal and sexist notions of women's bodies and our sexuality (Menon 2004: 159). The meanings of rape that circulate among men significantly define the lives of those who have suffered the outrage and a significant task of masculinity studies lies in uncovering such meanings in order to supplement the feminist task of subverting their import and fracturing their power.

Finally in this context, the manner in which female sexuality is conceptualised stands in a direct relationship to the ways in which male sexuality is imagined. So, for example, "good" and "bad" women in Indian cinema have (though such representations are changing) historically been represented as the self-sacrificing wife and sexless mother, and the promiscuous "vamp" respectively. The man who has multiple partners is, on the other hand, frequently represented as "virile" and someone who embodies "genuine" masculinity.

Conclusions

A feminist understanding of masculine cultures across different registers illuminates a number of contexts interaction that, in turn, tell us something about the ways in which cultures of sociality and power unfold. Masculinity studies, thus formulated, is the site both of an examination of the quotidian processes of producing men as the universal subject of history as well as a "theory of practice" (Bourdieu 1995) that seeks to uncover the consolidation of structures of power through quotidian acts. Further, it is a theory of self-practice. That is to say, it constitutes an examination of the structures of power within which the interrogators might themselves be located. This aspect lies at the heart of the necessarily fraught—but productive—relationship between it and feminist theory and politics.

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