BODY POLITICS

Rethinking Gender and Masculinity

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Edited by
Tanmoy Baghira
Ananya Mukherjee



AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE
DELHI (INDIA)

Published by



AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE

Publisher, Distributor, Exporter having an Online Bookstore

Head Office : L-9A, First Floor, Street No. 42,
Sadatpur Extension, Delhi-110094 (INDIA)
Phone No.: 9968628081, 9555149955 & 9013387535
E-mail : akhandpublishinghouse@gmail.com,
akhandpublishing@yahoo.com
Website : www.akhandbooks.com

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© Editors
Ist Edition 2021
ISBN 978-81-948850-0-9

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Printed in India

Published by Jhapsu Yadav for Akhand Publishing House. Cover Designed and Laser Typesetting at VM Graphic and Printed at Aarna Enterprises, Delhi.

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to those who inspired

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Foreword

When Connell and Messerschmidt began to work in the then-fledgling area of Masculinity Studies in late 20th century, few thought that the field would grow into the vast terrain that it has become in the 21st century, and fewer still could envisage the theoretical sophistication that would emerge at a relatively short time.

When the Department of English, University of Kalyani, introduced an optional course called New Gender Studies in 2009, that course had a component dedicated to Masculinity Studies – a chapter by David Glover from the New Critical Idiom volume Genders. Connell and Messerschmidt's essay "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" replaced the David Glover piece in 2011. The editors of this volume were students of that course and read that essay as a part of their New Gender Studies syllabus. It is a matter of great pride and satisfaction that these two erstwhile students of New Gender Studies have now put together a volume which I am sure will contribute substantially to the rapidly increasing Indian contribution to Masculinity Studies.

I am excited to see the rich variety of essays presented here. The fact that the volume has avoided any nationalistic circumscription or generic boundaries (texts coming from various countries and in various genres have been discussed in the volume) bears testimony to the fact that virtually any text from any culture and of any decade or century can be productively analysed through the lens of Masculinity Studies. It should also be kept in mind that this volume will probably reach those readers who do not have any acquaintance with Masculinity Studies and may be labouring

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under the illusion that Masculinity Studies is "a fitting reply" to Feminism, as if Masculinity Studies were a challenge to Feminism and is situated in theoretical and practical opposition to Feminism. I am sure that this volume will make it clear that far from being in opposition to Feminism, Masculinity Studies is an extension of Feminism in its anti-patriarchal politics. Masculinity Studies has to be differentiated from the agenda of Men's Rights groups and their covertly patriarchal intentions. Masculinity Studies is founded on Intersectional Feminism as was articulated in the now-forgotten Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977: "We do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se – i.e, their biological maleness – that makes them what they are". Forty-four years ago, there were feminists who believed that men should be included in the feminist movement. Masculinity Studies is a celebration of that inclusion. It not only attempts at unearthing the ways in which "masculinity" is commonly used as a compulsory mode of behaviour for men, but that "masculinity" need not be tied to the human being body declared "male" at birth. It is possible to perform a masculinity that is intrinsically anti-patriarchal and subversive. I am sure that this volume will succeed to revealing at least a few of the many ways in which a careful study of masculinity can be a tribute to feminism.

Prof. Dr. Niladri R. Chatterjee

Acknowledgements

We express our sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Niladri R. Chatterjee for introducing us to Masculinity Studies. We would like to thank Prof. Dr. Pinaki Roy for motivating us. We wish to extend our thanks to Assistant Professor Dr. Sneha Kar Chaudhuri and Assistant Professor Dr. Subhadeep Paul for helping us with their valuable suggestions. We would like to acknowledge our contributors who have contributed to this volume. The book would not take its shape without the help of Akhand Publishing House and last but not the least we would like to extend our gratitude to our dear parents and love to our dear brother Shubham for being with us as our support system.

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Introduction

Being researchers in the field of Masculinity Studies, one of the popular misconceptions that we often encounter is when people take this discipline as a counter-discourse to Feminism. The other most common response that this misconception extends is why it is to bother about 'masculinity' all of a sudden when it seems so obvious and natural. Though the definition of masculinity varies between individuals, the general characteristics that emanate from them are: "strong," "courageous," "tough," "muscular," and "resilient." It is not difficult to estimate that these traits are set against the popular notions of femininity. However, the characteristic of masculinity that is often overlooked in its apparent ubiquitous exteriority is how this notion has kept itself *invisible* and yet it generates widespread assumption of its palpable presence. This significant absence/presence of this concept is the critical juncture where this volume *Body Politics: Rethinking Gender and Masculinity* wishes to tread in order to further problematise the concept, thereby, bringing it into the discursive ambit to unpack and deconstruct it. Masculinity Studies, in this note, can be seen as a logical extension of Feminism that attempts to activate critical discourses on to those socio-cultural and academic arenas which were not previously taken into consideration in eliminating gender discrimination.

The apparent inconspicuous nature of masculinity that makes its presence ubiquitous, thence, too obvious to question, stems in its political construction of 'natural.' The assumption that masculinity is natural is the rubric under which patriarchy functions in subordinating both men and women and yet it keeps

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itself masked in ways that it becomes a sacrilege to question its nature. However, this apparent *invisibility* ruptures in circumstances when we perceive extremities that are culturally constructed being 'impossibilities,' yet there are ample instances of these in our day-to-day lives. Thus, an encounter with a crying man immediately triggers in us the idea of masculinity (or its absence) from our cultural unconscious. Similarly, the excess of masculinity is often signalled in the presence of a muscular man in his readiness to fight or take challenges. However, one can argue, these instances to be 'natural' since the muscular wrestler is taking his body to its 'natural' extreme while the 'efficiency' of the crying man is an instance that 'naturally' makes that individual un-masculine. This constructed cultural unconscious, however, becomes apparent in the diachronic study of literature and culture as it complicates the general assumption of 'natural' masculinity since historically the concept has gone through a radical transformation, and thus, the modern standard of what makes a man masculine might not be identical to the earlier socio-historical models. Thus, if scholars of European Renaissance try to evaluate the relationship between men of that socio-historical time in modern parameters of masculinity, the study is prone to be anachronistic and flawed. As teachers of English literature, this is a situation that we often encounter when students tend to read the relation between the fair youth and the poet in Shakespearean sonnets in terms of homosexual love and thereby attach their present understanding of the term to understand gender relation of that particular historical time. Therefore, they get bewildered as they discover how the socio-historical configuration of masculinity allowed heterosexual men to write about their passionate love for other men without making them appear 'effeminate' or 'homosexual,' but contrary to their belief, it reaffirmed their masculinity.

Similarly, masculinity in India had to be understood in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts since the colonizer's culture had significantly impacted the gender fluidity that once used to be the marker of Indian society and culture. The notion that masculinity is natural can be further problematised when it