SWABHIMAAN

INTERPRETING MASCULINITIES

Inside this edition:

Commentary

~ Shreeya Bhayana

Gender is one of the most prevalent social structures when it comes to human society. When the discussions about gender equality take place, it is an unsaid assumption that it is a discussion about women. Raewyn Connell, one of the leading researchers on critical masculinity studies, talks about how this happens because men are often taken as privileged subjects and classified as the unexamined norm. The gender of men is rarely brought up when they are studied. Instead of focusing on what makes women and their femininity the marginalized identity, critical masculine studies attempt to question the social configurations of gender practices that come to define men's structural dispositions to power in society.

Though one might misconstrue Critical Masculinity Studies (CMS) to be the male version of feminism, rather it is a discipline that is a constructive response to the diverse changes in men's life, at times, induced by the women's liberation movement. It is a discipline that seeks to understand the consequent disruption of traditional roles, such as 'protector', 'bread-winner' etcetera, that have been assigned to men and the crisis they caused for hegemonic patriarchal masculinity. Mangesh Kulkarni classifies the bewilderment of men buffeted by these changes into three categories: a demand for rights, search for spiritual solace or unwavering commitment to feminist causes. He points out that it is this resulting predicament that CMS seeks to probe, and the discipline views it as a part of the continual construction and reconstruction of masculinities through time and space.

One such instance of opposing masculinities is straight and queer masculinities. In the context of India when it comes to these masculinities, it is important to understand their colonial legacy and the colonial policies of sexual regulation inspired by Victorian notions of propriety. One such law was the British anti-sodomy law which dictated the practitioners of sodomy to imprisonment. And while this law being reduced in Britain was a boon, the same cannot be said for colonial states like India, where sodomy or homosexual intercourse was not punishable by law and the law became a retrogressive move. Prior to this, homosexuality, while was disapproved of, was not something that was persecuted.

Victorian morality, as Ashis Nandy (1983) points out saw homosexuality (or queerness) as a threat to 'masculinity' and criminalization of homosexuality was seen as a valorization of masculinity. Moreover, colonial imagination had a tendency to associate colonized males with either hyper virile masculinity or effeminacy. Additionally, the struggle for independent India saw a revision and restriction of nationalism that was built on equating masculinity with rationality, chivalry, moral superiority and (hetero)sexuality. In this rhetoric, there was no place for effeminacy, a concept often associated with homosexuality. Extrapolating from that, one can understand how modern homophobia in India is deeply linked to modern nationalism.

Masculinities are changing, especially in light of women's liberation movements. The changing role of women within society is causing men to question their set roles constantly and they are having to renegotiate their place within the social structure. The dependent housewife and the sole breadwinner model is in rapid decline and this is coming to haunt men to prove their masculinity constantly. Indian men growing up in the eighties and nineties are in a world where the patriarchal masculinity which they grew up seeing is being challenged. The generation after that, in part, is learning to refer to those same patriarchal masculine behaviours as toxic masculinity.

Anthony Clare termed this process, though dramatically, as Masculinity in Crisis.

So, for our upcoming edition, we look at and attempt to interpret this masculinity in crisis. We interviewed straight and queer men on the campus of OP Jindal Global University and Ashoka University. We spoke to them about how they understand their own masculinities and what behaviours they recognize as a performance of their gender identities. We spoke to them about their homosocial groups and how these groups influence their behaviours. We also asked them about how their sexualities interact with their gender identities. And the conversations also covered what these men consider to be healthy and toxic masculinities.

The group that we focused on cannot be considered nationally representative at all. This group is one that is situated in a position of privilege. Our sample group is studying in private universities and has had the privilege of good education in their lives. But they still yield an interesting sample for understanding the kind of crisis that plagues masculinity today and how the men of today and tomorrow are navigating their roles in society.

Interpreting Masculinities :

Written by Ruhi Nadkarni
Interviews conducted by Isha Khurana, Ruhi Nadkarni

This s piece is based on a series of interviews conducted with 3 individuals at Jinfal Global University campus on their views on masculinity. Quotes have been modified for clarity purposes.

"Masculinity is performative," Harsh says as he meticulously summarises Simone de Beauvoir's work on the social construction of gender identity. Gender, according to de Beauvoir, is not biologically determined but rather socially assigned upon birth. Confidence, aggression, and virility are some common traits that men are expected to embody. As a student at O.P Jindal Global University, Harsh has observed these bolding qualities erupt at football fields, gyms, and a plethora of social interactions. These conflations between masculinity and assertiveness ripple through social norms and even unique experiences. Men are expected to be the hero; the bread earner; the muscled leader that makes decisions while averting any emotions that express otherwise. The hegemonic patriarchal compulsion of upholding masculinity comes at the cost of oppressing other identities, including those who do not fit into the box of being masculine. This negativity attached to masculinity is prevalent in discourse against patriarchal structures. But is being masculine always a bad thing? Can someone be purely and truly 'masculine?'

'Masculine' themes of violence, entitlement and sexism manifest differently in varied cultural contexts. Even though stringing a few common traits that are perceived to be emblematic of 'toxic' masculinity, the caricature of what makes one

a 'real man' does not always personify the traditional trope of dominance. According to Nihal, a 20 year old student at JGU, masculinity is characterised as either 'toxic' or 'healthy.' The performance of toxic masculinity is projected as the normative, engineered from a very young age. "Competing with other men, as well as women, to one-up them and assert dominance is normalised." Students like Nihal express similar sentiments of conflating toxic masculinity to behaviours that entwine with displaying superiority. The correlation between toxic masculinity and the quest for power is not an uncommon concept. Be it through comparing how many times they hit the gym in a day, crafting jokes at the expense of others (justified as "dark humour"), mansplaining and even occasional brawls (usually witnessed over romantic endeavours or sports), behaviours that are considered to be 'masculine,' but are often toxic, seep into the culture at Jindal.

Social circles partake these themes of what is widely understood as 'toxic' masculinity. Even though homosocial

bonding is a subjective experience altogether, Nihal points out that conversations stay within the ambit of what boys are expected to talk about, that is, things that revolve around "manliness" or "locker room talk." Similarly, male friendships, Sahil — another 20 year old student on campus — observes, are usually low maintenance as conversations revolve around mutual interests and rarely delve into "emotional issues." The reticence of expressing emotions is socially reinforced, where men are supposed to display a strong front, incapable of being weak. An unaddressed stigma lingers in these social spaces, but conversations can take course otherwise. Building relationships that breakthrough emotional barriers can be unravelled with time. This only depends on how secure one is in their own masculinity. One's judgement of self and their gravitation or deviation from traditional tropes of masculinity influences the bonds that are formed with the people around them.

Masculine identities are shaped by the environment they are immersed in, and their interpretations of the

thsame are not necessarily caged by notions of toxicity. As proposed by sociologist Raewyn Connell, "gender is the product of relations and behaviours, rather than a fixed set of identities and attributes." The metric of measuring 'authentic' masculinity — if such a concept exists — thus varies accordingly. When asked how he views and adopts masculinity, Harsh weaved together the important relationship between sexuality and emotional vulnerability:

> *"My understanding of my masculinity is derived from my queerness. I have never had difficulty expressing myself, and I surround myself with people who will not judge me for being emotional. Because what does expressing your emotions, a very humane experience, take away from your masculinity?"*

Being confident in one's own interpretation of masculinity and deviating from stereotypes does not culminate in being 'any less of a man.' The understanding of 'healthy' masculinity, in this sense, simply refers to being comfortable in one's own identity; discovering the things you like without social roles streamlining who you carve yourself out to be.

To Nihal and Harsh, expressing 'healthy' masculinity is not always parcelled through the intimate act of emotional venting but also through the way one dresses. The clothes we wear act as an outlet of expression, representation and presentation, akin to a second skin that we parade every day. Clothing is undeniably gendered, pertaining to the binary of what a man or a woman is supposed to wear. Moving past these gendered dichotomies is a liberating form of gender expression because clothing is ultimately just a piece of fabric; a skirt brought from the woman's department but worn by a man, is still a skirt. Wardrobes are essentially a portal to identity creation and expression. By adorning

jewellery, nail paint or vibrant hair dye, traditionally assigned only to femininity, Nihal asserts: "Being comfortable in wearing my rings, pearls and looking into the mirror with satisfaction is when I feel most masculine." Without gendered conventions commandeering what he should and should not do, wear or say, embracing his own sense of masculinity is relatively unshackling.

Shattering these norms gives way to stares of disgust and confusion. The looming presence of the fear of being judged is often an obstruction to expression. One still faces stigma for adopting conventionally feminine qualities, with looks of confusion and disdain and offensive comments being thrown at individuals. "I often clench my fingers to hide my painted nails if I feel like someone is staring," Nihal reflects as he does restrict his outward expressions sometimes. While western apparel is gender fluid and easier to style, Harsh believes that traditional Indian wear is loaded with cultural and often religious sentiments that are deeply rooted in gender stereotypes. "As seen around campus, it is more common to see people breaking gendered norms of only westernised clothing." This means that it is more common to see individuals applying makeup and nail polish than a person wearing a bindi, which is a rare occurrence. One of the possible reasons for this, Harsh mentions, is the engrained cultural attachments to these pieces of fashion that

Jindal Global University Campus: *Scroll.in*

westernisation lacks. Especially for Jindal's upper class demographic and their increased consumption of western media and trends, crossing gendered boundaries through western clothing is relatively easier to mould an identity through.

Outgrowing the fear of being judged and finding comfort in their identities within and outside these masculine norms is a slow and often painstaking process but ultimately rewarding. Introspection, according to Harsh, is what gravitated him towards gradually stripping socially engineered notions of toxic masculinity. He continues, "unlearning toxic traits and stereotypes is not as difficult as trying to cultivate and discover your own identity within new interpretations that we are not used to." In this sense, dismantling conventions cultivates a new idea of self. "Sometimes," Nihal expresses, "discovering yourself is merely trying to understand yourself better: what one likes and not." From these conversations with Nihal, Sahil and Harsh, I've learned that masculinity is not confined to a single idea but is a subjective interpretation for these men. It is subject to their sexualities, their ideas of healthy and toxic, their privilege and their experiences. Thus, battling these toxic traits of masculinity and violence should be facilitated by creating safe spaces for men to channel emotions and spark discussions revolving around social norms and the idea of self. It is only with questioning what masculinity means to an individual that these rigid gendered rules can be dissected and gradually lead to identity creation regardless of what society expects masculinity to be.

Interpreting Masculinities :

~ *Wynonna Fernandes*
(Associated with Gender and Sexuality Cluster,
Nickeled and Dimed)

This s piece is based on a series of interviews conducted with 3 individuals at Ashoka University campus on their views on masculinity. Quotes have been modified for clarity purposes.

What is masculinity? For some, it is waking up every morning and putting on the same shirt and jeans because that's what they've always done. For some, it's being protective and strong, sheltering the people they love. For others, it's a mask you put on during a job interview or a paper presentation, but remove immediately after.

The popular nursery rhyme goes "What are little boys made of? Snips, Snails and Puppy Dog Tails". In that case, what are men made of? I interviewed three individuals that identify as men; one cisgender and heterosexual, one gay, and one genderqueer to answer this question. How do they view masculinity in their

daily routine and interactions? When do they feel most masculine? Which activities make them feel masculine? Are there certain traits they have imbibed or rejected because they think of them as masculine? Through my interviews one thing remained common: a sense of abstractness and an inability to concretely pinpoint exactly what masculinity looks like in their routine or self perception.

When asked for activities that are feminine, the interviewees were able to articulate clear answers – painting your nails, wearing makeup, listening to Taylor Swift. However, when asked for activities that were masculine, the interviewees hesitated and then fell

back on abstract generalised ideas. They explained that "how [they] dress" was masculine, but on pushing were unable to specify a certain aspect of their dressing. Additionally, they characteristized "how [they] talked when [they] were angry or frustrated" as masculine without being able to narrow down on specific speech patterns or tones. One interviewee said, "There is a certain appearance I have which is a masculine appearance". This inability to concretely narrow down on how they perceive their own masculinity stands out consistently through the interviews. They just were masculine because they were masculine, and the specifics of their gender performance were difficult to ascertain.

Masculinity – to my interviewees – was something they defaulted to, either because it was inbuilt into their routine, or when they experienced a surge of emotions such as anger or frustration. Rarely did they describe their performance of masculinity as a voluntary choice. Interviewees described masculinity as something they fell back on because it was easy and changing how they perform would take considerable effort. One explained that people expect you to look and behave a certain way and you don't want to stray from that because that involves additional effort as well. One of the interviews explained that it was "so ingrained that it's hard to change it". Another explained that changing your gender performance involves effort not just literally – buying clothes and makeup for example – but also socially, in the conversations and explanations it requires. "What will people think if you keep changing that often? It is difficult to bring that change. There is this effort you have to put in to explain it to people." he explained. Here, masculinity is simply the easiest option and change would mean effort.

Students at Ashoka University

The interviewees were all able to describe toxic masculinity easily and clearly. Toxic masculinity was described as associated with aggression, violence and the inability to display emotions. "Anger which crosses into aggression" described one of the interviewees. It was also easy for them to determine people that exhibited toxic masculinity; "dudebros" for example. Yet their descriptions of masculinity, especially their own masculinity, was shrouded in hesitancy and carefully phrased theory. While they have come across ideas and concepts of toxic masculinity on social media, conversations on masculinity are largely constrained to the classroom, and that is clearly captured by their answers. "Gender is a performance" said two of the interviews and "masculinity is the expression of your gender, it is difficult to describe" said the third. The cisgender-heterosexual man was especially careful, worried about saying the wrong thing.

While gender is largely understood through a theoretical lens in discourse, with the ideas of spectrum and performance taking centre stage, it is also part of people's lived experience. Whether they are able to describe what makes them so, they do still think of themselves as men. Masculinity has been largely "left out" of both academic and non-academic discourse. Kimmel describes it as the individual gender that has been "obscured from academic study". Social media and academia focus on "toxic masculinity" more than masculinity.

Discourse is important, theories build and change how we think of everyday life. Feminism has drastically impacted how women think of and live their lives. What happens when masculinity largely gets left out of the discourse? Shepherd describes how it results in a men-as-norm ideology where masculinity is simply not examined. More importantly, it results in what I witnessed in my interviews. Men who identify as men; but struggle to describe their gender without falling back on a theory or abstraction. The argument made against studying masculinity is that all of theory is a study of men. However, with the growth of feminism we have seen this change. We have seen a new "hybrid" version of masculinity grow out of this changing discourse on gender and sexuality. To not study this new evolved masculinity then, is a disservice not only to the theory of gender, but also to the individuals who identify as masculine.

In conversation with Gaysi

Interviewer - Tavleen Kaur Saluja,
Interviewee - Tejaswi (They/ She)

The requirement that male-identifying people acquire and re-gain their masculinity is often at the heart of damaging masculine gendering. He must frequently be heterosexual, as being sexually active elevates his social position. These notions are stereotypes in the sense that no single guy lives up to, or could live up to, all of them, but they are real in the sense that they profoundly influence men's thoughts and behaviours. Gender identity is "performed" by members of all genders in accordance with social instructions about what is and is not proper for members of their gender. When a person's conduct or performance goes against societal norms or crosses the lines of other genders' anticipated behaviours or performances, they might expect social policing or retribution (e.g., criticism or stigma) from others who want to preserve the status quo.

"Cis-masculinity is incentivised. However, this is not the case for other genders and other intersectional identities. We are not incentivised; we are labelled as trouble makers, we are labelled as people who rock the boat too much."

Tejaswi is a journalist, researcher and artist whose attention is captured by post-colonial human relationships at a time of the Internet of Things. They are currently working as a Digital Editor & Curator at Gaysi, and also serve as an editorial consultant for feminist organizations working in the space of mental well-being, sexual & reproductive health.

In this edition, we speak about interpreting masculinity in an attempt to question the social configurations of gender practices that come to define men's structural dispositions to power in a society.

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bring out stories of success and positive
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entrepreneurial spirit of creation and self-
respect. The Team would like to thank all the
interviewees who made this Issue of
Swahimaan successful.

Swabhimaan
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