



Emasculating Masculinity in “They Went Home” by Maya Angelou and “Acquaintance” by Taslima Nasrin: A Study

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Abstract— This article throws light on the discourse of masculinity and how it is emasculated by the two poets, Maya Angelou and Taslima Nasrin. Masculinity is a historical, political, cultural and social construct. There is a pressing necessity to deconstruct the ideology of masculinity in the contemporary times. The article explores on the concept of masculinity, evolution, feminism, femininity and the poems “They Went Home” by Maya Angelou and “Acquaintance” by Taslima Nasrin.

Keywords— Masculinity, They Went Home, Acquaintance.

REVISITING MASCULINITIES

“A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man.” (Beauvoir)

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a Woman.”
(Beauvoir)

The above quotes are a validating proof by Simone de Beauvoir, on the different ideologies constructed in the society by the man in a dichotomic order. The war of the two sexes has been persistent since the evolution, as the very creation of the two is antagonistic in nature. The concepts of sex, gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, society and gender politics have been thoroughly analyzed since history. However, there is a surge of emergence in these concepts in the contemporary times as critics have revisited and deconstructed the constructed ideologies. It is a well known notion that masculinity is a social, religious and political construct. Masculinity has been in different types and categories. There are hegemonic, nonhegemonic, oriental, occidental, marginalized and gay masculinities. The discourse of masculinity has been established to question its existence through feminism and femininity. However, the existence of masculinities is prevalent since centuries. To state the same,

“To understand the current pattern of masculinities we need to look back over the

period in which it came into being. Since masculinity exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations, we need to locate it in the formation of modern gender order as a whole - a process that has taken about four centuries. The local histories of masculinity recently published provide essential detail, but we need an argument of broader scope as well”. (Connell 245)

The father of psychology Sigmund Freud paved way for different dimensions of masculinity through psychoanalysis. He connotes that the concept of masculinity is deeply rooted in the opposite i.e. femininity. He was of the view that the relativity between the two is difficult to decipher. To quote,

“The concepts ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, Freud observed in a melancholy footnote, ‘are among the most confused that occur in science’. In many practical situations the language of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ raises doubts. We base a great deal of talk and action on this contrast. But the same terms, on logical examination, waver like the Danube mist. They prove remarkably elusive and difficult to define”. (Connell 3)

Many critics have discussed their views on history of masculinity and other aspects related to it. Moreover, the feminist critics have deconstructed the very

ideology of masculinity by interrogating history, politics, society, culture, gender, patriarchy and sexuality. Some of the critics have expressed their views on emasculating masculinity through their poetry. Most noted and popular among them are Maya Angelou and Taslima Nasrin who have analyzed the concept of men and masculinity in a detailed way.

“THEY WENT HOME” BY MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou is one of the poets who is the victim of racism in a patriarchal society and represents truth in her poetry through her real life experiences. Her poetry is unique and playful. She narrates her experiences of racism and black feminism in her poetry. There is a plethora of themes present in her poetry. She speaks of shattered dreams, unrequited love, partings, men, women, Africa, America and nationalism. Maya Angelou is known prominently as an African American poet. Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate and one of the greatest writers, quotes about Maya Angelou that,

“She was important in so many ways. She launched African American women writing in the United States. She was generous to a fault. She has nineteen talents- used ten. And was a real original. There is no duplicate.” (Morrison)

Her poem “They Went Home” is about men, their masculinity traits and how women try to decipher them. It is a small poem with subtle meanings about how men treat women and how women emasculate the men. The word ‘they’ here represents the men. The lyrics are simple yet mysterious as they narrate the feelings of a woman. The men in the poem are full of praise for the woman, but the phrase ‘but...they went home’ which is repeated after every stanza focuses on exposing men and makes us realize the reality of men’s feelings for the woman. In the first stanza, she writes how men express to their wives about her, as a girl whom they have never met or known in their lifetime. This sentence denotes that the poet is introducing men and their usual attitudes about women commonly generated. Women are presented here from two angles, one as wives and the other as a girl whom men know. The men praise the girl before their wives but they don’t accept the girl to be their own. This showcases the patriarchal quality practiced by men, since history. Both wives and the girl whom they have exploited are the victims here of patriarchy and male sexuality. In the second stanza, the girl is praised again by the men as they express that she is never mean and her house is licking clean; but however, they leave her and go home. Men also enjoy the mysterious air present in her home and her persona, but the girl asks to herself that after all this

enjoyment, why the men desert her. Maya Angelou sarcastically depicts how the men have been exploiting women in the name of love and marriage.

These stanzas also discuss how culture and patriarchy have set forth the goals or rules for women that she is expected to be desired, to be never mean, to keep her house clean and behave submissively in order to please men. Angelou deconstructs the men and masculine attributes in the poem in a very subtle way by questioning the men and their deceitfulness towards women. The third stanza is very clear in expression. The girl claims that all men praise her, her smile, her wit and hips. They liked her so much that they spent one or two nights with her, but they went home and did not stay back with her. These last lines explore how the men have exploiting her. The girl here symbolizes many women who could be tainted here as prostitutes or adulteress. The simple explanation of how the girl feels that even after being so virtuous, the men abandon her is so powerful here that the poet makes us question and decipher the character of masculinity. The men in the poem have the audacity to express how the girl is so desirable before their wives and desert the girl after enjoying her virtues. The attributes of masculinity in the poem are patriarchy i.e. to dominate the women both, wife at home and other women in the society, culturally as well as socially; to enjoy the sexuality of women and betraying them. The women are obliged to be submissive as men dominate and as society adheres to the ideology of respecting women only if they are married. Marriage is another masculine weapon used on women to exploit and victimize them. All these masculine attitudes are emasculated by Maya Angelou in this poem when she candidly clarifies through her expression about men. This poem symbolizes how women have come forward to interrogate the masculinity of men in the society and their struggle to expose and deconstruct the masculine traits of men which are harmful for the growth of women in society.

“ACQUAINTANCE” BY TASLIMA NASRIN

The concept of masculinity is an under discussed issue in the fields of history, politics, culture and society. There is a consistent necessity to address the issue of masculinity, as it is constructed by the men and for the men. Though feminism has been established as a discourse to tackle masculinity throughout the world, it is hardly accepted and followed, especially in the patriarchal societies. Therefore, taking up this issue will remain the need of the hour. Woman, her sufferings and her resurrection have been discussed and explored in the world of literature, but under the lens of patriarchal hegemony

it's difficult to emasculate masculinity, whether its literature or society.

Nevertheless, there are some women poets who rise like phoenix through their writings amidst the suppressing patriarchy. One such writer is Taslima Nasrin. Taslima Nasrin's poetry juxtaposes the social and psychological issues of women and men. The description of men in her poems is intrepid and realistic. She deconstructs the patriarchy and masculinity very elaborately and effectively. She exposes the bitter realities of man's psychology and sadism. To substantiate,

“Taslima Nasrin, an irresistible, irrepressible literary and humanist voice in South Asia marks a compelling presence in the zeitgeist of current literary traditions. Popular with the young generation especially with female readers, she is a buddy of the oppressed, a crusader against suppression of all forms and an uncompromising advocate of women empowerment and emancipation.” (Farooq 17)

Taslima Nasrin's poem titled “Acquaintance” is an epitome of deconstructing masculinity. This poem describes the characteristics of the man in a sarcastic tone and style.

In the first stanza, the poet introduces man as a half neutered person and half male. Taslima's remarks on the male gender are obviously ironical when she represents man as not man enough and as an incomplete human and questions his masculinity. In the second stanza, Taslima expresses the mystery of understanding the man. She opines that though a life goes by, though you may share all your life with a man, it is difficult to realize who the real man is. She expresses her innocence and ignorance of how she has failed to understand the man. For a long time she was under the impression that she has known man but he is the one she doesn't know the most.

In the third and last stanza, Taslima is candid and outright. She frankly condemns the man very clearly, expressing that man is someone who is half beast. She repeats the first idea that man is not manly but whereas he is a half man and half beast. Her comparison of man to a beast clarifies that she has been victimized and dominated by man. All the three stanzas portray her views about man where a man's construct of patriarchy and masculinity is deconstructed. This poem stands as an epitome of how beautifully and realistically the concept of masculinity can be deconstructed by presenting the reality from a woman's point of view.

Thus, both the poems and the poets have depicted the treatment of men and deconstructing masculinity in a very similar and sarcastic way. Both Maya Angelou and

Taslima Nasrin have been ferocious feminists who have criticized patriarchy and sexuality practiced in the society. Their poetry and lives are the validating epitomes of feminism.

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