

Caste & Masculinity: A Critique of R.W. Connell's Theory on Masculinity

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Abstract

In his conceptualization of masculinities, the renowned scholar R.W. Connell (1995) suggests that masculinity is not a coherent object of study, especially if understood in isolation. Through his combined analysis of gender, race and class, Connell delivers a compact theorization of masculinities- a contribution to the field of gender studies that is unparalleled till date. However, what were to happen to Connell's theory if it were transposed to the complex social matrix of India? How does the dynamic cross-section of gender, class and race get affected with the addition of a caste filter? In other words, would Connell's theorization survive the Indian socio-political terrain despite the nuanced social factor of caste? In my article, I expand on the relational dynamics of masculinity as stipulated by Connell. I then challenge the validity of Connell's theorizations by studying them through the shifting kaleidoscope of gender, caste, race and class, throwing light on a slanted interplay between masculinity and its contradictions. After providing relevant examples from Anandhi et al's field study on masculinities (2002), I conclude my article by highlighting the crucial importance of this interplay towards the longevity of masculinity as a stabilizing factor of multiple patriarchies.

Keywords: Masculinity, gender, gender studies, Connell, caste

Introduction

The sociology of gender, more particularly of masculinity, has gained immensely from the academic contributions made by the highly accredited scholar R.W. Connell in his pioneering conceptualization of masculinities, the critiques it sparked and the progressive revisions thereof. Premising his conceptualization of masculinity firmly on discursive practices of individuals located in a gendered order, Connell (1995) suggests that masculinity is not a coherent object of study, especially if understood in isolation. He asserts that "if we broaden the angle of vision, we can see masculinity, not as an isolated object, but as an aspect of a larger structure" and goes on to account for this structure and masculinity's location in it as 'inherently relational' (1995: 67-68).

In my essay, I intend to investigate the concept of masculinity as an 'inherently relational' one and argue that it is not just in isolation that masculinity ceases to be a coherent object of study but that a particular hegemonic pattern in the slanted interplay between masculinity and what it contradicts is crucial to the longevity of masculinity as a stabilizing factor of multiple patriarchies in what Butler (2004: 196-197) calls a 'phallogocentric worldview'.

In order to do so, I begin my essay with an attempt to unpack Connell's definition of masculinity and explore its relational dynamics within a larger framework. Following this, I explore Connell's conception of masculinity and its logical coherence against 'isolation' and test masculinity's relational dynamics with femininity as slanted and crucial to the its longevity as a stabilising factor of multiple patriarchies. In the next section, I extend these relational dynamics to the interplay between Connell's conception of 'hegemonic masculinity' (1987, 1995) and the multiplicity of masculinities that evolve in response it and in the "mutual conditioning (intersectionality) of gender" (particularly masculinities) "with such other social dynamics" (Messerschmidt, 2012: 59).

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While several scholars have acknowledged that “the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities” (Connell, 1995: 80), I treat this as an occasion to pay particular attention on the dynamics of caste in its intersection with gender, particularly masculinity at various points and what effects this has on Connell’s theoretical viability. I conclude by suggesting possible implications that a relational concept might have, not just for the logical coherence of Connell’s formulation of masculinity, but from a progressivist outlook to foster gender equity.

I

To begin with, it would be analytically useful to unpack what Connell theorises as ‘masculinity’. According to him, “‘masculinity’, to the extent that the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a *place* in gender relations, the *practices* through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the *effects* of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture.” (italics mine) (1995: 71). The three words that I have put in italics are the ones that I consider to be the cardinal points of correlation.

To elaborate, the *place* is the social location that a person occupies in the gender structure. Keeping in mind an earnest Halberstam’s claim that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (1998: 2), not only does an individual inhabit this location in relation to other individuals but in a larger relation to masculinities and femininities. As a result, individuals travel through masculinities while simultaneously producing them.

Masculinities are produced by individual engagements in “masculine” practices and characteristics (Schippers: 2006, 86). Speaking of *practices*- the second cardinal point of correlation, Connell theorises masculinity as “a configuration of practice, (which) is simultaneously positioned in a number of structures of relationship, which may be following different historical trajectories.” (1995: 73). Hence, masculinity constitutes what we understand as ‘masculine practices’ while ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987). What these definitions make clear is that these practices consist of social interactions take place within particular social structures at local, regional and global levels and bear spatiotemporal contingency (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 849). The embodiment of these practices produces particular *effects*- the third and final cardinal point of correlation. These effects vary widely, from an individual to a collective level and have significant socio-cultural impact. Hence, the three cardinal points- places, practices and effects are placed in a simultaneous relationship. As a result, individuals constantly occupy shifting locations in the gender structure, endlessly constituting and contesting masculinities through their practices and producing effects through and being affected by these practices on an individual and collective level.

However, this entire process does not exist in itself or in a socio-cultural void. In other words, while an inter-relation between places, practices and effects is explicitly mentioned in Connell’s definition of masculinity, what is equally important to factor in is that “masculinity is accomplished in social actions and is therefore contingent upon the gender relations in a particular social setting” (ibid: 836). Hence, masculinity needs to be understood in relation to the particular gender relations, as well as various dynamics of the social structure that it exists within and in constant interaction to, such as race, class, religion, and case. Such an approach, which is thoroughly intersectional, is not only likely to provide us with a holistic insight of masculinity but also the construction of multiple masculinities that emerge in this interplay between gender relations and the various social dynamics that they bear contingency upon. In Connell’s words, “to understand gender, then, we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class, race or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender. Gender relations are a major component of social structure as a whole, and gender politics are among the main determinants of our collective fate” (1995:76).

To sum up, relational dynamics exist at three levels. First- at the basic level of the definition, which has already been discussed at length? Second, between the constitution, re-constitution and contestation of masculinities and the larger structure of ‘gender relations’ and ‘social dynamics’ within which they exist and are ‘mutually conditioned’ (Messerschmidt, 2012: 59). And lastly, in a place that we often fail to consider, i.e., the interconnectedness of each relationship with other relationships, for example, the relationship between gender and caste impacts and is impacted by the relationships between gender-class and caste-class, something that I will elaborate upon later in the essay. To assume each relationship in isolation and as unilinear amounts to missing out on the most crucial component of intersectionality, which calls for the understanding of relationships as constantly interacting and intersecting?

II.

I now proceed to test masculinity's relational dynamics as slanted and crucial to the its longevity as a stabilising factor of multiple patriarchies. Several scholars have addressed the internally complex nature of masculinity as a category. Messerschmidt seems convinced about there being no fixed masculinity and that gender hierarchies were "historical" and therefore, "subject to change" (Connell & Messerschmidt: 832). Connell argues that "the problem of shifting definitions is exacerbated by our inability to define either masculinity or femininity except in relation to each other and to men and women" (1995:71). In his critique of Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinities, Demetriou argues that "men do not constitute a homogenous or internally coherent bloc" (2001:340).

However, masculinity exists, not simply in equitable relations with femininity but in what Paechter (2006) calls a "dualistic relation", "whether claimed by males or females, positions both extreme and normative femininity as without power, and indeed, as pathological" (p.257). Femininity thus theoretically constitutes everything that masculinity is not and something that all 'incompetent' masculinities dread slipping into. Roy comprehensively paraphrases this in his article, "this fear of failure (of attaining masculinity) is also a fear of the feminine because failure represents the danger of slipping into a category that you have never respected and held as inferior to your kind. From fear to hatred is a very short journey and violence a logical corollary" (2013: 25). In other words, failure amounts to femininity, a synonym of powerlessness. What is clear here is that the binarism of masculinity and femininity isn't just relational or mutually exclusive, but is one where masculinity is everything that femininity can never be, and femininity is everything that masculinity is so threatened of becoming, so much so that the very act of successful emulation of masculinity by the female body is suppressed to "...allow for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance" (Halberstam, 2001: 372).

Further, as Halberstam points out, "...unlike male femininity which fulfils a ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification or maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach" (ibid: 360). Despite being binary opposites, "femininities are not constructed in the ways masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to guarantee patriarchy. They are, instead, constructed as a variety of negations of the masculine" (Paechter, 2006:256). Whether seen at the normative level, or at the level of performativity or embodiment, masculinity and femininity don't just exist in relational terms but they do so in a dualistic relation, which lacks an equal balance and the "subordinate term is negated", and "femininity is thus, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity (Kessler and McKenna, 1978)" (ibid). Hence, masculinity doesn't simply attain its logical coherence in a simple relation to femininity, instead, it does so by placing itself on the ascendant end of what I term as a 'slanted relationship' with femininity, legitimising itself through unequal gender relations where the feminine is constantly debased, thereby amounting to a stabilising factor of multiple patriarchies in a 'phallogocentric worldview'. It is for the same reason that masculinity is so firmly situated in the male, and any instance of female masculinity is subdued, for that allows male masculinity to "stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance." (Halberstam, 2001: 372)

III.

My use of the term 'multiple patriarchies' implies an intentional move beyond the binarism of male-female and masculinity-femininity to address a similarly dualistic relationship elsewhere. Apart from patterns of masculinity being "socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity", they are also formed as a result of "social ascendancy of one group of men over others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 848; 844). Hegemonic masculinity isn't just "a configuration of gender practice which...guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Demetriou, 2001: 340) but as Anandhi et al point out, treats "those men who do not or cannot conform to hegemonic masculinity as effeminate and inferior" (2002: 4397). Further, it ensures the durability and survivability of patriarchy more through 'incorporation than active oppression'. Demetriou borrows the Gramscian concept of 'dialectical pragmatism' and Bhabha's 'hybridity', to account for hegemonic masculinity²

²Hegemonic masculinity, can be understood as the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Demetriou, 2001: 304). While is enacted only by a minority of men, it is held as supreme due to the unparalleled normative value it holds of being "the current most honoured way of being a man and requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt: 832).

As an 'internally diversified bloc' that counters the 'crisis of patriarchy' and adapts to historical changes by constantly incorporating non-hegemonic masculinities "in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy" (2001: 348). He asserts that the interplay between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in his 'masculine bloc' is "non-dualistic" (ibid). However convincing Demetriou's account may seem, "in practice, both incorporation and oppression can occur together" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 848). This indicates a similarly dualistic relationship between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities which, despite being slightly masqueraded by the 'incorporation' factor which makes it seem like there is room for mutual exchange, is eventually one-sided and in the favour of hegemonic masculinity, which exercises 'effeminacy', 'oppression' and 'incorporation' simultaneously. For example, despite hegemonic masculinity being enacted by only by a minority of men, it is constructed as an idealised type of masculinity, which, despite not corresponding closely to the actual lives of any men, is structured within the widespread ideals, fantasies and desires of men that are constantly strived for but can never be achieved completely (ibid:832; 838). Hegemonic masculinity is thus imparted normative value to the extent of placing it at an unattainable height, in a 'slanted relationship' with non-hegemonic masculinities, constituting everything that non-hegemonic masculinities constantly lack while it can freely 'effeminate', 'incorporate' and 'oppress'.

That said however, to neatly place hegemonic masculinities as the 'incorporators' and 'oppressors' versus non-hegemonic masculinities as the 'incorporated' and 'oppressed' in two homogenous, mutually exclusive binaries, is, according to Gopal (2006: 810) not only "incongruous but also makes us aware of the not so salient axioms of positivist, colonial logic." The numbers variants of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities are categorised not only according to their relational proximity to "a particular hegemonic masculinity" as Paechter (2006: 255) argues but in an intersectional relationship to the 'social dynamics' within which they are constituted. Undertaking an intersectional approach towards masculinities helps us understand the complex contestation of masculinities not only in relation to one another but within an entire social structure, as elaborated in the example below.

In their accounts, Anandhi et al, who conducted a research in the Thirunur village in Tamil Nadu, observed that the dominant response to the constant emasculation and humiliation of the Dalit (lower caste) men by the Mudaliar (upper caste) men emerged in "symbolic wish fulfilment in safer locations... even if Dalits could not beat up the Mudaliars in person, they dismembered the bodies of Mudaliars after their death- when the bodies were left in the burning ghat for cremation... inscribed by the Dalit men's desire to be masculine enough and an acknowledgement of their inability to do so" (2002: 4399). In contrast to this, several decades later, the younger generation of Dalits resisted upper-caste dominance in more direct ways, by "contesting upper caste dominance, primarily by refusing to work for Mudaliars and by getting direct access to land either as sharecroppers or as owners of land" (p.4400). Not only do these examples point to the changing relations between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in terms of resistance but place these resistances in a "complex interplay of territorial control, display of violence and masculinity" (p.4401) within a larger structural "socio-economic transformation" (p.4405).

Furthermore, what these accounts problematise is the notion that only the 'disempowered' are forced to assert their masculinity through "embodied acts of display" (p.4401-4402). Anandhi et al have accounted similar acts of "embodied acts of display" through the use of "violence against women" by upper-caste Mudaliar men of the same village.

Why would men, who are monetarily well-off, hold high a high social status in terms of their caste and possess normative power over hegemonic masculinity as the village patriarchs feel the need to re-assert their masculinity? Interestingly, hegemonic masculinity, while being resisted and increasingly contested by the Dalit men of the village, is increasingly characterised by resistance. Not only did the Dalit notion of "being a man" get equated with "being able to demonstrate one's distance from a regional (Mudaliar) hegemonic masculinity (Wetherell& Edley:1995)" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:840), but also with resisting and constantly challenging it. In response to that, the Mudaliar masculinity gets characterised as a threatened, non-hegemonic masculinity itself, but interestingly, this shift does not amount to hegemonic masculinity getting attached to Dalit masculinity.

Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is "not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (1995: 76). Hegemony can only be established if there is "some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual" (Connell 1995:77). Hegemony "did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force, it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Neither the hyper-masculine Dalit man, lacking insufficient resources, nor the publicly emasculated village patriarch qualify as a repository of or complicit to hegemonic masculinity. As Anandhi et al sum up, "Though the masculine practices of the Dalit youths look as if they are hegemonic, it is incomplete and at best a processual interregnum at the time of study" (2002: 4405). Hegemonic masculinity, in the process gets attached to the very act of resistance, which constitutes the violent subjugation of women (of their caste and the other's) by two equally problematised caste-based masculinities. To sum up, hegemonic masculinity in the Thirunur village is produced through the very act of resistance to the Brahmanical patriarchy of the upper-caste (Mudaliars) with a hyper masculine assertion of masculinity by men of the lower-caste (Dalits) and a counter-resistance by the 'publicly-emasculated' Mudaliars. Evidently, the social dynamics of caste places individuals at locations that will constantly be contested by them or others in resistance to them, locations that they can never fully achieve. It is in this endless contestation that the heart of patriarchy resides and hegemonic masculinity is produced.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to contend that whether looking for masculinity's regressive elements or its progressive potential, neither can be duly achieved by treating them in isolation. In terms of what masculinity contradicts, be it femininity or non-hegemonic masculinities (in the more specific case of hegemonic masculinity), it does so by placing itself in a slanted interplay in an inherently hegemonic pattern that is crucial to its longevity as a stabilising factor of multiple patriarchies in a 'phallogocentric worldview'. This regressive element exists in a relational interplay. Moreover, in approaching masculinity through its slanted interplay with what it contradicts brings up the question of which one we fix normative value to. Which masculinity becomes fixed and which ones play as its satellites? Such normative values have clearly been imparted to hegemonic masculinity by Connell and to female masculinity by Halberstam. Can one hope for the slanted interplay to become more equitable without questioning the top-down placement of these normative values?

Speaking of its progressive potential, one can argue that since masculinity exists in "constant contestation" and is "historically open", is a concept in social science that "has the capacity to travel and acquire new meanings" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:853). However, placing it outside isolation and in relational terms in itself and to the larger structure of social dynamics does not necessitate gender equity. Yet, situating masculinity within an intersectional framework is definitely a step in the right direction, an ongoing process that has to travel long before both, femininity and masculinity can escape 'phallogocentric world views' to situate themselves in more ethical relations of gender justice and equity.

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