

# Do ‘Men’ Have Body?

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“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me?”  
— John Milton, Paradise Lost

Who asked you to make me male? Who asked patriarchy to ‘gender’ me? Our identity (or, identities) is/are constructed through ‘words’. Our birth certificate is basically a piece of paper with ‘writing’ on it. Gender happens to be the most ‘important’ marker on birth certificate. Patriarchy does this ‘marking’ on birth certificate as ‘words’. We mark ‘sex’ prior to the ‘marking’ of gender. As soon as a human baby is born, we ‘mark’ sex on that body. None seems interested in the health of the human baby. It is as though ‘marking’ sex on the new-born human baby is more important than the information about the health of the baby. It is as if gendering the new born baby is rendering ‘it’ human!

Body is not ‘valuable’ as body itself; body is considered ‘valuable’ as a reflection of mind. It refers back to Latin phrase ‘*mens sana in corpore sano*’ (a healthy mind in a healthy body). Male body existed in Greek society not as a body, but as embodiment of the mind. Mind is represented in the body. This kind of representation was revived. In fact, this rubric of representation went into hiding for centuries. With the inception of Christianity, there is a certain kind of inculcation of fear, shame, horror and disgust with the human body. It led to corpophobia. Christianity put body into hiding. When Michelangelo painted nudity on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Pope intervened and ordered to ‘hide’ the genitalia. Patriarchy regulates and disciplines not only just the female body, but also the male body as well. Is nude body not the best example of the work of work of God? Michelangelo’s *David* is an example of Renaissance art of male body with small penis. His sculpture of *The Risen Christ*, a marble sculpture of the Italy High Renaissance, too, has tiny penis. This ‘small penis’ imply controlled sex drive. Greeks believed that if one is too much libidinous, desirous and given to sexual activity, one loses masculinity for having paid more attention to the body than it actually ‘deserves’. Male body, Greeks conceded, ought to be harnessed for intellectual creative works; since Greeks never prioritized the body in that the body cannot be an end in itself. Body should be there to accomplish its task as a means to an end. Greeks reckoned excessive sexual desire feminizes male. Therefore, enormous penis becomes a subject of ridicule. In Greek mythology, Priapus becomes a reference point of this theorization.

Masculinity Studies are often mistaken to be a counter-discourse to feminism. A lot of cisgender men do get pumped up by Masculinity studies. Masculinity Studies was never meant

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to be a declaration of war against feminism. In fact, Masculinity Studies draws its critical apparatuses from feminism. Masculinity Studies should not be seen as war cry against feminism; It is discursively feminist because it draws its abilities to diagnose the way in which gender operates (or, is made to operate) in society from feminism. It is an extension of feminism; and not a protest against it.

Since Masculinity Studies arrived in the critical field pretty late, it worked to its theoretical advantage. Masculinity Studies, by virtue of being the late entrant into critical studies, had the privilege of learning from the disciplines of feminism, LGBTQI + studies, Queer theory, Disability studies and so on. It was advantage for Masculinity Studies because it learnt from the mistakes that previous theoretical hermeneutics had committed 'unconsciously'. Previously, there were almost pre-coded conceptualization about sex, gender and sexuality. But since the intervention of Gay and Lesbian studies, since the intervention of Queer theory, since the intervention of Disability studies, since the intervention of Posthumanism, Masculinity Studies learnt not to make those mistakes. Therefore, Masculinity Studies learnt from critical discourses that had gone before.

Masculinity Studies initially began to assume that it was basically about men, body of men and the body of cismen. During the happy old days of Gender studies, there was an 'assumption' that women who were assigned sexed female at birth were the 'only' suitable subjects for feminism. Transwomen were not considered 'fit' subject for feminist critical discourses. Lesbian women, too, were 'unsuitable' subjects for feminism till 1970s. There is a way in which gender studies developed assuming that gender is 'only' about ciswomen, only about women who were born with vagina. Masculinity Studies pretty quickly shifted away from this theoretical position of gender studies. Masculinity does not depend on the body that has penis; this was the critical 'base' from where Masculinity Studies derives its theoretical discourse. Masculinity Studies owes a lot to Trans studies. In fact, Masculinity Studies is not necessarily a theoretical discipline with body that *does* have penis.

Masculinity Studies began when R. W. Connell, an Australian sociologist carried out a survey among school children in Australia. The survey turned out to be a discourse analysis of how children are 'gendered' in terms of how a boy is supposed to behave and how a girl is supposed to behave even at the level of kindergarten. There is a way in which gender is 'taught'. In 'Le Deuxième Sexe' (1949) Simone de Beauvoir conceded, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Similarly, one is not born, but rather becomes, a man. Society teaches masculinity; but there are *few* bodies that refuse to be taught masculinity. All bodies are *not* taught masculinities. Jen Manion, in her book *Female Husbands*, went all the way back to 1740 and drew from contemporary newspapers reports of women who lived as men.

These women took ciswomen as their wife. There were many households in mid eighteenth century England that had two women as married couple, one of them being the 'husband' - the female husband who would be swearing expletives, chewing tobacco, abusing

slangs, sitting knees apart in public. She becomes the female husband in Jen Manion's history of *Female Husbands*. However, this began to change in the nineteenth century when people became disinterested in accepting 'men' just because they were gender presenting as masculine. Victorians were more interested in the genitalia with which one is born. Nineteenth century was absolutely convinced that if one is born with vagina, one cannot claim the identity of man for yourself; if one is born with penis, one cannot claim the identity of woman for yourself. Therefore, there was a certain denial of trans experience, denial of trans identity in nineteenth century. Trans identity had to wait for more than a century to get recognized. Boys, R. W. Connell surveyed, were *taught* to be masculine. Judith Butler theorized in *Gender Trouble* that sex, too, is culturally constructed. When a child is born, and when a certain *sex* is applied to the child, that *application* is not really based on the genitalia of the child. It is based on how the genitalia is read; it is based on how the genitalia is regarded. So when a child is born with penis, it is assumed that the child will grow up to be a boy, therefore a man; it is assumed that the man will desire a woman, and therefore, the child will need the penis to impregnate the woman; and therefore the child is destined to be a 'man'.

This 'assumption' is the root of human unhappiness under patriarchy. We would not have been able to identify this patriarchal unhappiness had it not been for the greater visibility and availability of trans bodies and trans narratives that we have today. Trans body challenges the way in which we regard *sex*. It was in the year 2014 in Ecuador where a couple became incredibly famous. The husband was expecting the couple's first child. The husband was pregnant; he was impregnated by his wife. The husband has ovary and the wife has the penis. If the wife has the penis, then does the penis still remain a male genitalia? Penis does not remain the male genitalia anymore. Here penis becomes the female genitalia if the person possessing the genitalia claims to be a woman. Similarly, if the person carrying the womb, ovary and uterus claims to be a man, then the person should be recognized as man. So if a man is capable of having either a penis or a vagina, if a woman is capable of having either a penis or a vagina, then neither a penis nor a vagina has any 'fixed/stable' sex. Those who associate penis with male by default, they should ask themselves that if a penis is always already male, how do you *read* the penis on the body of a person who claims to be a woman. Penis may be male organ; penis may not be male organ. Penis does not have any fixed sex. If penis does not have any fixed sex, then penis does not have *sex* at all. Penis is just an organ out of which urine comes out, penis is just an organ out of which sperm comes out; but that sperm can come out of the body of a person who claims to be a female just as the ovary can be contained by a person who claims to be a male. Therefore, if we are going to dissociate 'supposedly' cis male body from masculinity, then it becomes easier for us to realize how masculinity is formed.

Masculinity is formed through a very rigorous exercise that gets repeated time and again. Masculinity is an exercise that is repetitive like all exercises; it is an exercise which seeks to consolidate certain kind of physical presentation – gender presentation – which is going to be recognized as 'masculine'. Masculinity is not fixed to any stable sexed body; Masculinity becomes a 'free-floating signifier' simply because it can be performed by any kind of body. It

does not have to be a body that has got penis attached to it. Therefore, masculinity becomes a *movable* construction. It can be set down on any 'base' (Marx). Masculinity is like circus tent that can be put down on any ground anywhere. Masculinity can be put down on any kind of 'body' even if that 'body' does not have penis attached to it. Any kind of 'body' can 'perform' masculinity irrespective of the presence or absence of penis between the two legs. We owe this theorization of transgender studies to Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, Jean Bobby Noble's *Masculinities Without Men*? But it all started with R. W. Connell who used to be Robert Connell; but she is Raewyn Connell now, a trans woman. So R. W. Connell becomes a free-floating signifier. Therefore, masculinity is absolutely nothing but gender presentation which is perpetually mutating, changing and destabilizing the 'base' of body.

R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt came up with the three-tier system of hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity and subordinate masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, to which very few men belong, is valorized at a given point in a particular society. *Kabir Singh* is a 2019 Bollywood blockbuster where Preeti, the girlfriend of Kabir Singh gets treated like an object, where the boyfriend is supposed to be violent and aggressive. It is 'blockbuster' because people love and support such gender presentation of masculinity in terms of men beating up women, controlling women, owning up women. Men, therefore, are 'expected' to be violent against everybody – male, female and all. This is 'hegemonic masculinity' which is present in certain kind of society at a given period.

Complicit masculinity, to which vast majority of men belong, happens to be the second tier of the three-tier system of R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt. People who belong to complicit masculinity are not necessarily hegemonic themselves. They do not have the body of, say, John Abraham or Salman Khan; nor do they go around behaving like Kabir Singh; but they support 'hegemonic masculinity'. Complicit masculine men are policemen of hegemonic masculinity. Complicit masculine men go about policing 'boys' and 'men' in terms of how to be 'proper' men and 'proper' boys. Complicit masculinity serves as police of patriarchy. This is where the terms like 'toxic masculinity' come into play. But the trouble is if there is 'toxic masculinity', there has to be 'non-toxic masculinity' as well; and if there is 'toxic masculinity', there has to be 'toxic femininity' too. Both masculinity and femininity are equally toxic. Men who are 'gentle', 'understanding', 'non-violent' are 'supposedly' 'non-toxic' men; but they are automatically by default still considered 'men' because they have penis attached to their body. There is an extraordinary 'assumption' that those bodies which have penis between legs *must* be considered men! How does one assume that the body which has a penis would automatically 'perform' masculinity – whether it be 'toxic' or whether it be 'non-toxic'? How does one assume what they are performing is 'masculinity' at all? Both masculinity and femininity are equally toxic as long as it is prescriptive because one still 'disciplines' 'gentleness' as code of 'non-toxic masculinity'. It is also prescription of gender in itself.

We are now down to the third part of the three-tier system and it is subordinate masculinity. Subordinate masculinity belongs to those people who refuse to give in to the

pressure of hegemonic masculinity. They refuse to be the ‘men’ that TV, music video, Bollywood, Hollywood want them to be. But there are few who could resist hegemonic masculinity. Majority of cismen rather happily subscribe to hegemonic masculinity. In fact, these cismen regard such ‘subscription’ empowering. But when cismen conform to such stereotype of hegemonic masculinity, they are actually being *powerless*. They simply adhere to patriarchy. How can such total obedience and total subservience be empowering? Drinking, smoking, consumption of drugs, riding bike without helmet are *not* at all empowering. Donald Trump refused to wear Covid-19 mask because the use of protective equipment does bring the body into existence. If one protects his body, one simply admits that his body exists. But patriarchy would never allow male body to ‘exist’. Ironically, when man protects his body, man loses masculinity. A lot of men resist wearing helmets during bike ride because it ‘emasculates’ men. There is an equivocation with regard to male body in that male body is both existing and not existing at once within heteropatriarchy.

Gender Studies could very well be regarded as *death-wish*; since the whole point of Gender Studies is annihilation of gender. The crux of Gender Studies is that there should not be any gender to begin with. There is a way in which we have begun to talk about masculinity in a way that often misses out on attempting a critique of body as base and gender as super-structure. But we end up constructing huge structure of ‘assumptions’ on the basis of ‘stable’ body/base. Why construct gender at all? On what basis do we construct gender along the line of genitalia at all?

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