

# **Men with Masculinities: How do they shape the idea of Feminism?**

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## **Abstract**

*Men and women, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. These binaries have existed for centuries under the patriarchal world system. Recent studies on these binaries have opened up new fields of research for scholars, feminists, and students. The questions of who a man is, or who a woman is are now questioned and critiqued in almost spheres of studies. This essay will try to understand these terms and closely look at how men and masculinities interact and give shape to ideas and beliefs which we consider 'normal' or 'natural'. The essay will be facilitated by the references of two short films: *Mardistan (Macholand)* by Harjant Gill in 2005, and *Zara Nazar Utha ke Dekho* by Anindya Shankar Das in 2020.*

## **Why choose these films?**

The selection of these two films is purely personal, and political. There are several reasons which allowed me to choose these two films. One of the primary reasons was that these two films are directed, and written by men. Harjant Gill is a professor of visual anthropology at Towson University, Washington, and has directed many short films which engage with the idea of masculinity, gender and sexuality. Anindya Shankar Das is a producer and has worked on diverse content relating to food, fashion and corporate.

*Mardistan*, a 2005 documentary film captures the understanding of masculinity of four men in the city of Chandigarh. Despite living in the same city, they had different experiences of engaging with masculinities. Amandeep is a writer and journalist and the author of the book *Roll of Honour*. Gurpreet is a modeler and designer, and a father of two daughters. Tarun is from Rajasthan and has come to study architecture in Chandigarh. Dhananjay is a social worker and LGBT activist. Despite being gay, Dhananjay is married to a woman and has two kids. The diverse backgrounds of these four men allowed me to gain a holistic understanding of masculinities that was in 2005.

*Zara Nazar Utha Ke Dekho* does not specifically talk of masculinities but it engages with the idea of how people from LGBT+ community cruise for desire in urban spaces. The short film tells the stories of people from queer community and tries to understand their idea and access of public space.

One of the stark differences between these two films is the time frame in which they are set in. The emotions and anxiety captured by *Mardistan* is different from *Zara Nazar Utha Ke Dekho*. With the decriminalisation of article 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised sexual activities which were

‘unnatural’ in nature allowed *Zara Nazar Utha Ke Dekho* (which was released in November 2020) to freely capture and document gay cruising in urban spaces. However, the anxieties of being gay and being not ‘normal’ were very prominent in the account of Dhananjay in *Mardistan*. There are also many similarities in both these films, suggesting the fact that patriarchy still exists and oppresses those who belong to marginalised sections of society.

## **Masculinities and crime**

In January 2018, an eight month old was raped allegedly by her 26 year old cousin in the capital city of New Delhi. Is this how masculinity manifests in society? Masculinities and crime has emerged as a field of academic research in criminology and masculine studies. Crimes against women and people from marginalised communities is not a new phenomenon. Traditional heinous practices of dowry, sati, female foeticide are crimes resulting from the patriarchal social order. Though punishable by law, they are still prevalent in some parts of north India. Nivedita Menon in her interview with Harjant Gill says that a distinction should be made between sexually violent crimes and crimes which are committed to upheld patriarchal belief systems in society. Sexual violence against women take place in forms of one man raping one woman, or group of men raping one woman. These kinds of violence emerge from the hegemonic masculine behaviour of men. It is the mystification of sex - the pleasure to conquer the object of desire by force which tend to relate to the aspect of masculinity.<sup>1</sup> ‘Doing wrong’ can be thrilling and intrinsically enjoyable and can also be linked to forms of status attainment and identity (Winlow 2004). Along with mystification of sex, another attribute contributing to the rise in sexual violence cases was the power difference between men and women, and the sex as a means to have that power. This view of power and sexuality was first discussed in 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *Second Sex* and then in Betty Friedan’s 1963 *Feminine Mystique* which discussed the use of sexual exploitation in advertising, the effect of sex roles on sexual fulfillment, and women’s sexual discontents (Shulman 1980: 591). It was this mystification of sex and the relation between power and sex that led to the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in the Delhi rape case of 2012. And it is these characteristics of sex that makes a man rape babies of eight months old. Is Gurpreet right in fearing for his daughters’ safety?



Image 1: Gurpreet with his two daughters

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<sup>1</sup> The pleasures of sexual violence has been championed in Ovid’s *Art of Loving*, where Dioscuri sisters Phoebe and Hilaria was cited as an example of mystification of sexual violence. Carroll, Margaret D. “The Erotics of Absolutism: Rubens and the Mystification of Sexual Violence.” *Representations*, no. 25, 1989, pp. 3–30. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2928464](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928464)

“What right do girls have to expose themselves? Why are girls out and about at night? If you are a good girl you should stay at home. If you go out at night you are called a bad girl.” Tarun says citing his friend’s reaction after Delhi gangrape. In patriarchal perspective, the raped woman is responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed the *lakshman rekha* of time (by going out after dark) or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (by dressing in unconventional ways). Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* cites a public meeting where the Chairperson of the Karnataka State Human Rights Commission says: “Yes men are bad...But who asked women to venture out in the night...women should not have gone out in the night and when they do, there is no point in complaining that men touched them and hit them” (Menon 2012: 113,114). It is these men with their idea of patriarchy that feminists rise up against. Yes, Gurpreet is scared for her daughters but he does not believe in compromising his daughters’ freedom or locking them up in the four walls of home. But these violent masculinities are very much inflicted inside the bedroom of a married heterosexual couple. “Once the rapist is the woman’s husband, the act of sex is retrospectively legitimised because of course, the consent of the woman to sex is irrelevant, in marriage and out of it” (Menon 2012: 114).

A lesser studied topic in masculinity and crime is male/male rape. Sivakumaran argues that there are two reasons behind the silence on the issue. First, the subject of male/male rape is a cause without a voice as there are very few people willing and able to speak on its behalf. One of the primary reasons of this is the shame associated with rape, and in this case the rape of a man. “We find cases of male rapes in armies and schools where the alpha male tries to subjugate the lesser powerful man, ” says Amandeep in *Mardistan*. But we do not quite know if this subjugation through rape is the repressed desire of man for a man, or is it just to claim superiority. The second reason that Sivakumaran gives is that this act involves sexual activity between two men, and society considers any such contact to be indicative of homosexuality, regardless of any element of coercion. And homosexuality is a shame not only to the society but also to the male self. Thus reporting of such crimes where a man has to encounter shame on his masculinity are never encountered.

## **Masculinities and Desire**

Desire is a crucial component of masculinity or being a man. Men who fail to act upon desire or who do not experience desire are called *namard* or not a man. In a study conducted to explore the phenomenon of “virgin-shaming”<sup>2</sup> among college men found out that a) having sex is often held as a marker of status or achievement of hegemonic masculinity, b) virgin shaming is found in social spaces more concerned with upholding masculine norms, c) virgin shaming can be used both as an invocation to reassert one’s masculinity and, relatedly, a taunt to encourage others to start having sex (Fleming, Shannon, 2018). Lacking sexual experience, Tarun goes through the same phenomenon and shaming as he was unsure about when to initiate physical intimacy with his partner. While talking about his sexual or romantic experiences in college, Tarun says that to act upon desire one needs to be familiar with what the other person wants and it is only after listening to songs of Honey Singh do men realise what girls today really want. However, after the Delhi gangrape case of 2012 feminist called for a ban on punjabi rapper Yo Yo Honey Singh’s performance. The misogynistic lyrics of his songs such as *Main Hoon Balaatkari* (I am a

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<sup>2</sup> A phenomenon where an individual is called out or made fun for lacking sexual experience.

Rapist) describes raping a woman out alone in the night, and *choot* (cunt) describes his violent sex with and urination on a woman (Dutta, Sircar, 2013: 293). Can we separate power when we talk of desire and masculinity?



Image 2: Tarun talking about his romantic relationships

Men desiring other men has been the focus in masculinity studies. How do men communicate desire with other men, especially in times when there were no apps like Tinder or social media. Public places like stations, buses, markets, parks are spaces where this desire is communicated through signals, codes and eye contacts. Public spaces are important for communicating desire as it cuts down borders that we otherwise have in society. After the decriminalisation of article 377 in 2018, desires were more freely expressed in spaces of public toilets and parks.



Image 3: Parks became places where male police officers would also try to engage in a sexual activity with other men

However, in a homophobic society like ours men are still ashamed of their sexuality and their desire for other men. To appear 'normal' and to live a 'normal' life, Dhananjay marries a woman. He wanted to live with a male companion but society tied him to a woman. He feels a sense of guilt of not being able to be a husband, and that he can't perform like a real man in a society. The idea of responsibility is very deeply instilled in the minds of young men by society. Thus, a man must be responsible to be able to perform the role of a man.



Image 4: Dhananjay (left) and his wife (right) in their household

The desire is also an occupation for some people. Public spaces like highways, metro stations, bus stands are places where these desires are traded. For the trans community, public space is important for business and living. In one of the accounts in *Zara Nazar Utha ke Dekho*, they say that the most ‘love’ is given by the police. Despite of the large numbers of police customers, prostitution and prostitutes are abducted under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956 which allows police to arrest women soliciting on the streets. In misusing the act, police simply remove prostitutes from public view without even intending to initiate their rehabilitation (Shetye 2018) . Prostitution is not a law and order problem, it is a work like any other work which needs recognition and respect.



Image 5: A prostitute in a public place

### Some Conclusions

A conventional definition of who a man is is now challenged by the shifting gender boundaries. By crossing the lines of gender and associating oneself with less masculine or feminine qualities, a new man is produced in a society - the one who is free. The goal of feminism has always been to break the binaries of gender and realise the individuality of a person. Living in a pandemic and in a virtual world, the boundaries of who a man is or who a woman is doesn't really matter. One can be who one wants to be in this new digital world. For Amandeep the idea of a man in Harjant Gill's *Mardistan* is: “man should be

able to understand others, to be able to listen to others, to be able to be sensitive to others, to be able to give compassion. That is also a part of masculinity which is so missing.” Can a man with masculinity give up or challenge the patriarchal and misogynistic understanding of society? Can a man question his identity which we recognise is ‘normal’ and step up and accept who he is? Can Dhananjay ever leave his hegemonic masculine self<sup>3</sup> behind and come out to the society as gay? Will the peers of Tarun make him a patriarchal masculine man who oppresses women and inflicts violence on them? Will Gurpreet be able to keep his promise of providing a free world to his daughters?

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<sup>3</sup> Hegemonic to his wife

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