Interrogating the Representation of Toxic Masculinity in *A Death in the Gunj*

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complex paradigm of toxic masculinity as presented in the movie *A Death in the Gunj*. It describes how darkness and hopelessness envelopes the life of a young boy who cannot cope up with the 'manly' world around him and feels alienated and how his tormentors seek sadist pleasure out of his agony. My paper seeks to interrogate the prevalent idioms of masculinity and sexuality with reference to Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Foucault's theory of sexuality, thereby exploring the alterations that take place theoretically and in praxis and their representation in history, fiction and popular culture.

Keywords: Toxic Masculinity, Culture, Film, Sexuality, Performativity.

This paper seeks to interrogate the problematics of toxic masculinity in the context of the Indian movie, *A Death in the Gunj*. As part of her first directorial venture, Konkona Sen Sharma has dealt with the psychological adjustments that a young man has to often undergo in order to cope with the normative gender pattern or behaviour, failing which he faces humiliation and undergoes a great deal of suffering. A sensitive filmmaker Sharma elucidates how the society creates its own monsters in the form of undaunted, unfeeling and gallant men who imbibe certain abominable traits as a part of their machismo and forcefully try to impose the same on men who are or want to be different.

Section I

Before dealing specifically with the movie *A Death in the Gunj,* it is essential for us to discuss the general problems associated with the idea of toxic masculinity, which would ensure a better understanding of the movie.

The concept of toxic masculinity is used in the social sciences to describe traditional norms of behaviour among men in contemporary American and European society that are associated with detrimental social and psychological effects. Such "toxic" masculine norms include dominance, devaluation of women, extreme self-reliance, and the suppression of emotions:

> Conformity with certain traits viewed as traditionally male, such as misogyny, homophobia, and violence, can be considered "toxic" due to harmful effects on others in society, while related traits, including self-reliance and the stifling of emotions, are correlated with harm to men themselves through psychological problems such as depression, increased stress, and substance abuse… (Wikipedia)

Toxic masculinity is one of the most menacing issues in the present scenario. A poignant fact that encompasses the world today is that this very perverse form of patriarchy does not only cause impairment to women but is equally intimidating to men. It shows its horrendous ramifications through domestic violence, bullying, acid attacks, rape, honour killing and in everyday gender bias. As per statistics, the violent effects of toxic masculinity is not only a cause of profound botheration in India but also throughout the world. This extreme form of behaviour is likely to be grounded in the attitude of parents and society as a whole towards young boys. The toxicity is not something they are born with but is rather an attribute that is thrust upon them from a very tender age.

The concept also had influence in criminology. All data reflect that men and boys perpetrate more of the conventional crimes and the more serious of these crimes than do women and girls. Moreover, men hold a virtual monopoly on the commission of syndicated and white-collar forms of crime. The concept of hegemonic masculinity helped in theorizing the relationship among masculinities and among a variety of crimes (Messerschmidt 1993) and was also used in studies on specific crimes by boys and men, such as rape in Switzerland, murder in Australia, football "hooliganism"and white-collar crime in England, and assaultive violence in the United States (Newburn and Stanko 1994. (Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the concept)

Another major concern that dominates this issue is how toxic masculinity is not just detrimental for women but also for men. More 'manly' subjugates the less 'manly', that is someone who does not conform to the physical or mental parameters of masculine as the set notion of the society. World confers power to the virile and dauntless who in turn suppress those who are unmanly or effete and this is another very important power equation besides the man-woman question that cannot be overlooked. Foucault's concept of power in *The History of Sexuality* is related to this. He says:

> By power…I do not understand a general system of domination exercised by one element or one group over another, whose effects traverse the entire body social…it seems to me that first what needs to be understood is the multiplicity of relations of force that are immanent to the domain wherein they are exercised…. (121-22)

We often talk about the victims of toxic masculinity but rarely do we talk about the situation of the perpetrators themselves. These men who are taught as young boys never to cry; never to share their feelings or express any hurt are victims in one way or other. They are often seen resorting to drug addiction and even suicide. They are trained to destroy their

sensitivity and that is when they turn towards crime. "Is masculinity innate or a product of society? Is it predetermined or actively constructed? Is it an entity to be worn, like an overcoat, or is it embedded, through daily practices, in boys' very "beings" (Imms)? For them, their gender/masculinity is a performance that they need to put up every day in order to remain in the power frame. The inculcation is so strong that for them their masculinity needs to be worn, proven and performed. As Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that gender is a performance and is essentially a construct. It is like role-playing. She states: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33).

Section II

In this section of the paper, I would like to discuss the portrayal of masculinity in Indian Cinema and how *A Death in the Gunj* is different from most of them. The take of the director Konkona Sen Sharma on the film and the presentation of toxic masculinity in it would also be discussed.

Indian mainstream cinema has always celebrated hypermasculinity[1] and hegemonic masculinity[2]. The portrayal of male characters and even protagonists has often been that of stalkers and bullies, men displaying toughness and chauvinism. Recent movies like *Sultan, Wanted, R...Rajkumar, Judwa, Dabang, Mubarakan* and so on, have valorized and glorified the normative and often malevolent forms of masculinity malignant to the society. The contemporary Indian cinema endorses urban masculinity where the muscular protagonist wears branded clothes and roams around in expensive vehicles promoting masculinity that requires wealth to be displayed. Such movies often attract the attention of youngsters and in the process of emulating these heroes they end up harming themselves and others. This is a trait that cinema must do away with keeping in mind the larger good of the community. There

are some movies though that have treated gender as it is and accepted it in all its forms but their number is very few. *A Death in the Gunj* is one such movie that not only exposes the perfidiousness and hollowness of families but also shows the very patricentric basis they are made up of and how that is an integral part and parcel of family structures so much so that anything out of the mould, anything different or unusual, anything not conforming to certain regulations is difficult to accept, prone to bully and misbehaviour and often pushed to its doom. *A Death in the Gunj* speaks for the 'other', describes a masculine perspective that is marginal and not much spoken about before.

Konkona Sen Sharma, the director of the movie, took the idea for the same from a short story written by her father, Mukul Sharma. Konkona, in an interview, expressed views about how certain aggressive forms of masculinity turns harmful for men. There is so much of heinousness that men face in the hands of other men. As Bhandari said,

> For me, *A Death in the Gunj* is a psychological drama. It's about human interactions. And also about what is expected from us. I think men are also victims of patriarchy. There is such toxic masculinity that is so acceptable in our daily lives, and when men don't conform to that, how do they deal with? How do other people deal with?

Thus the dilemma about masculinity remains. It is time now that the grand narrative on the same is discarded in cinema and popular culture and there is a broader reception of different forms of masculinities and their presentation in media and films. Masculinity needs to be defined in plural terms and a man must be accepted as a man irrespective of his race, religion, class or sexuality.

The multiple masculinities concept reflects a laudable desire to value diversity. It is ironic, then, that this concept has fostered a kind of categorical essentialism in studies of men. To invoke, for example, the existence of Black masculinity, Latino masculinity, gay

masculinity, Jewish masculinity, working-class masculinity, and so on is to imply that there is an overriding similarity in the gender enactments of males who are Black, Latino, gay, Jewish, or working class. The implicit claim is that all members of the category practice identifiably unique masculinity for all. (Men, Masculinity and Manhood)

Section III

In this last section, I would discuss how the movie *A Death in the Gunj* helps us read and understand the issue of toxic masculinity as present in our everyday lives in our very own surroundings.

A Death in the Gunj is set in McCluskiegunj, an old Anglo-Indian town, in present Jharkhand. Set in 1978, it revolves around a Bengali family's seven-day vacation. Comprising nearly a dozen members, the family meets after a long time. The mood is that of revelry and carnival. With special attention to detail, the family members are introduced. There is the bossy son Nandu (Gulshan Devaiah), insensitive to the needs and wounds of others. Bonnie (Tillotama Shome), Nandu's wife is frank, fun-loving and alert. She has a tender side to her character sometimes suppressed by the responses of her rough husband but mostly by her own negligence and denial of it. The highly attractive Mimi (Kalki Koechlin) with a sly and seductive demeanour is a family friend. There is the short-tempered and vicious Vikram (Ranvir Shorey), who is newly married and does not hesitate to share an illicit kiss. O.P (Om Puri) is the jovial head of the family who is mostly indifferent to his surroundings and indulges in elite luxuries of drinking and hunting. Another family friend Brian (Jim Sarbh), is relatively self-possessed in the group of three, namely Nandu, Vikram and himself. Then there is the conscientious matron Anupama (Tanuja) and Tani, a young, naïve girl of eight, the daughter of Nandu and Bonnie. Placed in a great contrast to the rest of the characters is Shutu or Shyamal (Vikrant Massey); subdued and isolated; someone trying

to grieve, afflicted with the fresh wounds of a recently deceased father. Shutu likes spending time with his young niece Tani, in solitude, away from the company of the over-enthusiastic and merry-making group of adults around. He collects moths and preserves them in the middle of a notebook. He has a list of words beginning with E. He buries a dead ant in the ground and draws frogs in his notebook. The filmmaker takes care and uses the word 'sensitive' more than once for Shutu. A person who keeps to himself; a person who is weak and not properly 'masculine'according to the sensibilities of the Indian family structure.

The three other men in the movie, namely Nandu, Vikram and Brian are bearers of 'internalized toxic masculinity' (Marik). These men were socialized learning to be 'men' first and foremost and everything else later. The yardstick of their manhood is measured by who can 'drink like a sailor'. They consider promiscuity something to be proud of and use sexual slangs in conversations in order to appear "manly"(Marik). Vikram has an affair with Mimi but for a wife, he chooses a homely girl much younger to him who refers to him as 'huzoor' or sir. The apparently naïve wife knows hardly anything about the husband's whereabouts and rather enjoys singing regional songs and entertaining his hosts. Mimi for Vikram was a woman who could be kissed behind a closed door; flirted with during the absence of the wife; ignored in her presence and rejected at will.

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue…Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell and Messerschmidt)

As opposed to these men, Shutu is a timid and shy person who has come for a holiday in order to escape a failed semester. The wounds of the death of his father are still fresh and his deep affection for him is evident when he caresses his father's sweater and sleepwalks under the trauma of his death. He seeks warmth and comfort in little tokens left behind by the father. Shutu studies mathematics but loves literature, draws and spends most of his days idly with his niece Tani. He secretly cherishes and desires Mimi but is unable to express anything to her.

The bullying starts with a game of planchette where Nandu and Vikram play a prank on Shutu to scare him and have a good laugh at his expense. The prank is successful and Shutu runs away once it is discovered that the spirit they had been calling, predicted his death. In a particular scene, we find that Bonnie asks her husband to be considerate of Shutu since he has been coping up with a big loss and not treat him that harsh. Nandu retorts that Shutu was no kid and it was time for him to take up his responsibilities, look after his mother and therefore 'man up'. Nandu's idea of manning up was a condition where one had no place or time for emotions. Neither did he himself try to understand the younger brother's plight nor did he want Shutu to ponder much about it. The tentacles of poisoned masculinity had ensnared him to such an extent that he failed to realize that in the process of revelry, bullying and forced imposition of masculinity, a human being was losing his very worth and existence. Shutu is a reminder of all those young boys who are taught from their very childhood to not cry, to suppress their emotions, to hide their pains away and to build an exterior no one dares open.

In this film, Konkana Sen Sharma manages to hold up a mirror to our society that is teaching our boys everyday that it is more important to be loud than right, boorish than empathetic and dominating rather than welcoming. Strength has come to mean how much

you can take rather than how much you can give and this strength is strangling our men into putting up a false show of bravado that they themselves often don't agree with. (Singh)

When the society teaches young boys to never show their emotions, these young boys either grow up to be aggressive and bearers of toxic masculinity or they tend to struggle with their emotions which affects their personality and thereby results in identity crisis as in the case of Shutu. Such children do not know where to place themselves in the structured gender patterns framed by society. The results could also be people like Vikram or Nandu who develop a sadist side to their personalities and their pleasures stem out of authority over someone they consider weaker. Violence often is a trait they resort to.

Phrases like '*Mard* [3] *ko dard nhi hota*' (*men don't feel pain*), '*Mard ban, mard*' (*man up!*) and '*Ladke rote nhi hai*' (*boys don't cry*) do more harm to boys and men than we can discern. Every time we tell a young boy to not cry simply because he is a boy, we train him to disregard his emotions. Crying is considered a weakness, something a real man mustn't ever possess. It creates a reluctance in him to even address his emotions, replacing it with aggression instead. (Gupta)

Another appalling occurrence that takes place during the seven-day vacation is Nandu's forcing Shutu to drive back home from a picnic spot. As a man, it was an ignominy that Shutu could not drive well and was scared of holding the steering wheel. This attempt of trying to toughen up Shutu actually triggered uneasiness in him and he hit the car with the wall causing greater distress and humiliation to himself.

The misplaced show of machismo in society is never-ending, cigarettes and bikes, pranks and physical assault, while qualities like sensitivity and shyness are ridiculed. Shutu labours under the burden of his family's expectations, cringing when he calls his widowed mother because the pressure of responsibilities seems too much, and spending all his time in an escapist bubble with an eight-year-old girl. He blends into the 'kids section' quite

conveniently and when he is left behind, forgotten, in the forest, it comes as no surprise. (Nagpal)

The game of kabaddi turns hideous because Vikram could not stand being defeated to an apparently 'effeminate' Shutu. When the game started none of the two teams was interested in taking Shutu with them, mainly because he could never be a winner in their eyes. A competitive Vikram chose Manjari, the domestic help of the house over Shutu, while pouring him with mocks, jeering and retorts. Ironically, the team Shutu got in started scoring the winning points resulting in Vikram's displeasure and annoyance. He could not come to terms with the fact that the 'weakling' Shutu played so well and the same disappointment turned to belligerence for him. While in the game Shutu started his part of chasing Vikram, the latter got hold of him and the game soon culminated into violence as in order to not let go of him, Vikram scratched Shutu's face, bloodied him and hurt him, all for a game.

The category "males" is not equivalent to the category "men." Men are (usually) biological males claiming rights and privileges attendant to membership in the dominant gender group. For an individual male to enjoy the benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group, he must present himself to others as a particular kind of social being: a man. To be credited as a man, what an individual male must do, in other words, is put on a convincing manhood act (Schrock & Schwalbe).

This requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity "man" is established and upheld in interaction. The dramaturgical task of establishing creditability as a man and thus as a member of the dominant gender group is aided by having a male body. Because of the conventional association between maleness and manhood, a male body is a symbolic asset. It is normally taken as a sign of qualification for membership in the category "men" (Schrock and Schwalbe).

Shutu's pain is too intense to be alleviated and that too in a place where his thoughts carried no meaning for anyone but Mimi's interest in him revived his interest in himself. He lied in order to impress her. He told her that he had not only completed his masters but was also willing to apply for a Ph.D. abroad. He started spending time with her and they make love. Little did he realize that he was as inconsequential to Mimi as a holiday fling who she used to get over the married Vikram. The truth of the incident was revealed when Mimi refused to meet him after returning to Kolkata and asked him to concentrate on his studies rather. For Mimi, Shutu was not the kind of person she could have a permanent affair with. He was a weak, lying man who had an almost failed career. He was no desperate Vikram to ward off the perils of the night and cold and go for a long bike ride. He was not burly enough to carry the burden of a family and a forlorn mother, who desperately wanted him to return to Bardhaman. Shutu could be a man she would spend a winter night with in order to wash off her hurt ridden soul; he could be someone to talk to and spell out her heart before, but Shutu was not someone she could settle down with. He was a man not man enough, afraid of ghosts and believer of magic. Shutu was not the man a girl dreams of perhaps. Women too bear a strange concept of masculinity. The image of a man is always of a protector, saviour and provider. A man who seeks saving himself does not fit into the proper realm of masculinity; a man who does not possess the desired manliness is not someone who can be cherished. The man must be the bread-winner, should fight whenever required and shedding tears cannot be an idea equated with an ideal man. For Shutu, the masculinity he cannot wear becomes the reason for his distress and apparent failures. The construction of this hyper-masculine man in the psyche of the society as a whole is so strong that one cannot absolutely do away with it.

If they wish to enjoy the privileges that come from membership in that group must signify possession of a masculine self. This self is, however, only a virtual reality, a dramatic effect, or a consequence of how an actor's appearance and behaviour are interpreted by others

(Goffman 1959). In this view, as opposed to the commonsense view, a masculine self is not a psychological entity, nor a built-in feature of male bodies. It is, rather, a self-imputed to an individual based on information given and given off in interaction, but it is an imputation that matters. (Schrock and Schwalbe)

Towards the end of the story, Tani goes missing and everyone blames Shutu for the irresponsibility, Tani's parents who were at home at that time too did not care about where she was until she was nowhere to be found. Shutu realises his position when he finds his aunt discussing with the rest of the family his academic career and negligence towards his mother and how it was wrong on the part of Tani's parents to have left her in the care of her 'good for nothing' uncle. Shutu could perceive how the family viewed him with judgment and pity at the same time. His feeling of desertion is further heightened when he goes to look for Tani with Nandu, falls in a ditch in the forest and is left there. The entire family later rejoices the safe return of Tani rescued by Vikram, completely forgetting the missing Shutu- scared and lonely, almost devoured by a wolf inside the ditch. It is only during dinner that Anupama notices Shutu's absence and sends for a servant to bring him back. Shutu is not only the victim of toxic masculinity but also the victim of deception and morbidity of the society as a whole. His gentility and silence are weapons against him and he went on to become the punching bag for the rest. Devastated and dejected he finally goes to seek refuge with Tani, his old companion, but her rejection of him was the last nail in the coffin. His consequent burst-out and suicide end the story with a number of questions in the mind of the spectator. "And it kills him; trying to be this hyper-masculine character that might be disliked in the movie but readily exists around us – in our everyday lives, our homes and offices" (Singh).

The very concept of masculinity as a grand narrative needs to change. The time for flexibility and acceptance has come. Movies like *A Death in the Gunj* are the need of the hour not only because they help us get a true insight into life but also because they help in

breaking the age-old stereotypes about masculinity that have surrounded us. *A Death in the Gunj* gives a message that society should shift from its linear focus of gender construction towards fluidity such that the outlook of the society is broadened; to modify social and moral values and achieve equality in the true sense of the term. All that the contemporary world necessarily should aspire is to break free from toxic stereotypes towards a society which recognizes individuals beyond all barriers, towards a single unitary end that is human such that no more Shutus lose their lives striving to attain ends that are not meant for them and more importantly not desirable.

Notes and References

1. Hypermasculinity is a psychological term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviour, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality.

2. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women and other marginalized ways of being a man.

3. Mard is an Urdu word, it means "man, male, hero, husband" in English.

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