READING MASCULINITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

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CONCLUSION

This thesis conducted a discursive-performative analysis of masculinities as portrayed in select works of contemporary South Asian fiction written in and translated into English. Using the method of close textual analysis, it critically examined the male body and its embodiment to explore private as well as public performances of masculinities. The thesis investigated individual and group gender performances within the spheres of family, caste, class, race and religion to unravel the politics of intersection involved therein. Finally, the study juxtaposed the performance of masculinities with the hegemonic process of nation-building and tried to discover if one was a metaphor for the other. In the novelists' representation of how nation-states promoted typical ideals of masculinities, it traced instances when non-normative gender identities were disciplined as well as punished by rigid, authoritarian structures.

A total of fifteen primary texts including two trilogies written by eleven critically acclaimed authors from South Asia were selected for this study. These included- Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1991), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (1995), Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008-2015) comprising of *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*, Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010), Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan trilogy* (2014-2018) comprising of *One Part Woman*, *Trial by Silence*, *A Lonely Harvest*, Vasudhendra's *Mohanaswamy* (2016), Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) and S. Hareesh's *Moustache* (2020). Following an introduction to the thesis and the first chapter consisting of the theoretical framework, the selected novels were thematically distributed and closely read in four succeeding chapters.

The first chapter, which laid the theoretical foundation of the thesis, was titled "Understanding Masculinities". It outlined the broad theoretical framework by referring to key theorists and scholars. It situated masculinity studies within the broad spectrum of gender studies and traced its development throughout the years by reviewing existing works. It considered Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) as the entry point to any systematic investigation of men and masculinities and built upon theorists like Judith Butler, R. W. Connell, James Messerschmidt, Pablo Dominguez Anderson, Simon Wendt and Nigel Edley. Elaborating on the diverse threads emerging in masculinity

studies, the chapter discussed the theorisation and application of the study of men and masculinities from a South Asian perspective. For that purpose, it engaged with scholars like Mrinalini Sinha, Indira Chowdhury, Kamala Bhasin, Nalin Jayasena, Praseeda Gopinath, Ronit Ricci, Ira Raja, Mangesh Kulkarni, Kama Maureemootoo, Vishnupriya Sengupta, Sanjay Srivastava, Avishek Parui, Namrata Ganneri, and Michiel Baas. A critical examination of their works facilitated a region-specific investigation of masculinities. Finally, by reviewing already available critical inquiries of literary representations of masculinities, the first chapter paved the way for a systematic and comprehensive study. The next four chapters consisted of the textual analysis of fifteen primary texts thematically distributed. Further, each chapter was subdivided into smaller sections for clarity of thought, logical expression and fluidity of progression.

Through a critical examination of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015), and Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy* (2014-2018), the second chapter carried out a discursive-performative analysis of how particular characters navigated repressive structures and hegemonic forces while enacting and refashioning their gender identities. Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* portrayed adolescent Arjie's sexual awakening negotiating heteronormative institutions and social structures. In an effort to confront heteronormative disciplining by his family and school, Arjie discovered physical spaces like the family's backyard and Radha Aunty's dressing corner, performative space of the theatre, liminal spaces like the staircase and garage and imaginative space of dreams that permitted unrestricted expression of his sexuality. By purposefully garbling the poem selected for recitation in honour of the institution, he used language as a tool of subversion to exact revenge on those who had wronged his lover. The chapter also gave critical insights into Radha Aunty and Amma, who became "funny girls" by violating social standards in search of companionship and fulfilment. While Radha Aunty explicitly disregarded the feminine codes of conduct, Amma subtly and inconspicuously rejected the sexual morality of monogamy. Their acts enable them to resist oppressive institutions and social structures. Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* traced the transformation of Kalua from the marginalised ox-man of Chamar Basti to Maddow Colver of Captain Mee's army to the prime deity in Deeti's Memory Shrine. Through the layered characterisation of Kalua and his eventual gain of agency, the narrative displayed the complex nature of gender performances in the context of caste hierarchies and politics. While Zachary's ascent up the social ladder using his newly acquired knowledge

of white gentility was a reflection of his aspirational masculinity, Gomusta's transformation of himself in the image of Taramony revealed the fluid nature of masculinities. The second chapter also dealt with the critical examination of space aboard the schooner in addition to studies of personal growth. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, the analysis subverted the notion of a utopian existence in the liminal space of the ship. It argued that the hierarchically repressive systems of land were replicated through the hegemonic demarcation of spaces based on class and gender. Finally, the critical analysis of Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy* enhanced our comprehension of gender as an improvised performance. It highlighted the androgynous nature of the Ardhanareeswar deity and thereby emphasised gender as "a free-floating artifice" in the lines of Butler. Ponna found the seemingly liberal, carnivalesque space of the chariot festival to be oppressive when, following a night of sanctioned temporary relaxation, she was forced to deal with Kali's hyper-masculine arrogance and caste pride. Regardless of whether he lived or died in the second and third books of the trilogy, Kali's display of masculinity wrecked the lives of two women: Ponna and his mother Seerayi. Murugan's trilogy also portrayed the crisis of masculinity faced by Kali when Ponna participated in the chariot festival. The sequels with alternative endings established him as a "failure" who either retired to a life of silence or took the extreme step of committing suicide. Finally, following a critical investigation of the 2014 Madhorubagan controversy, the chapter asserted that the text adopted not a radical, but an ambivalent stance in its representation of the festival of Madhorubagan.

The third chapter engaged with the complex representation of body and embodiment in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), Vasudhendra's *Mohanaswamy* (2016) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). By mapping the journeys of sexual discovery and growth, the chapter highlighted how major characters responded to compulsory heteronormativity and embodied notions of masculinity in the selected novels. It revealed how public as well as private perceptions of their bodies caused conflicts of embodiment in their lives. Be it physical disability (Brit) or homosexuality (Mohanaswamy and Kalleshi) or gender dysphoria (Anjum), they grappled with the normative politics of nomenclature and terminology. They realised that coming out was an extremely difficult process because it exposed them to the tremendous stigmatisation of heteronormative society. Their fates were determined by

childhood experiences, which developed ideas about appropriate and inappropriate sexualities. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the protagonists were successful in discovering spaces (like Brit's imaginary worlds, the Achyutaraya temple, Khwabgah and Jannat Guest House) and events (like Brit's sexual encounters with Amy and Cyrus) of respite where apparently non- conformist, "deviant" identities could be embraced fully, thereby escaping the pressures of gender dysphoria, body-binarisation and cultural indoctrination. The chapter also complicated our understanding of embodiment to critically analyse the accommodation efforts of a "deviant" character and a "monstrous" entity. The enormous body of Kashmir struggled constantly to resist internal forces of fissure as well as external pressures of territorialisation, whereas Tilo's body's ongoing effort "to accommodate its organs" appeared to come to an end in her newly discovered home of the graveyard. The analysis highlighted the potential for protest as well as resilience. The chapter argued that acts of punishing non-conformists (Kalleshi and Tilo) ran parallel to major characters finding "home" either amidst a sea of protesters (Anjum) or among a motley crowd at Jannat Guest House (Tilo). Lastly, the chapter demonstrated the insufficiency of heteronormative language to reflect the complex nature of lived realities through examples such as Mohanaswamy's failure to locate the Kannada equivalent of "gay" and Jahanara Begum's difficulty to categorise the gender of her new-born infant.

The fourth chapter conducted an intersectional analysis of masculinities through the lens of social institutions like religion and social stratification like caste and class. The representative primary texts analysed in the chapter were- Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010), Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015), and S. Hareesh's *Moustache* (2020). In contrast to Hareesh's moustache-man Vavachan, who was forced to flee his village as a result of the atrocities committed by his fellow villagers, Aslam's novel focused on the absent but strong masculine character of Jugnu, who became a victim of the orthodoxy that prevailed in the diasporic community. Whereas Ayyan Mani's meticulous planning and flawless strategy helped proclaim his son Adi as the "Dalit genius" of news headlines, Zachary emerged as the most enigmatic Sahib among Mr Burnham's acquaintances with timely help and good fortune. The four selected novels focused on the male protagonists' acts of conscious self-fashioning. Charag's "uncut self-portrait" was the most expressive moment of his self-realisation and performance. It served as a medium of revenge for all of Kaukab's

wrongdoings to him and his uncle. Similarly, Ayyan's perfect ploy to project his son as a Dalit genius, Vavachan's decision to retain the moustache groomed for the role of the policeman and Zachary's success in climbing up the social ladder were all conscious processes of self- fashioning which negotiated the dynamics of social hierarchy and institutions. The generic conventions within which the four novels functioned provided different ways of negotiating possibilities of social mobility. The social realism of Serious Men allowed only a temporary disruption of caste hierarchy as Ayyan Mani's perfect plan threatened upper caste/ class solidarity and privilege. On the other hand, the postmodern template of the narrative in Moustache offered possibilities of fluidity in the imagination of caste hierarchy. The incorporation of the oral tradition into the story of Vavachan's magical moustache allowed the transcendence of rigid caste boundaries. While Ghosh's work of historical fiction, Flood of Fire made social hierarchies fluid for Zachary, Aslam's diasporic novel, barring Kaukab and Chanda's family, negotiated religious and societal demarcations for most other characters.

The fifth chapter expanded our understanding of performances of masculinities in juxtaposition with the hegemonic process of nation-building. The chapter examined stories of socio-political fissure, civil unrest, and national hegemony, intermingled with intimate narratives of human ambition, heroics and failures. Sidhwa's novel portrayed how the body of Ayah became a site of revenge and power play for Ice-Candy Man. In contrast to the beast-like portrayal of Ice Candy Man and Masseur, the novel incorporated the images of Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah as metaphors for the two newly-formed nations, India and Pakistan. The transformation in Ice Candy Man's masculinity—from the heterosexual, zoomorphic figure to the elaborately costumed Mughal courtesan reciting Urdu poetry—echoed the political and sociocultural changes of the Indian subcontinent. Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) provided multiple instances when the nation-state and its institutions disciplined deviant masculine bodies. Anil Jayasinghe's Sinhalese identity threatened his relationship with Radha Aunty. Similarly, Arjie and Soyza's developing friendship ended abruptly when Arjie's family became victims of Sinhala atrocities. Parallel to these stories, Jegan was sacked from his job and Daryl Uncle was murdered because they were considered threats to Sinhala nationalism and its institutions. Yet, readers discovered instances where language allowed for a temporary crossing over of racial identity in Mr Rasiah's quick action to save Radha Aunty and Soyza's defence of Arjie. Rushdie juxtaposed the transformation of Kashmir

with that of the protagonist in Shalimar the Clown. As the geo-body of Kashmir resisted internal and external forces of fissure, annexation and self-determination, Shalimar reacted to his own emasculation caused by his passive letter-writing to Boonyi. He became a "pillowman assassin" who resorted to violence so that he could uphold his honour and guard himself against a sense of shame. While Colonel Kacchwaha's violence was his attempt to restore a sense of pride, Shalimar took revenge to regain a sense of honour. The idea of borders and boundaries for contemporary nation-states as geo-bodies was problematised by Rushdie's imagination of the ever-expanding Elasticnagar in contrast to the celibate masculinity of Colonel Kacchwaha. Finally, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) proved the possibility of an alternative history through the fictitious notebook of Tilo. It demonstrated how the state exercised its hegemony through repressive state apparatus like the army and ideological state apparatus like educational institutions. Additionally, it showed how the shifting dynamics of contemporary nation- states impacted the performance of masculinities by destabilising ideas of oppressor/oppressed, perpetrator/victim, etc. In Amrik Singh's curious position- swapping from a perpetrator of violence to a psychiatric patient, Roy's novel destabilised the notion of a fixed and homogeneous historical narrative.

The chapter findings as discussed above revealed a multi-layered understanding of the representation of masculinities in contemporary South Asian fiction written in and translated into English. It was observed that an engagement with the body and its embodiment was a consistent motif in all the South Asian authors selected for this study. They essentially wrote about non-conformist, deviant bodies enacting their gendered selves amidst oppressive forces of social institutions. Selvadurai's Arjie, Roy's Tilo and Vasudhendra's Mohanaswamy were some apt examples of such non-conformist, deviant bodies. By creating characters who suffered marginalisation owing to factors like their disability, and socio-cultural identity as that of caste, class and religion, the authors complicated the processes of their embodiment, thereby revealing hierarchical structures of contemporary societies. In Brit's bewilderment to act as "Brit Boy" or "Brit Man", Kanga problematised the embodiment of disabled bodies in private as well as public life. Again, the private spheres of individual and family life were held up to scrutiny when Aftab had to undergo his parents' attempts of cultural indoctrination and Dr Nabi's medical intervention "to seal up his girl part" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*) or when Charag and Ujala unknowingly consumed bromide salts mixed in their food by

their mother Kaukab in her attempt to tame their adolescent sexualities (*Maps for Lost Lovers*). It was also observed that the authors consciously engaged with the public performance of masculinities in their works by incorporating the politics of social institutions and hierarchies like caste, race, class and nation. The curious cases of Kalua's transformation from the marginalised ox-man of Chamar Basti to the chief deity in Deeti's shrine and Zachary's rise from a discriminated octoroon to the major stakeholder in Mr Burnham's massive business empire reflected Ghosh's preoccupation in displaying the impact of the artificial hierarchies in the discursive understanding and performance of masculinities. Similarly, in Hareesh's narrative of the moustache-monster of Kuttanad, we witnessed a hypermasculine character's conscious process of self- fashioning, negotiating caste-based violence in a highly stratified society. The chapters also explored how all the novels allowed points of intersection between the private as well as the public performance of masculinities. Ayyan Mani's realisation of living "like a man in the homes of the poor" (Serious Man) or Charag's bold statement of his adult masculinity through his self-portrait were instances when private performances of masculinities intersected and had a lasting impact on public performances of masculinities and vice versa. Finally, a few of the selected novels interpreted masculinities from the perspective of nation-building. By imagining the formation of the nation in juxtaposition with the discursive understanding of "the ideal man", the novelists highlighted another important aspect of masculinity studies from the South Asian perspective. While Sidhwa created the unique persona of Ice Candy Man whose transformation was simultaneous with the division of the subcontinent on communal lines, both Rushdie and Roy played with the ideas of boundary and borderland to juxtapose their imaginations of masculinity and territoriality.

Thus, from the above discussion, we understood that a very unique understanding of the representation of masculinities emerged in postcolonial literature from South Asia. This could be attributed to two major analytical findings. Firstly, it was observed that any analysis of masculinities from the perspective of South Asia necessarily required an intersectional lens as, through the selected works of fiction, the authors reproduced the highly stratified society in terms of caste, class and religion. For example, Nadeem Aslam creatively captured the inter-generational conflict around the practice of religion in a diasporic setting through the story of Kaukab and her sons' struggles to express their sexualities. Similarly, Ghosh's trilogy intricately wove multiple non-linear narratives

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highlighting the major characters' performance of masculinities thereby negotiating the hierarchies of class as well caste. Hence, following the critical examination of the selected works, we were convinced that any systematic literary investigation of masculinities should also adopt the intersectional perspective so that contemporary social realities are not missed. Secondly, it was observed that our understanding of masculinities from the perspective of South Asia was determined by a comprehension of the partition as well as nationalistic politics of the subcontinent. This followed from the fact that many of the writers chosen for this study were either first or second-generation survivors of partition politics, civil riots and communal riots or had some kind of a post-memory of such events either through their parents or some elders. Their experiences left an indelible mark on their fiction. For example, in many interviews, Bapsi Sidhwa recounted her childhood experiences of partition of the Indian subcontinent which happened when she was nine years old. Her memory of the partition shaped many characters and plots of her novels. Similarly, Shyam Selvadurai was a victim of the Sri Lankan Civil Riots and had to emigrate to Canada when he was nineteen years old. He creatively retold his traumatic experiences in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Funny Boy*. Hence, these examples demonstrated that our attempts of understanding the representation of masculinities required an acknowledgement of the authors' lived experiences of partition and nationalistic politics. This thesis, while conducting a thematically divided performative- discursive study of men and masculinities, could effectively accomplish the objectives set out in the introduction to this research. By conducting a much-needed region-specific and intersectional study of men and masculinities, the current study would lead the way to more detailed and intensive studies in the future.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this research. As hinted in the introduction, they were chiefly of a spatial and temporal nature. The spatial limitation consisted of the challenge of bringing together writers who are globally dispersed and divergent in their choice of characters, settings and topics. The temporal limitation consisted of the challenge of bringing together works spanning almost three decades of time. The first limitation could be partially addressed by tracing their origin to the geographical region of South Asia. That is, though their current place of living and choice of characters as well as setting span the entire globe, there is an unmistakable South Asian identity in their life as well as their works. The second limitation could be

addressed by identifying the partition of the subcontinent as a major historical milestone and considering the fact that all the texts were written after the partition of the subcontinent, in a postcolonial setup. However, certain questions might remain as to the representative nature of the choice of authors. For example, this study did not engage with authors from India's Northeast. The author of this thesis strongly believes that the rapidly growing corpus of fiction as well as non-fiction works written by authors from India's Northeast requires a separate, detailed study. As a tribute to the region where she grew up and a contribution to the existing corpus of available research, she intends to embark on a future study of the discursive-performative representation of masculinities in fiction from India's Northeast.