



Men and Masculinities: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake

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Abstract:

In Oryx and Crake it is seen that both sex but gender are influenced by society culture. The skin colour, height and other details believed to be biologically ordained are in fact the product science and socio-cultural influences and therefore unstable. Challenging the essentialism associated with gender and sex, the novel lays bare the conditions and cumulative influences of society, culture and family which are responsible in moulding and fashioning of both masculinity and femininity. Atwood, through her both men and women characters deftly brings out range of men and masculinities not necessarily fixed to their sexed bodies. It is explored that not only is masculinity exhibited by men but by women too. Femininity is not only associated with women but men to display feminine traits quite dexterously. This removal of gender characteristics from the sexed bodies brings out the display of both masculinity and femininity by the people of either or both sexes.

Key words: *Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, performance, socio-cultural, gender.*

Towards the end of the twentieth century media, academicians, sociologists and other critics identified an incipient “crisis of masculinity” that led to the stretching of attention span from ‘women’ to ‘men’, asserting that men too are gendered like women. (Kimmel, *Gendered Society* 6). The upsurge in debates about socio-cultural construction of gender identified ‘man’ as a new prey of patriarchy (Carabi 42). Masculinity studies emerged in the United States in 1960’s as a field of critical analysis that aimed to reconstruct the meaning of masculinity, analyzing masculinity, like femininity, to be a “social construct, context specific and culturally-bound” and to challenge the invisibility and exploitation of men in society (qtd. in Carabi 46). Men’s studies which emerged in response to second wave feminism asserted that gender order is not only oppressive for women but men too are oppressed for e.g. growing body of gay scholars - the main contributors of studies of masculinity- have shown that patriarchy also oppresses homosexual men. Not only men but feminist writers too contributed to the study of masculinities. Men’s studies aimed at make gender relations “equitable” and for this it was required to make “gender visible for both men and women” as it is “men- or rather masculinity- who are invisible” (Kimmel, *Gendered Society* 9, 5). Robinson too argues about invisibility as a prerequisite for the continuation of male dominance and “one cannot question, let alone dismantle, what remains hidden from the view” (Robinson 1). On the other hand Judith Butler (1990) and Donna Haraway (1991) also expressed “the privilege of inhabiting an unmarked body that has been the patrimony of white Western man” (qtd. in Carabi 46).

The writers of men’s studies discarded Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that, “it goes without saying that he is a man”, by establishing that, “masculinities are historically constructed, mutable and contingent” (Adams and Savran 2). In the early 1970’s few men put across their arguments that sexism casts depressing influence on both men and women. Marc Feigen Fasteau writes that, “the sexual caste system” is exploitative and destructive for the people of both sexes, and “men are beginning to seriously question the price of being thought superior” (qtd. in Adams and Savran 4). This marked the beginning of first wave of men’s studies scholarship (1970-1980’s) which focused its attention on the experiences of white, middle class man. Although the early men’s movement developed in response to feminism, the emergence of gay liberation movement by the end of 1960’s had a great impact on it. Connell explicates masculinity as the display of hegemonic masculinity. He argues that within a particular social framework there exists a construction of masculinity that is culturally governed. Erving Goffman provides the

account of hegemonic masculinity of American males as, “A young, married white urban, northern heterosexual, protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports... Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself ... as unworthy, incomplete, inferior” (qtd. in Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 141). The hegemonic masculinity in Western Society is believed to be adhering to all those men who exhibit, “heterosexuality economic autonomy being able to provide for one’s family, being rational, being successful, keeping one’s emotion in check and above all not doing anything feminine” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 141). This type of hegemonic masculinity is not performed by ordinary men and is believed to be a “historically mobile reaction” (Connell 77) and a “cultural ideal” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 142). It is an aspiration rather than a reality for the common man to achieve. The surfacing of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the 1980’s and 1990’s destabilized the notion of prevalent identity as single, fixed and unified and provided a new dimension to the construction of gender identity. Like the gendered construction of women’s identity, masculinity study analyses and exposes masculinity as a socio-cultural product. Therefore masculinity:

- occurs first not in a person but rests in culture and language..... It is a prefixed arrangement of the order of things that work together to perpetuate the interests of a masculine subject—who is no one in particular and so is everywhere—“he,” a discourse of self-generation. (Parlow 216)

It has also been proved by Judith Butler’s arguments that, “the gender performances which we enact are performances in accordance with a script- a script which supplies us with ideals of both masculinity and femininity”. Talking about heterosexuality, she remarks that it is the ideal of masculinity in our society and is, “inextricably entwined with cultural constructions of hegemonic sexuality- to be a ‘real man’ is to be a heterosexual man” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 142, 143). Michael Foucault (*The History of Sexuality* 1976) challenged the generalizing claims of psychoanalytical and biological approach about the construction of masculinity and argued about gender as the product of socio-cultural interactions.-

In *Oryx and Crake* it is seen that not only sex but gender too is influenced by society culture. The skin colour, height and other details believed to be biologically ordained are in fact the product science and socio-cultural influences and therefore unstable. Challenging the essentialism associated with gender and sex, the novel lays bare the

conditions and cumulative influences of society, culture and family which are responsible in moulding and fashioning of both masculinity and femininity. The stereotypes are imbibed by the people of both sexes to such an extent that it appears to be real and natural. Atwood, “undermines the conventional thought patterns that are so often the cause of facile binary oppositions: winner and loser, dominance and subordination, aggressor and victim” (Nischik 33).

Robert Bly in *Iron John* (1990) along with other critics challenged the universalized idea of manhood and worked to prove masculinity as, “varied, dynamic, changing” moving from “single ‘masculinity’ to plural ‘masculinities’ ” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 136). Hence “‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connell and Messerschmidt 841). In the light of above arguments the construction of men and masculinities can be studied in the *Oryx and Crake* of Margaret Atwood. Atwood highlights through Jimmy-male protagonist that how gender is shaped under the influence of family. It brings out how ideal of hegemonic masculinity endows man with superior and dominating position in society. Jimmy is introduced to the do’s and don’ts of masculinity in his family. Millett argues:

- The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology’s prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament and status. Although slight differences of definition depend here upon the parents’ grasp of cultural values, the general effect of uniformity is achieved, to be further reinforced through peers, school, media, and other learning sources, formal and informal. (35)

His father tries to construct him according to the stereotype of masculinity, helping him imbibe the traits considered essential for a boy in society. As asserted by Greer, “Boys learnt their male role from father and girls their female role from their mother” (246-47). Jimmy’s “father was always giving him tools, trying to make him more practical” (*OC* 41). The patriarchal society encourages men being rational and reasonable, with no display of emotions and tears, as tears are unmanly. Beauvoir arguments complement that “‘a man doesn’t ask to be kissed... A man doesn’t look at himself in mirrors ... A man doesn’t cry’. He is urged to be a ‘little man’; he will obtain adult approval by becoming independent of others. He will please them by not appearing to seek to please them” (298). She further explains, “The child is persuaded that more is demanded of

boys because they are superior; to give him courage for the difficult path he must follow, pride in his manhood is instilled into him” (299). Being emotional, sentimental, and shedding tears are labelled as feminine trait and being practical is exclusively demarcated as masculine. Men are believed to be reasonable and logical as opposed to women who are sentimental fools. This can be exemplified through Jimmy’s response at his mothers’ escape during his childhood. He feels quite morose and sentimental but he says to himself, “If he’d been a girl he could have burst into tears” (OC 73) as, “Tears are woman’s supreme alibi; sudden as a squall, loosed by fits and starts, typhoon, April shower” (Beauvoir 620). This idea is further elaborated by Giddens’s understanding of gender division, “in modern societies control of social and natural worlds, which has been the male domain, has been facilitated through the development of reason as something set apart from emotion” and is experienced as “a massive psychological process of repression” and has become “an institutional division along gender lines.” Women “have played the prime role in emotion”, which is deemed as, “wholly resistant to rational assessment” (Parsons 57). The difference between masculine and feminine gender is reinforced when Jimmy’s father expresses his opinion of women’s temperament as similar to unstable weather conditions. He says about his wife, “Women always get hot under the collar...women, and what went on under their collars, Hotness and coldness, coming and going in the strange musky flowery, variable country inside their clothes- mysterious, important, and uncontrollable” (19). Millett reveals that “patriarchy enforces a temperamental balance of personality traits between the sexes” (42). Thus women are stereotyped as mysterious and whimsical whereas:

- men’s body temperatures were never dealt with; they were never even mentioned, not when he [Jimmy] was little, except when his dad said, “chill out’. Jimmy questions, “Why weren’t they? Why nothing about the hot collars of men? These smooth sharp edged collars with their dark, sulphurous, bristling, bristling undersides. He could have used a few theories on that. (OC 19)

Through Jimmy Atwood questions the essentialism endowed to men by patriarchy, arguing that why the traits labelled as feminine cannot be appropriated and exhibited by men. This justifies Parsons’ discussion about men’s exploitation under patriarchy, “Men too have become subject to patriarchy, being trained to carry out the violence and aggression against women which it requires for its sustenance, a role which also damages their emotional and psychic lives” (51). Hornacek describes that Men in the consciousness raising groups not only, “benefit from patriarchy but are also hurt by it”

(qtd. in Hooks 74). Here Jimmy's arguments seem to suggest the denial of Simone de Beauvoir's claim that, "it goes without saying that he is a man", by establishing that, "masculinities are historically constructed, mutable and contingent" (Adams and Savran 2). At another instance Jimmy's father comments on gender of his lab technician, calling her as "his right- hand man (Joke he would say to Jimmy, to show that he knew Ramona wasn't really a man. But Jimmy knew that anyway)" (OC 59). The construction of masculinity as superior and ultimate in itself prohibits men from the display of any weakness projecting them as fully in command of their emotions, practical and reasonable in their approach.

Jimmy, influenced by the relation of his father and mother that exhibited sexual role stereotyping, takes to imitating their roles among his friends in school. This performance of gender clearly culls gender elements highlighting man as oppressor and woman as oppressed.

- His right hand was Evil dad; his left hand was Righteous Mom. Evil Dad blustered and theorized and dished out pompous bullshit. Righteous Mom complained and accused. In Righteous Mom's cosmology, Evil dad was the sole source of hemorrhoids, kleptomania, global conflict, bad breath, tectonic-plate fault lines.... As well as every migraine headache and menstrual cramp Righteous Mom had ever suffered. (OC 68)

Jimmy even went to the extent of enacting, "Righteous Mom weeping in the kitchen because her ovaries had burst" because of the "sex" with his, "evil dad falling upon it and tearing it apart with lust because Righteous Mom was sulking inside an empty Twinkies package and wouldn't come out" (OC 68). This clearly reflects men as sexually dominant, with women as passive sexual object. The sexual dominance exercised by man owing to their constructed hegemonic masculinity, oppresses woman, sexually objectifying, dehumanizing and mutilating her existence. Jimmy's representation of dad with his right hand and Mom with his left hand confirms gender hierarchy, which is discursively imparted to Jimmy through family and socio-cultural influences. Kate Millett explicates the sexual dominance of men and subordination and passivity of women i.e. "sexual behaviour" as "almost entirely the product of learning" as the "product of a long series of learned responses - response to the patterns and attitudes, even as to the subject of sexual choice, which are set up for us by our social environment" (32). Jimmy's vision is tampered with the amorous desires for Ramona as well as his school teacher, where Jimmy finds it difficult to avoid looking "at her

breasts” (*OC* 76). Beauvoir states, “The adolescent boy... undoubtedly dreams of woman, he longs for her” (352).

Jimmy, along with Crake in his teenage years, gets addicted to porn movies that add and complement to the, “general demand that encourages the porn movie market to keep on supplying these movies” (Huisman 21).

Jimmy tries to fulfil his acquired hunger of sex by trapping women, by exploiting their emotions, using the bait of love and affection. He pretends his tone, “like a tool, a wedge, a key to open women” (*OC* 132). He manipulates their emotions of being, “generous, caring, idealistic” (*OC* 222) by initially presenting himself as “tender hearted”, applying “himself to them like a poultice. But soon the process would reverse and Jimmy would switch from bandager to bandagee.” He let them, “labour away on him. It cheered them up, it made them feel useful. It was touching, the lengths to which they would go. Would this make him happy? Would this? Well then, how about this (*OC* 223)? The pretext of emotions by Jimmy to extract the desired attention from women brings about the artificiality of emotions merely as performance, not associated with one’s nature or biology. Jimmy strengthens sex role stereotyping of women as passive and inferior in an argument with Crake by asserting that, “Men... don’t want women who are ten times bigger than them” (*OC* 198). Following the same line of argument Jimmy is repelled by the perfection of genetically engineered Craker women. It can be argued here that since Jimmy’s knowledge of women stereotypes compels him to visualize them as “vassal”, “weak, futile, docile” , exhibiting “laziness and mediocrity” (Beauvoir 352, 358, 359), who look at male “for fulfillment and escape”, “as liberator; ... rich and powerful” a “protector”, he is threatened by the Craker woman’s perfection that pose a challenge to his dominance and subordination. According to Greer it is commonly assumed that, “man is inflamed by what is different in women” (159).

Atwood proves that along with human beings, subjects of education too, are gendered. It is believed that “for centuries science has been culturally coded as masculine as opposed to the more feminine arts and letters” (Deery 1). She deconstructs the myth and belief about science being the subject of men and art of women. The novel explores this more exquisitely through the character of Jimmy, who despite being man, displays interest in arts, and defends it against masculine science represented by scientist Crake. Jimmy’s interest and inclination in art and aesthetics is reflected in his arguments against Crake’s scientifically induced mating process among Crakers. Jimmy argues that because of the “cyclical” mating process there would be no existence of, “Courtship behaviour” which

would in turn result in loss of art. “Well, what about the art? Said Jimmy, a little desperately.” Supporting art he argues, “When any civilization is dust and ashes... art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music, imaginative structures. Meaning- human meaning, that is- is defined by them. You have to admit that” (OC 197). Therefore gender boundaries and stereotypes are transgressed both by Jimmy and Oryx, affirming gender identities as constructions in discourse. Jimmy’s in his display of emotions, sentiments and interest in arts exhibits feminine traits partially violating his masculinity. Jimmy stands against Crake for all of his scientific endeavors, be it new inventions or genetically engineered organisms. Jimmy’s incompetence, his helplessness and tendency to hold himself responsible for his mother’s deserting him alone, can be compared to the insufficiency and incapability which Tony experiences in *The Robber Bride* during the same condition in her life. Thus Jimmy can be seen exhibiting another trait that is exclusively linked with femininity since it is “young girls” who are known to be “often weepy” (AG163). Exhibiting sentimental and emotional approach towards life, he is at same the same time amazed by the practical response of Crake at his mother’s death. He felt, “how he could be so nil about it- it was horrible, the thought of Crake watching his own mother dissolve like that. He himself wouldn’t have been able to do it” (OC 208). Whereas most of the women characters in the novel are described as word person, Jimmy too, is shown to be word person. He already knew he was not a “numbers person”, as he was not practical and materialistic in his approach and view of world, rather being sentimental, given to arts and aesthetics he finds solace in rediscovering forgotten words, “as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them” (OC 250).

Ingersoll explains “Crake is Jimmy’s superior at work and within society. “[He] discovers, Crake has had designs for him for some time, ironically ‘designs’ very similar to those Crake has had on Oryx” (168). Because of Jimmy’s passivity, interest in arts, and empathy he is chosen by Crake, to look after the Crakers. His reasons for choosing Jimmy as caretaker of Crakers are similar to his motives of appointing Oryx for the same task. When Jimmy enquires why Crake chose him only for this job when he had many scientists at hand for the same job, asking, “I couldn’t head up a thing like this, I don’t have the science”. Crake replies, “These people are specialists,” said Crake. “They wouldn’t have the empathy to deal with the Paradise models, they wouldn’t be any good at it, and they’d get impatient. Even I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t begin to get onto their wavelength. But you are more of a generalist” (OC 376). Crake being a scientist, and

displaying hegemonic masculinity undermines the art and femininity of Jimmy and Oryx and assigns them inferior jobs. Another job given to Jimmy is that of doing an ad campaign to sell the BlyssPlus pills to enhance sexual vigour and to prevent sexually transmitted diseases that ultimately proves to be fatal for humanity and destroys the whole world. After the apocalyptic destruction of the world due to these pills, only Jimmy is left at the end to look after the Crakers as Crake's "prophet" (OC 120). So we also see Jimmy parenting (Crakers) - that is another feminine characteristic. Though Jimmy is socially and emotionally more unstable, he has more sexual vigour and inclination than Crake. "Crake hadn't been what you'd call sexually active. Girls had found him intimidating"... and a "little creepy" (OC 126-27). Where Jimmy refrains from touching Oryx out of his respect for Crake, believing her to be his girlfriend; Oryx does not refrain from, "seduce [ing] him".(OC 367). Jimmy's and Oryx's response to Oryx's narration of her past life too can be construed to enrich our understanding of fluidity of gender. Whereas Oryx remains calm and composed without exhibiting any emotional or aggressive behaviour, Jimmy gives vent to his pent up anger by abusing her exploiters. He is even shocked to listen "bad words" (OC 158) from Oryx, of which "she had a large supply". In *Oryx and Crake* the myth of the superiority of white hegemonic masculinity is also destroyed. The stereotype of white masculinity is shattered where white men are proved to be as fragile and vulnerable as any other man.

Atwood, through her both men and women characters deftly brings out a range of masculinities not necessarily fixed to their sexed bodies. Not only is masculinity exhibited by men but by women too. Femininity is not only associated with women but men too display feminine traits quite dexterously. This removal of gender characteristics from the sexed bodies brings out the display of gender by the people of either or both sexes. Both Jimmy and Crake perform different masculinities.

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