

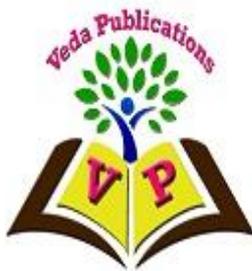


REPRESENTATION OF MEN AND MASCULINITY IN AGHA SHAHID ALI'S "SNOWMEN"

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ABSTRACT

Masculinity is very widely discussed in all the aspects and faculties of literature. Masculinity is a social, political, psychological and cultural construct. It is a part of sexuality which dominates through tradition, customs, rituals and culture framed in a patriarchal set up to rule and consume the women. Since its genesis, masculinity remained overpowered and was never observed as an inferior to the other sexualities, which can be analysed as gender politics. Whether in the fields of history, politics or mythology, masculinity can be witnessed in different epitomes. Men have exploited and have been exploiting the other genders in the name of masculinity.

However, the poem, 'Snowmen' by Agha Shahid Ali represents a different picture of the characters of men and masculinity. The ideas of poet's heirloom, his ancestral men, treatment of women etc. are presented in the poem which are against the tide and stereotype. The paper examines how the poet discards winter and snowmen and embraces the spring symbolizing the non patriarchal ancestry, sexuality and society. It is quite clear at the end that the poet deconstructs the men and masculinity. Through this rare poem one can realize the realistic notion of masculinity which is uprooted by the man himself.

keywords: *Masculinity, Ancestry, Women, Sexuality, Society.*

**MASCULINITY**

Since its inception exploring masculinity has been considered as not necessary because of the strong base it stands on, in the history and in the present. Masculinity is widely accepted in the society without any doubt which results to domination. It was and is very difficult to question the aspect of masculinity in the patriarchal society, which has to be deconstructed. Masculinity can also be represented as the ego and insecurity that is constructed artificially since birth or childhood.

As a theory, masculinity is discussed thoroughly as a part of sexuality and psychology. There are many definitions on the concept of masculinity defined by the experts. To substantiate, it is explained likewise.

Feminist thinking has been fundamental to the formation of contemporary men's and masculinity studies as intellectual endeavors, academic subjects, and social movements. Misogyny created feminist theory, and feminist theory has helped create masculinity. Rosi Braidotti (2002) alleges that "the price men pay for representing the universal is disembodiment, or loss of gendered specificity into the abstraction of phallic masculinity," and she suggests that men need "to get real" by recognizing their embodiment. Exactly what this means and how both men and women, including those with physical and sensory disabilities, experience their embodiment is a fruitful topic in current feminist and masculinity studies. (Gardiner, 36-37)

AGHA SHAHID ALI- THE KASHMIRI BARD

Agha Shahid Ali is a Kashmiri poet, who migrated to America. Ali was brought up in a non parochial and secular environment where he was free to express his thoughts on anything. His poetry expresses Kashmir in a very beautiful and realistic way. His poetry includes themes like diaspora, exile and nature. Ali was influenced by Christianity during his young age and also wrote a poem on Christ. He was

influenced by ghazals and the music of Begum Akhtar as well. To quote,

Ali was deeply moved by the music of Begum Akhtar. Several niches in his apartment had photos of the people who had deeply influenced his work. Akhtar's photo occupied one of these spaces. The two had met through a friend of Akhtar's when Ali was a teenager and her music became a lasting presence in his life. Features of her ghazal rendition - the presence of wit, wordplay and nakhra (affectation) were found in Ali's poetry as well. However, Amitav Ghosh suspects that the strongest connection between the two rose from the idea that "sorrow has no finer mask than a studied lightness of manner" - traces of which were seen in Ali's and Akhtar's demeanor in their respective lives.

SNOWMEN

The poem, as the title suggests is about the men and poet's ancestry. The poem is highly symbolic where the poet compares the men with the winter season signifying coldness. 'Snowmen' also represents the ideas of poet's heirloom, his ancestral men, treatment of women etc. It pictures the characters of men and masculinity and how the poet deconstructs it in a very subtle way. The poet begins the poem by introducing his ancestor as a man of Himalayan snow. To quote,

"My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,"

The very first line of poem expresses how the poet introduces his ancestors, i.e. a man who belongs to the Himalayas. The terms man and Himalayas clearly reveal the comparison where the poet compares his ancestors to Himalayas which symbolize dominance and superiority and does not mention about the women. The poet here hints that his ancestors were from Samarkand and migrated to Kashmir with a bag of whale bones and settled there for good. The bag of whale bones was the only possession of his



ancestors. The next lines depict the coldness of his ancestors. To quote,

“His skeleton
carved from glaciers,
his breath arctic,
he froze women in his embrace.
His wife thawed into stony water,
her old age a clear
evaporation”.

These lines reveal how the poet renders the significance of words like glacier, arctic, froze, stony water and evaporation. The skeleton of his ancestral man is carved out of the glaciers, which is cold, frozen and sharp and his breath is compared to the arctic region which is not warm but cold as hell. The line ‘He froze women in his embrace’ expresses how cold as a man he was and how there was no warmth and love in his embrace. It also may mean the man’s grip of control over his women in which the women froze. The poet moves on to explain that his ancestor’s wife melted gradually into stony water as if her life gradually melted in his control and evaporated in old age, which means she died without any existence and identity. These lines are symbolic and are related to the women, which clearly showcase that his ancestors were patriarchal and cold in nature, who dominated women in their embrace.

In the second stanza the poet describes how the same skeleton of ancestry is passed on from generations of grandsons and sons and now the skeleton is under his skin following his back. They haunt the poet, as if he could see them tapping the window of his room but their voices are hushed to ice. The poet is reminded of his ancestry and his men threatening him to continue the same coldness. But the last lines are hopeful, as expressed below.

“No, they won’t let me out of winter,
and I’ve promised myself,
even if I’m the last snowman,
that I’ll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders”.

These last lines symbolize that the poet realizes how his ancestral men won’t let him out of this symbolic bondage of winter. Nevertheless, he is also hopeful

of being the last snowman of winter as he promises himself riding into the spring on the melting shoulders of his snowmen. The last stanza depicts the poet’s inner thoughts to end this ancestral chain, which won’t let him out of winter or away from being cold, but the poet promises to himself that though he is the last snowmen, he will ride into spring from the winter, on the melting shoulders of his ancestral snowmen. Here the term spring denotes the change or the transformation from one season to the other or from coldness to warmth.

The poem is highly symbolic in nature where the snow and winter express the coldness of men and masculinity throughout the poem. The climax of the poem signifies a paradigm shift where the poet deconstructs his ancestral men and their ancestry. It is proved that the poet discards winter and snowmen and embraces the spring symbolizing the non patriarchal ancestry, sexuality and society. It is quite clear at the end that the poet deconstructs the men and masculinity.

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