
Social Requirements in the Construction of the Dominant Masculinity

Angelina Subrayan

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This review on masculinity is focused on several studies conducted by researchers to examine the influence of social expectations in the construction of masculinity in selected fictions by various authors between the time frame from 1757 to 1950. During this era, gender performance in literature constantly depicts the ineffectiveness of patriarchal family relationships and heterosexual marriage principles. The researchers' findings are critically reviewed to expose how societies in diverse cultures play vital roles in the construction of masculinity. Although scholars recognise various types of masculinities and understand the numerous ways of being looked upon as a man, there is one distinct form of masculinity that is very popular and which is the dominant type. This dominant form of masculinity which is the cultural model of manhood in the society is principally stereotyped as heterosexual, mostly middle-class men and is distinctively referred to as hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: Masculinity, Dominant, Social Construction, Hegemonic masculinity

INTRODUCTION

The construction of masculinity in societies around the world and occasionally in history is examined through masculinity studies which includes the interdisciplinary areas of socio-cultural, political, historical, economic and psychology. Since the cultural ideals of manhood transform from time to time and across smaller groups, we cannot conclude that there is a singular or universal "masculinity" or "femininity" as there are debates among scholars generating the notion that gender is a social formation that is ever-changing (Butler 22). In fact, there are various characteristics connected to portray men and various ways of being women. To date several studies on masculinity have been conducted and it would be noteworthy to look into some of the prevalent issues highlighted or discovered in the related studies.

SOCIAL REQUIREMENTS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DOMINANT MASCULINITY

Pruitt conducted a study in 2012 on victims of failed masculinity in nineteenth-century American Literature. The study examined the patriarchal values and social expectation in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohican*. Although the setting of the novel is around 1757, which is the third year of the French and Indian War in nineteenth century America, this analysis examined the connection involving the condition in The United States which was established on the principles of patriarchy, where men were called to exhibit their masculinity in public. During the nineteenth-century, when the middle and upper class Americans started populating the cities, they were unable to portray their masculinity in the public domain due to competitiveness. This inability constrained these men by making them feel insecure. The only way to free themselves from this oppression is to project their dominant masculinity in their homes, and also show their physical prowess at the marketplace (Pruitt 4).

**Address for correspondence:*

angiesubrayan@hotmail.com

The findings reveal that most men lived in fear due to being perceived as female because they were thought to be showing feminine features, where one of it is the act of displaying their emotion. In this study, the writer mentions that this apprehension was enveloping in the culture and is revealed in literature of that time. Pruitt’s study draws substantiation for this claim by examining the male characters in selected works by Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Washington Irving. This study which focuses on the work by male writers in the nineteenth-century illustrates that the male characters put effort to prove their masculinity in three classified demands which are in their occupations, control over women and men, and physical strength. These men depicted in the study accomplish their portrayal of masculine identities by diverting, suppressing, and disguising their emotions to adhere to social requirements and constructions that have been fashioning hegemony.

The findings also reveal that, when it comes to dominant expectations, men were normally victims because of their commitment to social relations to prove themselves as being masculine men or due to falling as victim due to pressure put to demonstrate their masculinity. The societal resolution for evading dominant requirement is a journey to the frontier, both literally, which ensued in the populating of the West, and figuratively, with men living out their wishes in dime novel Westerns or having hopes of acquiring an identity on the frontier. Pruitt’s study explains that men were required to comply with specific standards; masculinity was “no longer fixed in land or small-scale property ownership or dutiful service. This is true in connection to Michael Kimmel’s view in his *Manhood in America* (1996) that states that success must be earned and masculinity should be “proved—and proved constantly” (17). Hence, men were unable to freely be themselves, where they had to suppress their real selves by concealing their actual emotions to be able to conform to the patriarchal standards of achievement. Further findings reveal that masculine men were required to be independent and avoid depending on others. This attribute advocated dominance and authority in all the roles that they played in their lives which included their families, emotions and their physical strength. The frontier was seen to permit men to increase their force and individualism, urging them to apply their physical strength and competitiveness. This study worked on looking into the patriarchal men employing values related to ideology set during the 19 century. The study was limited to analysing only one kind of masculinity which is the dominant type. What is evident in Pruitt’s study is, men have to comply with a society’s role and expectation to prove that they are masculine men even if they are against the practices. This study focused extensively on hegemonic masculinity without any discussion on other forms of masculinities.

In another study conducted in 2012, the researcher Tanoori analysed the novels of Thomas Hardy which have long been the focus of gender analysis, resulting in a massive body of rewarding criticism (Tanoori 12). The study analysed previous work done on Hardy and masculinity. The researcher provides a new reading on six of Hardy’s novels which investigated the portrayal of masculinity in the area of social-constructionist theories of masculinity and Foucauldian theories. The novels examined in chronological order are *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *Two on a Tower* (1882), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

The methodology employed by this researcher is applying social construction theories of masculinity and the theories of Foucault. The findings reveal that the men depicted in these novels are exposed as constituting themselves in the course of the gender and class structures and discourses during the discussed era. The researcher analysed the degree to which the male characters in the novels were constrained by these forces and the extent to which they struggle with them. Reading the themes connected to Hardy’s novels proves to be notable as this study focuses on the role of social structures in the construction of masculinity. To be respected as ‘men’, Hardy’s male characters have to function within the sphere of up to date social structures and discourses, which have already determined the dominant methods in gender ideology of the culture which becomes naturalised in the society. Since men were commanded by the existing discourses of masculinity, these male protagonists emerge primarily to characterise themselves in the provisions of power but the study showed some limitations

in the construction of masculinity. The constraints are emphasised more vigorously as the study progresses towards the end, which makes clear the increasing disastrous vision evident in the novels. Although the male characters are confined by social structures they are not entirely trapped in them. The likelihood of a restricted resistance to these social forces therefore is present, as this study exposes. This research positions the investigations of masculinity in Hardy’s novels in the perspective of his values, endeavoring to draw attention to Hardy’s observation not only of the means in which gender is created but also of the methods of transformation. In fact, this study proves to be motivating because comparatively a few critics have focused on the issue of masculinity in Hardy’s novels. The findings based on the relationships between social structures and men provide information on the significance relating to the current study. In fact, the connection between these constitutions and the characters are depicted as a dynamic one and the constitutions which represent the characters are in fact formed by them during their gender performances. The existing social structures of masculinity are therefore revealed to make way for a steady transition and opportunities for more relevant studies and opportunity for more studies on masculinities.

Yet, another study on masculinity in 2006 focused on the production of masculinity in modern American fiction. The researcher Worden discusses how extensive works of modern American literature utilises masculinity to construct substitutes to social conventions. Worden states that masculinity plays a vital role in American modernism that is connected to nineteenth-century dime novel Westerns which is apparent in the shared narrative approach by the authors and the similar political content. Instead of dealing with modernism’s obsessions on masculinity that is most obvious in author like Ernest Hemingway as a breakdown to cope appropriately with irregular gender role during the twentieth century, the researcher studied masculinity as an approach to gender performance. Between the time frame from 1880 to 1950, gender performance in American literature constantly depicts the ineffectiveness of patriarchal family relationships and heterosexual marriage principles. Starting with an understanding of nineteenth-century dime novel Westerns, this investigation questions the link between masculinity and the male body, an association that frequently helps to solidify male supremacy. Dime novels together with the social fear that enfolded them during the late nineteenth century reveal the manners in which modern masculinity is separated from a fundamental relation to the male body. The study focuses on the works of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, Ernest Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*, Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the novel and film versions of *Shane*. The findings reveal that American modernist writers’ preoccupation with masculinity has a straightforward literary predecessor in dime novel Westerns where masculinity is not an identity but rather a narrative form. In dime novel Westerns, masculinity based on American modernism works against patriarchal possessions, family, and marriage principles by developing open-ended narratives that generate different approaches of social belonging. The various depictions of masculinities are not analysed in this study and further research is required to distinguished how male masculinity is reproduced in the British setting.

In another study, Kunin (2002) examined masculinity in Jewish-American Literature, 1867-1950. This study focused on selected texts belonging to the ending of the civil war and the starting of what is mentioned as the ‘cold’ war. Kunin studied the structuring of masculinity based on several initial works of Jewish-American literature. Particularly, it looks into the constraints between *Edelkayt*, a type of masculinity originated in conventional Judaic culture. The researcher studied the rising masculine norms during that period of time which depicts the pathologised types of masculine conduct outside of the ever-increasing constricted and restricted meanings of heterosexual normality. The custom of *Edelkayt* for the study was initiated by the researcher, Daniel Boyarin. The researcher established the historical framework to which the Jewish authors of the study responded. The discussions were based on the ways the interpretations of masculinity in the United States were disrupted by shifting patterns of life steered in by industrialisation, immigration, the development of the capitalist economy, and the challenging status of African-Americans previously and after the Civil War. The researcher proceeds to examine a number of mid-nineteenth century literary works that

convey thoughts of nationwide unity in the figurative expressions of the body and masculine wellbeing. The responsibility of the contemporary notions of race and sexuality that were being disseminated by the scientific concerns is also examined. In addition to that the study focused on three pioneer authors of Jewish-American literature who are Emma Lazarus, Henry Harland (a.k.a. Sidney Luska), and Abraham Cahan. Through their work, Kunin investigated a series of Jewish reactions to American models of masculinity, beginning from the proto-Zionist Emma Lazarus’s expectation of Max Nordau’s fight for a battle of “Muscle Jews,” to Abraham Cahan’s concise, then later on abandoned connection of the malleable rabbinic male with a common style of masculinity which was further agreeable to his socialist ideals. The novel of Anzia Yezierska, called *Bread Givers* (1925) that is made up of a distressing feminist assault on the approach and significance of the compliant rabbinical man is also examined. The researcher’s conclusion reiterates the fundamental ideas of the study, and as a leave-taking signal, endeavours to briefly position the study inside the perspective of Jewish-American studies and the contemporary discourse of Jewish masculinity.

CONCLUSION

To date several important studies on masculinities have been conducted with the use of several conceptual frameworks as read in the studies carried out previously. A number of studies were done on various fields of masculinities. The emphasis of the studies reviewed is focused more on the traditional practices by the community of men in the societies which are related to masculinity. The social influences that are related to men’s portrayal of dominance are insightful in the studies but they lack information on gendered relationships and how a society can shape those relationships. The principles of manhood advocated by the dominant masculinity put forward a number of attributes that men are persuaded to internalise into their own personal set of laws which shape the foundation for masculine codes of behaviour.

REFERENCES

- [1] Butler, J. (1995). Melancholy gender/refused identification. *Constructing Masculinity*, 21(36). Eds. M. Berger, B. Wallis and S. Watson New York, NY: Routledge
- [2] Kimmel, M. S. (2005). *The gender of desire: Essays on male sexuality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- [3] Kunin, J. (2002). Diss. *Studies Masculinity in Jewish-American Literature, 1867-1950: A Study of Selected Writing From the End of the Civil War to the Beginning of the Cold War*. Retrieved January 20, 2014 from <https://muse.jhu.edu/>
- [4] Pruitt, J. (2012) Diss. University of Wisconsin: *Victims of Patriarchy: Failed Masculinity in Nineteenth-century American Literature*.
- [5] Tanoori, K. (2012). *Newcastle University eTheses: Men and “presence”: Constructions of masculinity in selected novels of Thomas Hardy*. Retrieved January 20, 2014, from <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/handle/10443/1515>
- [6] Worden, D. (2006) *Like a Man: The Production of Masculinity in Modern American Fiction*. University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Angelina Subrayan, is currently a PhD candidate at Universiti Putra Malaysia and is also working as a senior lecturer in a public university. She has more than twenty five years of teaching experience and has published numerous articles with a number of reputable journals. Her areas of expertise include Language Studies, Literature and Critical Discourse Analysis. She also has interest in Victorian and early twentieth century writings.