

Remembering Patriarchy through Hegemonic Masculinities: A Connellian Reading of Suleri's *Boys Will Be Boys*

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Abstract: This study aims to discover the socialization of boys and the politics of masculinity in Sulehri's memoir *Boys Will Be Boys* and attempts to discover the extent to which the writer has projected the critique of masculinity regarding the patriarchal structures in socio-cultural traditions of Pakistan. The dominance of boys is accepted in society because of the gender roles in the family, religion, and cultural traditions. The study further attempts to locate the critique of this formative process because of which patriarchy sustains and normalizes itself. The study draws upon Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which postulates that manhood is equated with authority and aggression that consequently devalues feminine traits. By employing this framework, the study explores the cultural practices that lend legitimacy to male dominance. The study employs the method of textual analysis to identify the key themes of power, sexuality, and resistance, which make it not only a personal narrative but also a critique of culture in Pakistan. The research becomes significant as such and contributes to masculinity and feminist studies because the memoir destabilizes the natural masculinity dominance and shows it as rather a manufactured phenomenon that promotes inequality between genders. Gender, class, and cultural privileges all join hands and intersect in shaping masculinity. The writer, therefore, highlights the necessity to re-imagine the equitable model of manhood as an alternative. When read in this sense, the memoir becomes not only a personal account but also a political narrative to challenge the cultural mythologies sustaining the dominance of masculinity in Pakistan.

Keywords: Masculinity, Sociocultural Critique, Personal Memoir, Hegemonic Masculinity, Cultural Privileges.

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1. Introduction

Pakistan is rich in cultural, historical, and political heritage, and the same has profoundly impacted its literature over the years. Culturally speaking, the setup is patriarchal and has been found asserting itself in time and space. The historical context also reveals the dominance and assertion of power in the colonial and postcolonial sense. The same is the case with the political system in Pakistan, which has given space only to power, and all other voices have been marginalized. In such a patriarchal setup, gender performativity, as suggested by Judith Butler, is the norm even in this age of advanced technology. For example, the boys are told from the very outset that they must avoid weeping because it is a sign of weakness, and instead, they must exhibit roughness and toughness. The matter further escalates when parents feel proud of their sons being born and turning powerful and dominating as a sign of hegemonic masculinity

(Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) [1]. As binary opposition, this attitude of the parents underscores the performance of girls as being weak and dominated. Further, as a boy grows up, for example at school, he is always encouraged to fight his way instead of reconciliation, and if the boy does not, he is ridiculed, which proves that social institutions play a role in stressing aggression with masculine traits. The same holds good in Suleri's memoir, *Meatless Days*, because here a boy is excused for all mistakes and errors, and even his acts of harassing a woman, which is akin to naturalizing the behavior of the boys, especially by using language for the suitability of their actions. This and many other dicta of social training at home train the boys to behave accordingly. This purports that not only institutions but also the mother's gendered teaching influences the training of the young mind of a boy. It is always reminded to the boys through discourses of competitiveness that life is a constant struggle even with friends, and it will yield only in fierce competition, and so a boy is perpetually under peer pressure to do big things. Even religious ideas are invoked to make the boys understand their patriarchal standing. It is because of this huge responsibility that the failure of a girl is personalized, but the same of a boy is galvanized into the need for a much higher level of struggle. So, the unspoken rule is clearly spoken that to be a man was to dominate, never to yield. The daughters of Mr. Suleri in the memoir, though, are educated and have been brought up in a liberal environment, which their father has been found claiming, yet the control and limitations, not only on the daughters but also on the foreign wife, were also, though by him, an absolute necessity. This aspect of the father's personality made him exert himself on his family's lifestyle, upbringing, and social activities, especially with reference to the women of the household. The women of the household also followed his dictates, as the memoir reflects, but they debated their unwillingness to follow some of the dictates of the father and declared them to be unnecessary and hence challenged the masculine authority of the father. When the narrative is read critically with this lens, it can be interpreted as per the theories of Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) on hegemonic masculinities, which would stress that even when enlightenment and democratic values are equally assertive. Herein, the same is explored to discover the portrayal of the father in the memoir *Boys Will Be Boys*.

2. Literature Review

In the memoir *Boys Will Be Boys*, Suleri vacillates constantly between her love and respect for the father but occasionally slips towards the critique of patriarchy also. These two strains of the

story go hand in hand, and ultimately the thing attaches itself to the postcolonial historiography and cultural studies. Especially if we look at the write-up with respect to feminist theory or the patriarchal lens, we again get these two strains, which say that on the one hand there is a male gaze with domestic authority appreciated, but on the other hand it converges on the criticism of the male gaze (Nawaz, 2019) [2]. According to Nawaz, this description and interpretation of male gaze is according to the concept of Male Gaze given by Laura Mulvey, which further extends the male gaze to the discursive level where it becomes a regulatory action focusing on the mobility, privacy, and desire of women, especially when the writer tells her father's reading of their private letters and his comments show his refusal to accept the female autonomy (Mulvey, 1990, [3] as cited in Nawaz, 2019) [4]. This becomes significant when one realizes that the affection of parents turns very soon to patriarchal surveillance. Asma describes this as a critique of Suleri's portrayals, asserting that women are very much there in Pakistan and hence challenging Sara's early claims that she came from a country where there are no women. Jharna Malaviya (2017) [5] adds another dimension to the portrayal of Pip by Sara: that her father was very upright in his dealings with the politics of the country and the loss of the two-nation theory in 1971, but he was not that upright in dealing with his children, which shows him drawing a line between political ethics and domestic tyranny. Zahid et al. (2024) [6] agree with this point while conducting their study on this text through cultural studies and discourse analysis and claim that the discourse of Suleri acts as an unsettler of patriarchal and nationalist hegemonies; however, it does not reflect the emotional and psychological cost borne by the women. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship by shifting focus from women solely as victims of patriarchy to patriarchy itself as a self-undermining ideological formation embedded in postcolonial Pakistani society (Zahid et al., 2024).

As such, in the memoir *Meatless Days*, Suleri seems more influenced by the powerful personality of her father and so dedicates more space to the dominant male in comparison to the females. The space and voice of the female is therefore reduced because of this tilt in the story. But even this tilt goes to indicate her repulsion for the patriarchal dominance. For example, Murtaza et al (2020) [7] claim that "Sara Suleri is divided between her fascination for her father's strong character and her repulsion for the consequent effect on women's space in family life, connoting a critique of Pakistani patriarchal society" (p.633). Murtaza et al (2020) furthers the argument by agreeing that a memoir needs to particularly address the person for whom it is

intended but being a female writer, the author could not help exhibiting her dislike for the dominating attitude of the patriarch because “Although *Boys Will Be Boys* is an elegy to her father, Suleri ‘manages her tilt’ toward him despite advocating for a woman’s space that is miserably shrunk to domestic life in Pakistani society” (p. 633). Nawaz (2019) reverberates similar thoughts by associating the powerful description with Pakistani nationalism, where male dominance is inherent in the nationalistic discourses. According to Nawaz (2019), the text situates the father in the narrative as the central figure whose patriarchal presence designs the history of the family as well as public politics. As such, masculinity acts as a rudiment to familial as well as national narratives. Partially, it is because of the postcolonial nature of the text that, in such discourses, authority dominates not only in the domestic sphere but also in the literary fashioning, as is done by Suleri. This aspect of the memoir also reflects that historical perspective where national history becomes more a history of the man in the sense of national memory and thus portrays the father as a true patriarch. Therefore, Suleri situates the father in *Boys Will Be Boys* as a ‘true patriarch’ who is found dominating because of his position, family history, and national memory as well (Aftab & Asma, 2017) [8]. Keeping the context in mind, this portrayal of the father is reflective of the cultural norms of Pakistan where females are automatically marginalized. They further emphasize that the patriarchal structure illustrated in *Boys Will Be Boys* mirrors the broader cultural norms that assign men dominance, marginalizing women’s agency and voices even where they are present (Aftab & Asma, 2017). A critical reading of *Boys Will Be Boys* manifests an impression of socially accepted and propagated hegemonic male attitude. Davis (2009) [9] claims that the presence of the fatherly figure of Suleri’s father made its influence felt almost all around even when he was absent, which becomes a hallmark of the textual flow of the memoir because Suleri frames her father’s life as a site of both authority and absence. But all this has been visibly portrayed in the sense of masculinity, its power, authority, and ultimately the limits Suleri would prefer to promote also, especially with reference to the build and construct of Empire. Consequently, the position of Pip necessitates the exploration of his character in the narrative to assess how he enjoys his position, not only to assert his own philosophy of life but also the values and history of the Pakistani society, and how the narrative seems to challenge the same.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

This socio-psychological male attitude can be understood as Hegemonic Masculinity, which is not just about one man's doing, but rather it is the name of the behavioral patterns in a social setup which allow men to dominate women or other men. 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 (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These dominating men are different from all other masculinities, especially the dominated ones. Though they are few in number, they make it normative. It also includes the men who would not become hegemonic but would attempt to enjoy masculinity benefits without adopting it altogether. Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). With the passage of time, this type of masculinity begins to operate through cultural consent, and not just with force. Many of the postmodernists suggest that in the current world, much of the fluidity is available in the bordering of gender identities, but still sociologists believe that hegemonic forms can be found in the traditional social setup. These hegemonic forms can be witnessed in the media representations and the discussions on gender in the postcolonial societies.

Hegemonic masculinity is further clarified by Judith Butler (1990) [10] who associates it with gender performativity. As per the writings of Judith Butler, gender is not by its essence but by its process, and so it is unstable because of its dependence on social acts. According to Butler, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency... rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. It appears natural because it repeats and ritualizes in its acts, multiple times. This makes the body of a gender a site of its performance, which Butler argues: 'One is not simply a body, but... one does one's body'. Butler further argues that the idea of natural gender is social making and is an historical fiction. What society treats as "natural gender" is a historically produced fiction enforced through social norms designed to reward and punish. This can be further understood through the related concept of gender enunciated by Bourdieu (2001) [11], who, while talking about the social space, says that the social world can be conceived as a multidimensional space that can be constructed empirically. Social positions are defined in relation to one another, not in isolation. What exists in the social world are relations, not interactions or intersubjective ties between agents. Bourdieu

terms it as habitus, which produces practices that become useful in developing the very objective structures which in turn become the symbolic power. Symbolic power is a power of misrecognition, founded on the recognition of the legitimacy of domination.

4. Discussion & Analysis

The patriarchal superiority and emphasis on the male being equipped with better minds and understanding reveal the writer's reflection of the patriarchal thought about females, as was believed by her father. For example, Knowledge of the girls was mostly believed to be less than the boys because when Tillat was asked by Shahid about the legs of a chicken, she would include the wings also and counted as FOUR. The father would not stand for that and questioned the ability of the girl as to why she was so poor in knowledge and not only exposed her but also ridiculed her by saying, "How many legs does a chicken have?—four" (Suleri, 2003, p. 4). This type of understanding about the female is reflected in the fixture of social standing and psychological positioning. In social behavior, the places were fixed differently for the women and those for men, which means the boys could lie or sit or relax at any place, but the girls could not do the same. For example, when the whole family was visiting a foreign city, the girls with the host Scheherazade sat on the front alcove and thought about the inappropriacy, and the same happened when the husband of their friend requested them to "Please get up, please get up," (p. 12). Even in the case of rabbits, the writer gives the impression that male rabbits could survive even without a female and spread beauty in their own ways. "Chookie and Pookie were, however, gay and perfectly content with their own rather obvious maneuvers" (p. 14).

Wearing of jewelry has always been thought a woman's prerogative, but as for manhood, certain religious sects would make it mandatory to wear jewelry to indicate their power, wealth, and religious devotion. For example, Suleri tells, 'Later, when we had a minute to ourselves, Austin asked me quite earnestly, 'What is the religious sect in India that requires men to wear jewelry, silks, and lipstick?' 'I'll explain later,' I replied". (Suleri, 2003, p.18) [12]. Even the style of Laugh fixed differently for men and for women. For example, good women never laugh as loudly as men. The writer has challenged this notion. For example, she says, "One of my fatal flaws is an uncontrollable laugh—call it an inelegant guffaw, if you will—and once it exploded from me, I had to leave the room" (p. 34). Not only this type of challenge, but another one also: that a woman should cover her head when she is praying. We are reminded that only men can pray without covering, not women. The writer quotes a long passage even to prove her point. She

says that, "Once home, before anything else, she took off her sari blouse, put it on her head, and knelt to say some prayers of thanks to the God who had allowed her to arrive safely. "But, Nuz," I wondered, "does God really like to see you in a bra?" Maybe he did, for she was quite inviting. Mozzies, you see, must cover their heads when they pray, and Nuz simply grabbed (p. 34). The same is echoed in Hanif's *Red Birds*, where the woman covers her head with her blouse, just to show respect for covering her head with her shirt, though she got naked at other points of her body.

The speaking, learning, and teaching languages have not been left untouched by the theme of men being preferred over women. For example, when the writer talks about the way their mother uses multiple languages of the country and one that of her native country, the girls spoke only one language. This thing is told in terms of monogamy (the matrimonial terminology), which would be otherwise if they spoke more languages (polygamy). The writer comments on this trait as a female trait, as was the case with many other traits of women. "The rest of us women remained monogamous, linguistically speaking, since monogamy is our wont in other matters, too" (Suleri, 2003, p. 69). This male dominance over females continues when the writer talks about the shared characteristics of humans; she quotes her father and her husband. For example, the writer comments about her sister's understanding that, "I do believe that Tillat has a point, when she says Austin, with his habit of interruption, has certain alarming affinities with Pip" (72). Moreover, the use of the word 'sportsman' for a girl and not replacing it with sports person by Shahid, the brother of Tillat, also indicates the challenging attitude of the writer towards the male dominance in language. For example, when Shahid wanted to show his anger towards his sister for not playing cricket properly, he would say, "Tillat! What kind of sportsman are you?" "I'm not a sportsman," Tillat replied quite accurately" (p. 81).

Even the title of the book is reflected and critiqued in the book when the mention of the three marriages of Pip is made by the writer. She tells that because of this, they had a type of fear that all of them were not similar in appearance yet were almost of the same age; that one of them said the same thing and advised them not to come to the church because they belonged to different religious cults. Some to Muslims, some to Christians, and some to Hindus. The kind of multiple marriages and their consequences are hinted at by the writer; there is no outright condemnation of the same, though. "Our story was as follows: we were three half-sisters, for

our father had married three times, first to a Hindu, then to a Muslim, and lastly to a Lutheran missionary” (Suleri, 2003, p. 94). A similar scene follows on the next pages when Sara needed permission from her father to act on the stage, and she thinks “Why on earth did I need permission?” (99), especially when she had become 21 years old. This reveals the control and social pressure on girls, not on boys, that they needed permission even when they were grown-up individuals. And the same is the case with the closing sentence of the book that Pip will be remembered more than ever even though he is labelled as a boy, a representation of the boyish nature of the culture. The last sentence of the book is “Good night, sweet Pip, flights of angels sing thee to thy rest! You will be back more times than you know. I was always obstinate”. (Suleri, 2003, p. 121)

5. Conclusion

The memoir debates and projects the life of the father of the writer, but evidently it is not without the agenda of the writer. On the one hand, she manifests her clear stance about the role the father played in the upbringing of herself and her siblings; on the other hand, she critiques also the same role that it was full of patriarchal control that she manifestly felt but did not argue or contradict till she was a grown-up woman. Even after being grown-up, she could only resist at the minimal possible level and mostly appreciated her father and followed his advice and acted also as he would want her. But alongside this obedience, she goes on to highlight the way the male would keep on attempting control over the women of the household in the name of protection, family loyalties, and honor of the family. Consequently, the narrative becomes representative of the patriarchal control and the kind of critique that would be launched by the women of the household. Besides, *Boys Will Be Boys* offers a fertile landscape for the discussion of postcolonial analysis in the context of masculinity. And as such, it is a manifestation of aftershocks of colonial administrative masculinity within the national discourses. The most evident in this regard is the contradictory nature of the postcolonial discourse because Sulehri’s father, an intellectual and a journalist, is like a postcolonial elite, nationalist in rhetoric yet shaped by colonial institutions. The father’s intellectual dominance and the daughter’s observation are an analogy of the centralized authority of the postcolonial state and the destabilization of this authority. Overall, the memoir suggests the patriarchal assertions in the age of information and knowledge that these are automatically there, where the historical and political context keeps on supporting them.

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