

Male identities in conflict: The construction of masculinity in the characters of Devi Mahasweta's "The Hunt"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the construction of masculinity in Devi Mahasweta's "The Hunt". Michael Kimmel and R.W. Connell's work on gender identity are used as a theoretical support to identify the different masculine archetypes present in the text. Also, masculinity is conceived as a discursive structure determined by the socio-historical conditions that interpellate individuals; in this case, capitalism. Finally, it is concluded that each character embodies a particular, and in some cases more than one, male identity in conflict. These male identities are the result of capitalist and cultural globalizing processes that affect the Kuruban society.

RESUMEN

Este artículo desarrolla un análisis literario sobre la construcción de la masculinidad en los personajes del cuento "The Hunt" de Devi Mahasweta. Como marco teórico referente se utilizan principalmente los aportes de las teorías de Michael Kimmel, y R.W. Connell en lo que respecta a la identidad del género masculino. Por otra parte, la masculinidad se entiende como una elaboración discursiva determinada por las particularidades socio-históricas que interpelan a los individuos. Finalmente, se concluye que cada personaje representa una –o varias en algunos casos- identidad masculina en conflicto producto de los procesos de globalización capital y cultural a la que la sociedad de Kuruba se ve sometida.

Key Words:

"The Hunt", Devi Mahasweta, Kuruba, gender identity, masculinity, discourse

Palabras clave:

"The Hunt", Devi Mahasweta, Kuruba, identidad de género, masculinidad, discurso

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Introduction

In every culture, there are social precepts that shape the way people identify themselves and others. Gender identity is one of the strongest human conditions used to differentiate people and make them part of a community. Gender identity provides individuals with a set of codes, characteristics and standards related to both their biological nature and social identity. Coined in social, cultural and biological arguments, gender identity refers to the masculine and feminine perceptions used to define what is meant to be a man and a woman in a particular society.

Postmodern theories on gender identity and sex have an ontological function rather than an ontological nature or essence. The materialization of gender identity is based on a subjective construction discursively elaborated by the historical conditions of the subject. Therefore, sexual and gender differences are socio-historical elaborations. In this respect, the biological nature of the individual becomes a material difference that organizes social life into regulatory ideas about femininity and masculinity. According to Judith Butler

Sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual differences. The category "sex" is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal." In this sense, then, "sex" not only functions as a norm but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of

productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate- the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory idea whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. (1993: 1)

Consequently, the ontological function of discourse is to normalize the individual’s practices and inter-subjectivity into the categories of male and female - man and woman.

The normative process of discourse segregates physical appearances, emotions, aptitudes, attitudes, occupations and institutions into polarizing practices that create performative stereotypes for people to assume. Male and female gender performances are determined by the official discourses of each particular time and context, materializing the ontological function of discourse according to certain expected performance. Edmond Cros argues that

It is by establishing discursive relations among all these elements [systems of norms, behavior patterns, economic and social processes] that discourse forms the object of which it speaks, and that it itself accedes to the status of a *discursive practice*, this “place in which a tangled plurality – at once superposed and incomplete – of objects is formed and deformed, appears and disappears.” This is why discourse is not “a mere intersection of things and words” nor a “slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and experience. (1998: 34)

In this sense, masculinity becomes a discursive practice within the ideological formation of gender identities. As an ideological institution, literature exemplifies the way(s) gender identities are portrayed, exercised, subverted or perpetuated through generations.

Postmodern masculinity in “The Hunt”

The short story “The Hunt” from the anthology *Imaginary maps: Three stories* by Devi Mahasweta illustrates the controversial construction of masculinity in a colonized

society that is becoming capitalist. This story is developed in Kuruba, a village located in the southern region of India. Initially, hunting and gathering were the main activities to survive. The members of the Kuruban society were mostly shepherds and farmers. Kuruba was conquered by the British Empire during the period of colonization. Little by little, England introduced the capitalist economical system in the Kuruban society changing its social and economic organization.

The working field assigned to the Kuruban men and women was one of the first repercussions of the socioeconomic change. People were forced to work outside home as slaves or workers of foreign business companies. The narrator points out that “[o]nce upon a time whites had *timber plantations* in Kuruba” (Mahasweta 1995: 2) where both men and women had to work to get some money to survive. But those plantations “left gradually after independence” (2). As a result of this new economic system, masculinity was re-de-constructed according to the standards of the capitalist man. The Kuruban people had to adjust themselves to the capitalist economy where the abilities for gathering and hunting were no more precious masculine qualities. Instead, the capacity to earn money became the main male condition to recognize a man as such.

In Kuruba, the concept of masculinity is adapted to the ideas of progress, commercialization of goods and services, and the use of technology in everyday life activities. This socio-economic view associates the issue of masculinity to material welfare. Connell claims that “the unprecedented growth of European and North American power, the creation of global empires and a global capitalist economy, and the unequal encounter of gender orders in the colonized world” (1995: 185) generated new social interactions that affected the notion of masculinity. In the Kuruban village,

The expense of having trains stop was perhaps too much. Now one sees a stray cow or a goat in the *station* room, in the residential quarters and the porters’ shanties. The billboard says “Kuruba *Outstation, Abandoned.*” Arrived here, the train slows. It gasps as it climbs. It climbs Kuruba Hill bit by bit right from here. It is a low hill. (Mahasweta 1995: 1)

The changes in the Kuruban social life and context evidence the struggles to survive under the conditions of the capitalist system. The image of the “cow” or “goat” in the

abandoned “station room” pictures a fragmented society with problems to succeed in a new postmodern context. Social interaction is also affected because individuals have to find out the way to live in a society poorly developed and neglected. In doing so, what is considered “manly” is established according to the individual capacity to accumulate material profits. Those men having more money become the ideal masculine prototype because they can afford a family proving to be good “providers”.

Male class division is another revealing repercussion of capitalism in the construction of masculinity. Working classes are located at the lower level of social hierarchies, and employers at the top creating two main kinds of masculinities. On one hand, there is the rich man representing the legitimated and powerful male image. On the other, the poor and middle class working man is perceived as the undervalued masculinity. In other words, a successful man needs to have skillful business abilities. In the text, Prasadji represents the successful man, “everyone says Prasadji is most fortunate. He pays Bhikni a wage. With Mary the agreement is for board and lodging, clothing and sundries. The Dixon bungalow was built as a residence for whites” (Mahasweta 1995: 3). Prasadji has the vision to make profitable businesses. Despite the fact that Mary is a (illegitimate) woman, Prasadji has been able to “see” Mary as a potential opportunity to earn money.

The conflict between Tehsildar and Jalim also exemplifies the different kinds of masculinities generated by segregated labor organizations. The narrator argues that

Mary was getting tired of Tehsildar’s tireless single-minded pursuit. Jalim might get to know. He’d be wild if she let him know. He might go to Tohri market to kill Tehsildar if he got the change. [But] Tehsildar has a lot of money, a lot of men. A city bastard. He can destroy Jalim by setting up a larceny case against him. (Mahasweta 1995: 12-14)

In this new postmodern class division of men, Jalim has a lower position. Even though both Tehsildar and Jalim are entrepreneurs, Tehsildar symbolizes the White colonizer. Jalim, on the other hand, is the inferior colonized man. The masculine characteristics upon which traditional Kuruban masculinity was constructed are worthless in this new post colonized society. Kimmel explains that

Manhood had been understood to define an inner quality, the capacity for autonomy and responsibility, and had historically been seen as the opposite of *childhood*. Becoming a man was not taken for granted; at some point the grown-up boy would demonstrate that he had become a man and had put away childish things. At the turn of the century, manhood was replaced gradually by the term *masculinity*, which referred to a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, *femininity*. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question –lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine. (1996: 119-120)

In this sense, Jalim’s masculinity is the representation of a second-rate man. Although he is a grow-up man, his masculinity becomes less powerful because the institutionalization of the male supremacy is legitimated by an economical status Jalim does not have. He is just a middle class working man with difficulties to accumulate money.

The Kuruba elders and the genteel patriarch archetype

According to Kimmel, the Genteel Patriarch is one of the strongest masculine images of modernity. This male prototype “was frequently depicted as a virtuous man of the people, the Father of the Country was also its *pater familias*, and represented the gentility of the landed gentry” (Kimmel 1996: 145). The characters best representing this male archetype are the Kuruban elders. However, their masculinity has a variation originated from their submission to the capitalist system.

The Kuruban elders personify the male traits of the colonized “dislocated” Genteel Patriarch. In terms of age and experience, they play the role of the Kuruba community’s fathers acting as the “virtuous men of the people”. Their main concerns deal with taking care of the community life, traditions and values. The Kuruban elders are the first social members reacting against the social changes that the new labor system is causing to the Kuruban men and women. In this regard, “the elder said, how about the women’s honor if they work?” (Mahasweta 1995: 8) As Genteel Patriarchs, they worry

about the way new working practices are transforming the Kuruban traditions regarding their patriarchal gender organization. Because they are the traditional leaders of the community, the Kuruban elders are in charge of taking the decisions - or at least expressing at the public level their opinions - that would affect not only their families but also the whole community life.

However, the Kuruban elders do not fully accomplish the Genteel Patriarch archetype. The Kuruban elders are not rich landowners, educated and intellectual men at the eyes of capitalist and occidental societies. But in the light of traditional Indian tribes, these features can become evident in different ways with different signifiers and signifieds. In tribal life, calling them elders has been traditionally considered a symbol of experience and knowledge. Elderly is, then, another way to evaluate intellect and richness. In other words, the elders represent the Genteel Patriarch archetype adapted to the socio-historical situations of a non-developed capitalist society.

As a result, the Kuruban elders' masculinity has a kind of ontological essence that becomes useless in a postmodern society regulated by capitalism. Because the Genteel Patriarch acts upon a strong code of responsibility, honor and respect, his capacity to exercise his masculinity is effective only if the other social members share the values of such moral code. In this sense, the male identity of the elders is dislocated from the historical conditions of their traditional contexts and worldviews. An example of this situation is manifested when the elders trust on the promises made by the contractor (the colonizer) without realizing that this foreign individual does not share their same ideas and male performance. Because of this reason, "the elders' heads turned with the trucks' speed and the efficiency of the fast work. So they couldn't think that the contractor's words were untrue" (Mahasweta 1995: 8). They trusted the man's word because their male worldview works upon a code of chivalry based on honor failing to accomplish the ideal image of the modern man.

Prasadji: The “dislocated” modern self-made man

On the other hand, Prasadji represents the mixture between what has been called the “dislocated” Genteel Patriarch - the Kuruba elders - and the modern self-made man. As a Genteel Patriarch, Prasadji is a family man. He is a married man who shares the traditional Kuruban arrangement of marriage; that is why he did not approve Bhikni’s relationship with the Dixon’s son. In this sense, the narrator states that

Mary’s mother looked after the Dixon’s bungalow and household. Dixon’s son came back in 1959 and sold the house, forest, everything else. He put Mary in Bhikni’s womb before he left. He went to Australia. The padre at the local church christened her Mary. Bhikni was still a *Christian*. But when Prasadji from Ranchi came to live in the Dixon bungalow and refused to employ Bhikni, she gave up *Christianity*. (Mahasweta 1995: 2)

Prasadji did not hire Bhikni because she was a single mother who broke the Kuruban traditional gender relationships. This situation sheds light on Prasadji’s prejudices about marital conformation. On the other hand, Prasadji also has the genteel characteristics of the rich landlord because he owns a lot of land; in fact, “seventy-five acres or two hundred and twenty-five bighas of land are attached to Prasadji” (Mahasweta 1995: 6).

Prasadji also represents the modern adapted Kuruban male. He shares the values of the capitalist society. He is not considered a community leader because the Kuruban people think Prasadji does not care about the community welfare but only about his own benefit. Consequently, “nobody around here [Kuruba] obeys the land ceiling laws” (Mahasweta 1995: 6) Prasadji proposes because Kurubans know that his concerns are just determined by a capitalist idea of individual private property rather than by the benefit the whole traditional community life. Prasadji constantly transgresses the ordinary Genteel Patriarch to *partially* adopt some of the characteristics of the self-made man whose strong and constant interest in making business is based on material accumulation.

Finally, Prasadji is after all a colonized man who still lacks full understanding of the way modern male business works. In reference to the trees’ business, Prasadji thinks that he has earned good money because “The white planted the stuff” (Mahasweta 1995:

7). Besides, Prasadji believes that the future transportation of the trees will be very expensive because “Trucks won’t come here. This is not the white man’s rule when I could have brought the elephants from the *Forest Department* and pulled the timber to Tohri. I’ll have to make it to Murhai. Flat tires on the dirt roads. I’ll have to cut the trees before that, think of the expense! (Mahasweta 1995: 7) Prasadji did not realize that “the bastard tricked [him]. He took all the profit” (Mahasweta 1995: 9). As Mary stated, the reality of the business is that

the contractor praised the uninstructed ignorance of his caste-brothers Prasad, Mulni and Lalchand. The idiots don’t even know what goods they are abandoning. He has given Banwari a rupee per tree in secret [the driver of the train]. This too leaves him a wide range of profit. Countless trees will be ready for felling in a few years. Prasad must be kept happy. Soon these parts will be joined to Tohri at that end and Nirlaghat at this. Roads are under construction. Once there roads, future transportation expenses will be saved. (Mahasweta 1995: 8)

Through corruption, the modern business man tries to get more profits at a low cost. Prasadji exemplifies a new kind of man immersed in a changing society where “the entrepreneurial culture and workplaces of commercial capitalism institutionalized a form of masculinity, creating and legitimating new firms of genders work and power in the counting-house, the warehouse and the exchange” (Connell 1995: 11).

Tehsildar: The self-made man

Tehsildar is in his way of thinking and acting the faithful representation of the self-made image. Kimmel explains that

the men became increasingly concerned about the economic and social impact of manly appearance. Talent and motivation may have become unreliable predictors of success, but one could still make sure to look the part, to act as if one were already successful, too, as we might say today, “dress for success.” (1996: 124)

Tehsildar is a business man whose main concern is taking the most profits he could from the Kuruba's trees. Therefore, "the first thing Tehsildar Singh looks at is trees to be felled. Then they start negotiating prices" (Mahasweta 1995: 7). In other words, the only thing Tehsildar can see in Kuruba is trading trees because the "Tohri's real benefactors are the timber brokers. They are split in sawmills and sent in every direction. Tohri's bustle is an experience after the silence of Kuruba" (2).

Connell also argues that the new self-made man re-de-constructs the image of the father and husband by diminishing the importance of the family, and glorifying the success in business. Tehsildar replaces the family with business. Even though he "has a wife and children [...], he still lusts women" (Mahasweta 1995: 11-12). Tehsildar does not respect the traditional family compromise. On the contrary, Tehsildar tries to demonstrate his male "superiority" by having as many women as possible; that is why "he doesn't give up chasing Mary" (Mahasweta 1995: 12). Tehsildar, as a self-made man exercising his masculinity, cannot accept female rejection because this means the subordination of his gender. In other words, women are objects to consume because "having" them demonstrates the male capacity to succeed in life. This chauvinist attitude turns gender identities into merchandises commercialized in terms of the capital accumulation.

Therefore, the family loses its traditional importance. This social institution is replaced by commerce because it becomes a good. Connell makes clear that

The main axis of power in the contemporary Europe/American gender order is the overall subordination of women and dominance of men –the structure Women's Liberation named 'patriarchy'. This general structure exists despite many local reversals (e.g. women-headed households [as Mary is], female teachers with male students). It persists despite resistance of many kinds. (1995: 74)

Tehsildar cannot accept that "Mary Oraon from a wild village like Kuruba could blow him away. He stuck to Mary through marking and felling the trees, cutting and transporting them. That Mary wouldn't look at him and would rather marry a Muslim increased his anger" (Mahasweta 1995: 11) because in male terms this would mean that

Jalim was more “manly” than him. As Connell ponders, “marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (1995: 81). Taking into account that gender is “a way of structuring social practice in general, not a special type of practice [...], it is now common to say that gender ‘intersects’ - better, interacts- with race and class. We might add that it constantly interacts with nationality or position in the world order” (Cornnell 1995: 75). Consequently, Tehsildar’s incapacity to accept Mary’s choice - Jalim - obeys to a complex social situation generated by occidental masculinities constructed not only in relation to white-white men but also in reference to white-other men relationships.

Banwaris: The colonized masculinity

Another character performing the stereotype of the Self-made man is Prasadji’s son. Banwari’s attitudes toward women, male characters and businesses are individualistic. Banwari does not care about the family and the community’s concerns. As Kimmel ponders, Banwari is

the lesser hero, a slightly younger and less vigorous boy who becomes our hero’s apprentice; the snob, the son of a gentleman, who is “lazy, ignorant, arrogant, and unwilling to work because he considers it beneath his station” and who is both overtly contemptuous and secretly envious of the hero’s success; and the who lacks the intelligence or ability of the hero and is often susceptible to the corruption of the environment. (1996: 143)

Banwari faithfully behaves as the corrupted boy who is reluctant to work. He wants to make “easy” money without taking any responsibility. Even his father, Prasadji, is aware of the sluggish, ignorant and haughty attributions of his son. He knows that “Banwari is pig-headed and takes after his mother I first said ‘no,’ then Lalchand and Mulni got angry. There were objections at home” (Mahasweta 1995: 9) because “Banwari’s taken his cut” (9) of the trees’ business with Tehsildar. In other words, Banwari betrays his own blood because his desire for money is stronger than his family attachment. “What a shame” (Mahasweta 1995: 9) points out Prasadji while realizing that his “own son

understands nothing. What shall I do? Don't I know that he'll sell everything and take off when I die?" (9)

On the other hand, Banwari's misogynistic way of expressing about Mary confirms his rejections and fears towards the feminization process the Kuruba village experiences. Although he knows about the bad intentions Tehsildar has towards Mary - and the fact that Tehsildar's mother "thinks of her [Mary] as a daughter" (Mahasweta 1995: 9) -, Banwari decides to help Tehsildar instead of Mary who is like his sister. Banwari tries to justify his son's bad behavior by making others think Mary is a trouble maker. Therefore, "Banwari said at evening meal, 'Mary has insulted my friend'" (Mahasweta 1995: 10). Banwari tries to strengthen his relationships with other men by delegitimizing the female image because he is scared of Mary. In doing so "Banwari said to Tehsildar, 'She [Mary] is a real bitch, a rude girl, doesn't give a damn for anyone'" (Mahasweta 1995: 11).

Jalim and the man of the fifties

Jalim's masculine traits represent the man of the fifties. He is responsible, hardworking and there is no evidence of violent behavior. He has all the good qualities Kuruban women want in a man. In addition, Jalim has properly exercised his masculinity in terms of acquiring a place in the hierarchical system of a capitalist society which has given him the opportunity "to get" Mary. In this sense, the narrator states that

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. Jalim the leader of the marketers and a sharp lad, is her chosen mate. (3)

As the man of the fifties, Jalim fully accomplishes the male role of the provider. Consequently, he becomes the best candidate to marry Mary who "has let Jalim approach her on the promise of marriage" (Mahasweta 1995: 3).

Jalim and Mary also share the same socio-economical function of the modern individual. They both work, and Jalim has accepted this situation without questioning Mary's apparent manly performance. Rather than considering Mary's behavior as a thread to his manhood and masculinity, Jalim has accepted the way she is - apparently - in the name of love. Therefore, they agree on sharing the economical responsibility of saving one hundred rupees because there is no hierarchical separation of the socio-economic spheres among men and women.

The heroic artisan: Transgressing the construction of masculinity

In the case of the heroic artisan image, Mary transgresses the traditional patriarchal gender identities. She is a "manly" woman. According to Kimmel, "the Heroic Artisan is the mythical ideal of the honest hardworking man whose virtue stems from his commitment to industry" (1996: 145). In the Western societies, the cowboy has been a powerful male image because

As a mythic creation, the cowboy was fierce and brave, willing to venture into unknown territory, a "negligent, irresponsible wilderness," and tame it for women, children, and emasculated civilized men. As soon as the environment has been subdued, he must move on, unconstrained by the demands of civilized life, unhampered by clinging women and whining children and uncaring bosses and managers. (Kimmel 1996: 149)

Even though the cowboy is biologically male, in social performance Mary is the only character with the masculine standards attributed to the heroic artisan. The narrator states that "Mary is a most capable cowherd. She also sells custard apple and guava from the Prasad's orchards, driving terrifically hard bargains with the Kunjaras, the whole fruit buyers. She takes the *train* to Tohri with vegetables from the field" (Mahasweta 1995: 2).

Beyond her social behavior, Mary's strength is also physically given. She is "eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured, light copper skin" (Mahasweta 1995: 2). She has the ability and capacity to perform traditional masculine jobs. The narrator points out that

Mary cleans house and pastures cattle with her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor-sharp mind. On the field she *lunches* on fried corn. She stands and picks fruit and oversees picking. She weights the stuff herself for the buyers. She puts the fruit bitten by bats and birds into a sack, and feeds it to her mother's chickens. When the rains come she replants the seedlings carefully. She watches out for everything. She buys rice, oil, butter, and species for the Prasads. (5)

As the masculine heroic artisan, Mary works the land. She is self-sufficient and she shares the conservative precepts about the importance of the family.

Also, Mary shares the heroic artisan's worries about the community safety. Despite the fact Mary is socially considered inferior, she transgresses the patriarchal restrictions assigned to her gender. Mary has a voice. Through her sense of agency, Mary makes others listen to her. Her preoccupations are manifested when she warns Prasadji and the Kuruban elders about the trees' business with Tehsildar. She helps them to avoid Tehsildar's fraud by firmly stating that "when you sell trees later, there will be *road*, don't give it to him. Go yourself to Chripador. Talk to the big companies and do your business. Don't be soft then. [...] Mary told the elders as well. [...] 'he [Tehsildar] is greedy now'. He will come again in five years" (Mahasweta 1995: 9). Mary's smartness is as well as her bravery symbol of her heroic nature.

Conclusions

As a discursive literary production, *The Hunt* evidences contradictory discourses on the construction of masculinity. The attitudes and aptitudes attributed to both male and female characters reveal the compulsory gender relationships and identities generated in tribal societies absorbed by postmodern capitalist paradigms. The Kuruban elders, Jamil, Prasadji, Tehsildar, Bawari and Mary portray the tensions of gender-based identities among men - and women - upon which masculinity - and femininity - is constructed and exercised nowadays.

Because ideologies are not static constructs, they are in constant change permitting different dissociations in the same regulatory categorizations ascribed to masculinity. This is especially the case of the Kuruba elders, Prasadji and Tehsildar who fail in fully achieving the patriarchal male roles assigned to their socio-historical conditions and standards on masculinity. Instead, their male identities are dislocated from context and space showing a tribal conservative society immersed in a capitalist process that perceives individuals as merchandises.

Finally, the male characters in *The Hunt* recreate particular historical-male constructions in conflict. The Kuruba elders, Prasadji - and his son -, Tehsildar and Jalim illustrate the different male identities Kimmel proposes for Western societies. Even though Kimmel's and Cornell works are contextualized in America (mainly, in The United States), his analysis transcends other societies -like the Kuruba village in India- that have been taking part of an Occidentalization process. With few socio-historical variations in the way male identities have been constructed in the West, each of the main characters in *The Hunt* represents a particular archetype of the masculine images Kimmel describes.

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