

To Look Back Is to Suffer: The Lost 'Masculinity' of Esthappen in *The God of Small Things* and the Loss of a Conforming Childhood Memory of the Contemporary Young Men in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt at understanding the formation of "masculinity" apropos conflicting childhood memory with reference, first, to Esthappen in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and, second, to the young men in Bangladesh. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the "unusual" present as well as the split/shared memory of Esthappen to explore how he gradually develops a marginalized self and eventually stops claiming "masculinity." The formation and evolution of a person's childhood memories go through a culturally pre-determined gendering process. It is not rare that a person, like Estha, fails to survive the gendering of memory and is, thus, led to cling to an always-traumatic childhood to look back upon. The second section, referencing differing versions of "masculinity" and Jan Assmann's idea of "Cultural Memory," concentrates on the young men in Bangladesh who, like Estha, have experienced stunted development of subjectivity. Acknowledging the fact that these young men live in a different spatio-temporal and socio-cultural scenario, the section shows, based on a number of interview-based case studies, how culturally pre-determined gendering works on the development of male subjectivity. The third section places Roy's Estha and the young men in Bangladesh, the fiction and the fact, face to face to show how unconventional dealing with childhood memory may lead a male individual to resist or fail in conforming to the mainstream ideas of masculinity.

Introduction

Is it really possible to discover what remains hidden behind a silence?

At least two different answers to this question can be found in Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. The first answer is a "yes." You have countless paths towards the past of any silence; and the second answer is the opposite, a "no." It is impossible to cross the endless ocean of memories. The novel starts with Rahel's return to Ayemenem after twenty-three years of her separation from her twin-brother Estha who has gradually turned into a silent person. Roy manages to come up with a good number of random ways to reveal the past of Estha's life that precedes his wordless present. But at the same time it appears that to look back into the past of a silent person sometimes turns into a failure. Can any revisit to the world of memories be considered complete if it excludes (or cannot include) the dreams and the nightmares? Esthappen once asks his mother, "If you're happy in dream, Ammu, does that count?" (Roy 218). Estha has always felt that from a person's memory

dreams cannot be removed completely; and sometimes it happens that the memory itself fails to differentiate between a dream and a reality.

This paper intends to show how the way Estha constructs his memory deviates from any “normal” gendering process, leading him towards an “unusual” present. He seems to deny the normative definition of masculinity that demands a man to maintain “the social norm for the behavior of men” (Connell 70). Or he actually fails to survive the culturally predetermined gendering process, and thus is left with an always-traumatic childhood to look back upon.

Then the paper attempts at analyzing the development of masculinity (or masculinities) of contemporary young men in Bangladesh who, like Roy’s Estha, have gone through the essentialist and normative gendering process and have failed in conforming to “our culture’s blueprint of manhood” (Brannon, cited in Connell 70). This section includes several references to Jan Assmann’s essay, “Communicative and Cultural Memory” to clarify how these “de-masculinized” young men have to experience a differently normal present as they have failed/denied to deal with their childhood culturally and collectively. Acknowledging the fact that these young men live in a different spatio-temporal and socio-cultural scenario from that of Estha’s, this paper presents a number of interview-based case studies as some examples of the “process of emasculation”¹ of their memories and their “refusal or inability to perform hegemonic masculine identity practices” (Malaby 84).

De/gendering Human Memory

As the now-well-known distinction between sex and gender shows, unlike sex, gender refers to a culturally subjugated formation of a human self. And it has already been an established idea that “a human self is a diachronic identity built of the stuff of time” (Luckmann, cited in Assmann 109). So, when a child grows up, it absorbs both the culture and the time it lives in.

Now, if we narrow this discussion to the growth of a male child within a given time in a particular culture, it would be easier to internalize the focus points of this study. The emphasis is upon the culturally determined gendering process that every male child must go through and some examples of deviations from this process. In his essay, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” Jan Assmann contends that there is a dynamic relation between memory and identity. He also argues that human memory works on three different levels: individual, social and cultural. Of these three, cultural memory works as “a kind of institution” (Assmann 110).

Since gendering always includes an internalization of the cultural memory, as a boy lives on, he has to face the family, society, the norms and customs as well as history, tradition, myth, and religious beliefs. So a male child enters a web, even before he is born, of certain pre-ordained ideas, traditions and norms that he must conform to. The Freudian idea of id, ego, and superego suggests that the development of one’s self (ego) is a kind of maintaining balance between the individual (id) and institutional (superego). But not necessarily everyone will eventually be able to maintain the balance between this individual self and institutional education. Hence, there cannot be traced any single way of constructing memory. A conflict between individual memory and cultural (also collective) memory is always possible as they work like two opposite forces while storing images, sounds, smells, events, dreams, and thoughts in a person’s mind.

Suppose a boy is born Bangladeshi and belongs to the Hindu (or Muslim) religion. The construction of his memory must include the internalization of some Hindu (or Islamic) myths, legends, rituals, and beliefs as well as national beliefs, ideas, and images. But at the same time, as he is born with an individual unconscious, his memory will also try to store up his desire, dreams, nightmares, and individual thoughts. So, two different forces will work face to face. It is not necessary that the culturalization and socialization of a subject (here a male individual) will always be successful. Sometimes it may happen that the construction of individual memory with its own colors, smells and sounds overpowers the development of a socio-cultural memory. A quote from RW Connell’s 1987 book *Gender & Power* can help us to clarify the argument. She writes about gender formation: “Some cases will deviate because of the abnormal functioning of an agency of socialization ... the products of these deviations are homosexuals, transsexuals, intersexes and others whose gender identity fails to correspond in their usual way to their sex” (192). So, the deviations must be there to resist the power of the culturally determined gendering process of memory.

The Loss of a Conforming Childhood Memory

“Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat. Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language,” says Kimmel (148). For a man, the world has been narrowed down to a particular set of gender-based-activities. If you are born a man, you must not do or practice anything “feminine,” cannot show your emotions and feelings. You cannot sit with your legs crossed; you must avoid every sort of effeminate behavior. Even your childhood or boyhood memories must be very masculine. A man must have a vast recollection of playing outdoor games, fighting, running, cycling, etc. Otherwise his memory is more or less effeminate, and he is nothing but a “sissy.”

So, when the cultural reality is like this, what happens to the men who have been constructing a non-conforming memory; who have not followed or been able to maintain the socio-cultural gendering process of their memories. There occurs an unavoidable silence. The silence of Esthappen in Roy’s novel, in a way, indicates his possible loss of conventional masculinity and masculine memory. A number of young men of today’s Bangladesh are also practicing (rather being forced to practice) an almost bottomless silence as they cannot reveal their non-heterosexual identity and “womanish” childhood/boyhood memories in a world of strictly “compulsory heterosexuality².”

Esthappen’s Childhood and the Shared Memory

Rahel never wrote to him (Estha). There are things you can’t do – like writing letters to a part of yourself. To your feet or hair. Or heart.” (GOST 164)

Unlike the usual dizygotic twins, Rahel and Estha seem to share a single memory. In the novel, there are a good number of instances that show how they stay inseparably unified in spite of being physically taken away from each other after Sophie Mol’s death. And this shared memory always includes dreams and nightmares, pleasure and pain, love and hatred. Estha, as he shares his psyche with his sister, evolves into a “man womanly.”³ As he grows up, the conflict between a conventional, cultural way of storing the real events into his memory and his individual way of constructing memory (both from reality and dreams) gradually deepens. All the influences of the efforts made by the adults around Estha, including Ammu’s way of rearing and protecting the twins, eventually fail to build up a conforming masculine memory though his feminine other (Rahel) has been taken away; though he is separated from his mother and made to stay with his father. They think a boy needs a father to grow up as a “real man.” But in this very struggle between individual and cultural memory, eventually, the individuality wins and brings an unfathomable silence into Estha’s life and alienates him from the mainstream. As he is “re-returned” from his father twenty-three years later, we do not find the expected masculine self in Estha; rather his silence refers to his rejection or inability to take part in the culturally determined gender performance. All these years, actually, he has never been separated from his feminine other. The spatial distance between the twins has only succeeded in creating a silent young man with a divided psyche: both manly and womanly. Still Rahel lives in him. He still shares his dreams with his other self. “Now, these years later, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha’s funny dream” (2).

Recollection, Silence and the Lost “Manhood”

At one point, Ammu expresses her fear that Estha, her son, would eventually develop into a “male chauvinist” like her brother Chacko. As a mother, she appears to be over-concerned about the twins’ education. The shadow she throws upon Estha and his sister remains all through their life. Instead of a father, as in most of the families, here the mother plays the agent of the superego. She, present or absent, alive or dead, practices an overwhelming control over Estha’s entire life. It is also possible that Estha never dares/wants to disappoint his mother. That is why he never tries/wants to be a “chauvinist”; he actually never follows the footsteps of his father or uncle; rather he grows up like a “non-masculine” man. His obsessive cleanliness, his passivity, silence – nothing actually goes with his sexual identity. Very distinctively, he stays away from almost all practices of the “male chauvinist.”

Estha’s rejection or inability to become a male stereotype very evidently appears through his activities in school. He starts studying at a boys’ school in Calcutta after his return to his father. One of the major observations of the teachers about his schooldays is that he “does not participate in Group Activities” (11). It suggests, in a way, that he does not participate in the “masculine” or “would-be-masculine” activities of the boys in the school. He

deviates from the hetero-normative way of growing up, unlike most of the male students of his age; and gathers different feelings, different images, different sounds, and hues to be stored in his memory. For him, to look back upon the days in school will be completely different.

And he eventually refuses to attend any college after finishing the school with “mediocre” results. Surprisingly, much to the initial embarrassment of his father and stepmother, Estha begins to do the “housework” which is traditionally considered very unusual for a man. This “womanly” aspect of a young man, who at one stage was expected to turn into a “male chauvinist,” includes doing “the sweeping, swabbing and all the laundry.” Maybe this very emergence of the hidden feminine self of Estha finally leads him to the quietness that “reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms” (11).

In his book *The God of Small Things: A Saga of Lost Dreams*, K.V. Surendran, while discussing the character of Estha, points out that “The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man episode was something more than what Estha could bear ... the episode continued to hover over his mind from which he never had an escape” (48). At the movies, because of excitement, he starts singing loudly and his very strict mother tells him to go out and sing. As he appears in the lonely lobby of the cinema, the man who sells drinks there makes Estha hold his penis until his hands get “wet and hot and sticky.” It is quite probable that this anecdote remains in his memory as a threat to his masculinity, and eventually makes him question his existence as a heterosexually social man.

De/gendering of the “Split Generation”

The 1990s of Bangladesh reared a special generation (according to western terminology, they can be referred as Generation Y or Millennials⁴) who can also be termed as “the split generation” – “split” because their memories contain two different times. The first half of their life belonged to a local culture with hardly any global intervention, without much dependence on technology. They were growing up listening to the local radio, watching only the national television and enjoying the movies made in Dhaka. But the second half of their lives has gone through a huge cultural change and a technological revolution. They gradually turned into a technology-obsessed generation. So, in their very memory, there has always been a battle between these two opposites. At the same time, the gendering process of this generation, because of this in-between condition, has never been like that of the others. The culture a generation belongs to, the things they receive in the forms of entertainment and education play a very significant role in shaping the memory and the gender-traits of the generation. This part of the paper will concentrate on the males of this generation and the cultural influences on them as they evolve into adults with a “split” memory.

Connell’s idea of “gender multiculturalism” (234) refers to an inclusive de-gendering process. She suggests that to place the non-hegemonic gender identities, it is not always necessary to delete the hegemonic ones. Sometimes, it is possible that in a person’s mind, there coexist two different ideas regarding masculinity. A man of this young generation may assess his gender identity from both a local point of view and a global one because he has experienced both.

To clarify these ideas, in the next section, I will bring some real-life case-studies based on the interviews of some contemporary Bangladeshi young men who represent a “silent” part of the millennial generation: the homosexuals and bisexuals. Due to privacy reasons, the case studies will be presented anonymously.

Non-conforming Case Studies

- a. This young man, now aged 25, grew up in a small town. He fell in love at a very tender age with a girl studying in the same school. But, within a very short time, he discovered he is actually attracted to boys. So, all of his crushes, from that time on, were men of different ages. Unfortunately, he is still single and the relations he tried to establish with his crushes have never been successful. Now he is going through a terrible mental agitation. But, in one sense, he seems to be very confident as he thinks he is still quite masculine. He has a very strong mental power and can repress his desire whenever it is necessary. When he recalls his boyhood, passed in the 1990s, he becomes more or less confused. The past was very silent in the sense that, in those days, he never talked to any single person about his sexual preference.
- b. This man says he has always been bisexual. Even in the early years of his life, he was aware of this fact. He considers himself as a very good-looking guy, and he thinks this actually has been helping him a lot to find

- “friends” (sex partners). But he is still not sure about one thing – to whom he feels more physical attraction, male or female. Since his culture and religion will never permit him to get married to a man, he is now trying to stay away from same-sex relations. He still remembers his first sexual encounter with a boy of his school. “It was a boys’ school far from my home,” he says. And he thinks the experience still disturbs him. It has even become a kind of threat to his masculine identity.
- c. This young man was molested several times in the 1990s as he was a very innocent-looking “cute” boy. His first experience was very bitter as it was forced sex at a very tender age. He used to attend a music school once a week. And quite unexpectedly, his music teacher abused him more than once. He has been carrying that traumatic experience within him all these years. Now he is a well-established person, and is in a relationship with a wealthy man. He does not believe in the hetero-normative definition of masculinity. He says human memory is very inclusive and it can carry anything: both “normal” and “queer.”
 - d. This one is actually a diary-entry (translated from Bangla), dated 17 April 2002, of a young man instead of an interview based case study. He wrote it at the age of 14: “It is a very calm night of Baishakh. Everyone has fallen asleep. A very sweet breeze enters my room through the window. A moonlit night it is. I’m feeling like singing; feeling like thinking about someone. I seem to be able to think of only one person. Maybe he is the only friend who really loves me. But beside him, I love another person, a girl. It eventually hurts me if I think of her. She is not what a girl should be like. She seems to be quite unnaturally strict and rough. I’ll never have any opportunity to express what I feel for her. Maybe it’s natural that you won’t get what you want. Normally, in this world, nobody cares for nobody. But I am an exception. My best friend is another. He is that single person for whom I live on.”

Two Silences: Fiction and the Fact

The case studies of the previous section, like the case of Estha, talks about silence created partly because of the conflict between the cultural reality and individual feelings, partly because of their split memory consisting of two opposite forces, male-female or local-global⁵. In the novel, Estha withdraws himself from the outside world because his ego cannot maintain the balance between the id and the superego. Estha has to go through a very harsh reality which he cannot accept. To live without the feminine part of his psyche (Rahel) is quite impossible for him. Still he is forced to continue a compulsory “masculine” life which he, after a long struggle, rejects to live. Thus, his silence has turned into a protest against the hegemonic concept of masculinity.

And all these men mentioned above are passing their days very silently as they cannot reveal their real sexual preference in public. Like Estha, they are also bound to separate themselves from the hetero-normative world. The people of the outside world do not allow a man to be sexually attracted to another man. They “are a kind of gender police constantly threatening to unmask (these non-hegemonic men) as feminine, as sissies” (Kimmel 148). These case studies also present diverse opinions regarding the culturally determined gender roles. The first and the third man share an almost similar kind of attitude towards their own gender-identity. Both of them refuse to accept the hegemonic definition of masculinity. The second case along with the last exhibits a partially hegemonic point of view regarding gender performance. But still all of them are connected to Estha because they, more or less, deviate from socially pre-determined gender formation; because, in every case, the individual memory overpowers the socio-cultural.

Conclusion

Constant or forced silence is, in most cases, harmful. It has an unbelievable power to unsettle the pleasure of living a life. For Estha if he were not made to leave his sister and mother, his life could have been different. It is never possible to understand what a silent person really wants to have. His dreams and desires never come to light. The events, images, thoughts, sounds he has gathered all through his life remain untold, neglected.

For the young men mentioned in this study, silence has created some unexpected complications. A good number of men of this generation are living in a constant threat of breaking the silence. The fear of being termed a “sissy,” “faggot,” and “abnormal” haunt them at every moment. For them to love has become a very secret activity of life.

The question was “Is it really possible to discover what is hidden behind a silence?” The answer should be a bit strategic. Even if it is never possible to find out what makes a person remain silent throughout life, we should at least try to break this kind of unbearably destructive silence. It is time the voiceless had a voice.

Notes

1. Emasculation normally means the process of removing the external male sex organs. The meaning can be extended to the way of making a man feel less than a man or to make a man think differently of his masculinity.
2. Adrienne Rich popularized the term “compulsory heterosexuality” in her essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” She argues that society forces every person to be or remain heterosexual.
3. In her 1929 essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf suggests that it is necessary for a person to have both masculine and feminine feelings. “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple. One must be a woman manly and man womanly.”
4. William Strauss and Neil Howe, in their book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, coined the term “millennials” for the generation born between the early 1980s to early 2000s. But this paper will use, to adapt with the Bangladeshi context, 1985 as the beginning birth year and 1995 as the last birth year for the “millennials.”
5. People of this particular generation are living in a temporal diaspora that makes them fluctuate between two different ways of experiencing the world. The rapid globalization has been playing a dominating role in this case.

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