

# Cornered men and toxic masculinity



THE MIDDLE PATH  
ADNAN R AMIN

JUST after we had graduated to secondary school, a new boy joined our class. This new entrant was of pale, white complexion, had shiny, silky hair and walked like a girl. His spotless uniform and filed nails made the other boys feel like...well, lesser animals. After tiffin break, when all the boys smelled of sweat, dirt and mischief - a gentle whiff of Nivea wafted from his person. The fascination continued for a week. Slowly, the students began to realise that he avoided contact sports, refused to learn or repeat dirty words and abstained from planned disobedience in class. Slowly, the entire class' attitude changed.

It started with whispered taunts and escalated to bullying and scuffles to the point where teachers had to intervene. On multiple days, he was sent home weeping, his mother confused as to what her boy had done wrong. The teachers knew what it was, but had no language to discuss it.

As most of us already know, boys who are (mis)identified as 'effeminate' often become prey at an early age. They are mockingly called *hijra* (hermaphrodite), 'gay', 'ladies', 'half ladies' and other perceived derogatory terms. They are punished for not being 'manly enough' and are excluded from social circles and activities that produce and reinforce masculinity.

The social reaction to effeminate boys relates directly to the construction of masculinity. 'Gender' (masculinity, femininity) is a social construct i.e. it is not inherited at birth, but taught subsequently. Through gendered names, colour-coded clothes, gendered toys, resource allocation and nurturing of ambitions - gender is socially imparted. A boy is a boy not because of his anatomy, but because he was constantly taught to be so.

In essence, masculinity is the idea that a man is the opposite of a woman, and that certain symbols and behaviours are warranted to demonstrate this difference. *Think about*

these norms: men don't cry; they don't dance or take money from their wives; it's unmanly to wear makeup or bangles; men fix things; they fight wars. Simple enough, right? But millions of such rules give a surprisingly consistent meaning to manhood almost all over the world. Men compete on these criteria and receive various socioeconomic rewards (or punishments) within patriarchal systems.

As per Connell's 'Hegemonic Masculinity' framework, a number of characteristics are encouraged in men: violence / aggression, stoicism (emotional restraint), courage, toughness, risk-taking, adventure and thrill-seeking, competitiveness, and achievement and success. Not without its share of criticisms, the hegemonic masculinity framework provides some understanding of what could constitute an ideal male. It tells us that a man is a provider, protector, builder, fixer and adventurer.

Masculinity is a big deal, and men are far more concerned about preserving it than women are with femininity. Researchers Bosson and Vandello (2011) write that femininity functions more as a (biological) state, while masculinity is a status. In fact, they argue that masculinity is a terribly fragile status that can be dismantled by a single unmanly act. The social sanctions against defying male role expectations appear to be harsher too. This means that masculinity must be constantly reinforced through masculine attitudes and behaviours.

Fragile masculinity has been under assault from a number of directions for centuries now. Anthropologist Peter McAllister in his tongue-in-cheek book *Manthropology* argues that Neanderthal women had 10 percent more muscle mass than the modern European man. Usain Bolt, he says, would be outrun by ancient aboriginals. Other studies show that modern men are substantially weaker than they were even 30 years ago. Present day workouts regimes, muscle-building, steroids, body-revealing clothing and gym-selfies are all ways of compensating for the loss of physical strength. Readers may want to search the hashtag #MasculinitySoFragile for more similar instances.



ILLUSTRATION: MOYUKH MAHTAB

The market for keeping up masculine appearances is at its peak. While all this sounds innocuous enough, there are darker expressions of masculinity, giving rise to the notion of 'toxic masculinity'. Toxic masculinity advocates stricter punishment for 'deviant' men, forceful subjugation of women and the use of violence to maintain the status quo.

Add to this the fact that men and women now enjoy similar citizenship benefits and work similar jobs. Instruments of politically and economically excluding, and thus, dominating women are becoming less effective. Naturally, this creates a sense of anxiety in men. It creates confusion as to how they should assert and reassert their gender identity.

The capitalist mode of production - by marketing rugged clothing (denims, hoodies), guyliners (eyeliners for guys) and heavy metal music - exploits this very vulnerability. The market for keeping up masculine appearances is at its peak. While all this sounds innocuous enough, there are darker expressions of masculinity, giving rise to the notion of 'toxic masculinity'. Toxic masculinity advocates stricter punishment for 'deviant' men, forceful subjugation of women and the use of violence to maintain the status quo.

Because heterosexuality is an essential ingredient of mainstream masculinity, any alternative idea or arrangement elicits derogatory and exclusionary treatment. In Bangladesh,

work on HIV-AIDS prevention reveal that Bangladeshi men who engage male sex workers (MSWs) are typically married (to women) and have heteronormative social identities. Due to the (perceived) centrality of sexual orientation in determining gender, they are compelled to keep their practices separate from their gender identity. It is the only way to save face. Thus readers will start to see why 'effeminate' boys in school are marginalised: they conform fully to neither entrenched gender roles and thus become threats to both.

Toxic masculinity is even more dangerous for women. As it is, masculinity feeds off of subjugating women as an underclass that acts as a symbol of male conquests. In Bangladesh, female council members are sometimes 'controlled' by their husbands. Female workers tend to turn over their earnings to husbands. Men's sense of masculinity still remains deeply tied to girls' / women's bodies and sexuality. As new strains are applied to this connection, men are likely to respond with coercion: dictating what women may wear and where they may

go. With further loss of power, things could take a more violent turn. Sexual harassment, acid-throwing or rape are all common forms of violence against women that potentially originate from male powerlessness. It could partially explain the spike in physical and sexual violence against women in this region.

All around the world, sexual assaults, gun violence and terrorism as a product of toxic masculinity have been making the headlines. Some schools of thought recommend dismantling the gender dichotomy altogether. But the boundaries and practices of masculinity in Bangladesh are unique as they are useful: e.g. our masculinity rebukes paternal absenteeism and prescribes caring for ageing parents. But in the absence of avenues for advocating social change, violent expressions of masculinity could easily surface. That is why it is important to study these expressions independently of imported discourses, and advance ideas for rooting out the toxic elements.

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## The "Me" factor

SHIFTING IMAGES  
MILIA ALI

CONSIDER the following situation: You meet someone at a social event and within seconds you are subjected to a monologue about her posh home, luxury car, high performing kids and a doting husband. There isn't even a veiled attempt to inquire about your wellbeing - the stream of self-centric conversation just flows on and on. You may not always have the option of walking away without coming across as rude. So what do you do?

Whenever I am on the receiving end of one of these boastful chatters, I tune-out and let my imagination wander off. I am reminded of the Greek myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. There are two versions of the story, but they essentially have the same ending - when Narcissus realised that the image was his own, he lost his will to live. He kept staring at his reflection until he died. The term "narcissism" is now used to mean "the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes."

A social encounter with a narcissistic personality can be emotionally draining. These people are not only self-absorbed, but they love giving theatrical performances that demand your attention. The one thing they all

have in common is an utter lack of empathy. They live in a cocoon believing that the world revolves around them.

The ancient Greek myth about Narcissus tells us that this is not a new phenomenon. However, some experts are of the opinion that narcissism has now reached the proportions of an epidemic. This is not surprising given the several avenues for self-propagation that the social media has opened up. While the syndrome may be more endemic among the young even the older generation is afflicted by the malaise. They are fast catching up with their selfies, exaggerated descriptions of exotic vacations and embellished accounts of mundane accomplishments posted on Facebook, Instagram and other sites.

Faced with the challenges of inflated egos and unbridled boasting, therapists and self-help gurus are raising red flags about the dangers of a less humane world. But how can we arrest this phenomenon when many of our leaders are practicing and promoting narcissistic behaviour? One cannot deny that Donald Trump's haughty expression, braggadocio and narcissistic comments continue to impress more than 40 percent of the American electorate. I am not insinuating that all of Trump's followers are narcissistic. But there has been a noticeable increase in traits such as materialism, low empathy, egocentric self-view and selfish disregard for others among the general population. It appears that the

future lies in the hands of people who can shout the loudest, brag in the most shameful ways and have very little compassion for the less fortunate and those who choose to maintain a semblance of modesty.

As an antidote to this epidemic, many may remind us of the myth of Narcissus and the dangers of living a life where all that counts is "me". I would, however, like to cite a different story from a different age - Rabindranath Tagore's *The Skeleton*

(1926) about a young widow who dies and her skeleton is then donated to a school for anatomy lessons. The protagonist, who appears as a supernatural being, narrates her sad tale. Widowed as a child, she returned to her father's home where she matured into a beautiful young woman, desired and coveted by men. Realising the power of her beauty, she became vain, but was increasingly frustrated by her widowhood that denied her the privilege of accepting a man's love in a

conservative Hindu society. When a male doctor rented part of her house, she began to enjoy his adulation, often using seductive wiles to attract his attention. She was upset to learn about the doctor's impending marriage. On the night of his wedding, she stole some poison from his office and added it to his drink. She then wore her bridal attire and took a dose of the poison, hoping that people would admire the attractive smile on her lifeless face and grieve the death of the beautiful woman they had ignored in her lifetime. The story tragically ends with her lament: "But where is the wedding chamber?... Where is the bridal costume and the smile? I woke up to a hollow rattling sound inside me and noticed three young students using my skeleton to study human anatomy.... And there was no sign of that last smile on my lips".

Morbid as it may sound, isn't this the fate that all of us must suffer? No matter how beautiful your smile is and how much admiration it evokes, ultimately it is "dust into dust...suns song, sans singer and sans end".... But, alas, myths and stories only give us fleeting moments of introspection - we seldom learn lessons from them. The "high" that self-admiration yields for most individuals far outstrips these reflective moments. And, we humans fall into the same trap over and over again!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

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ILLUSTRATION: MARCO MELGRATI

QUOTABLE Quote

BARACK OBAMA

Even the smallest act of service, the simplest act of kindness, is a way to honour those we lost, a way to reclaim that spirit of unity that followed 9/11.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Door parts
- Lack of nursery rhymes
- Concerning
- Suppress
- Edison's -- Park
- Loosen, as laces
- Green fruit
- Put into words
- Shellfish from Alaska
- Shove
- Drinks noisily
- Bold poker bet
- Winter weather
- Was inclined
- Tardy
- Lefty
- Flying mammal
- Infamous emperor
- 44th president
- Come up
- Portion out
- Cuzco people
- Note from the boss
- "Bye Bye Bye" band

DOWN

- Jelly's kin
- Lincoln nickname
- Work wk. start
- Heavy lash
- Impassive
- Sounds of delight
- Bit or wordplay
- Hamelin problem
- Nepal setting
- Those folks
- Miniver
- Relaxing resorts
- Void
- Norway's capital
- Voice boosters
- Harvest
- Antifur org.
- Hearty dish
- Newborn baby
- Bill word
- Prepare for a game
- Big snakes
- Skilled
- Story
- Pop's mate
- Quite cold
- Jacinto
- PC key

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

5-28

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SCARS LAMAR  
TAPINS AGAVE  
OMEGA BORES  
REMARK ARE  
ERANTRUST  
DANDERIDE  
BREED  
SPRUCE WIT  
THERMAL ENO  
HIT PINATA  
ALICE NOSES  
LOTAS EVES  
SHEDS SALTS

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott