

**MEN AND MASCULINITY: A POETIC NARRATIVE****Shivangi Gautam****Designation** - Junior Research Scholar**Department** - Department of English and Modern European Languages**University** - University of Lucknow**Email** - shivi.duggu.20@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

"The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't weigh gender expectations." (Adichie, 2014). In contemporary times, hyper-independence and anti-feminism have been marked as major features of masculine gender. The gender expectations have led the men to be excessively violent, aggressive and discriminatory against all the other genders. The stigma of toxic masculinity has been attached and feared. Masculinity is a wide and complex concept, and cannot be contained in the traditional, culture-specific sphere for long. The negative reverberations of traditional masculinity have culminated in the term- Toxic Masculinity. This research paper attempts to study the aspects of Toxic Masculinity as presented in the poems- First Light by Chen Chen and Duplex By Jericho Brown. The next two poems - Coniferous Fathers by Michael Kleber Diggs and If by Rudyard Kipling throw light on the kind of masculinity and fatherhood we need to facilitate the positive masculinity that is inclusive and gentle. The poems have been briefly analysed. The paper distinguishes the language and conventions that frame men and masculinities and provides an insight into the conflicts of the changing nature of masculinities through the stated poems.

**Keywords:** Men, Masculinity, Gender Expectations, Toxic Masculinity, Hyper-Independence, Anti-Feminism, Gender Roles, Contemporary Masculinity, Violence, Aggression, Discrimination, Stigma, Toxic Masculinity in Poetry.

As progressive as we are today, discussing gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights is a normal part of our daily conversations which we hold as a standard of modernisation and also being a means to be of a higher strata. Working on laws and sciences to bring out the best of humanities has sidetracked us into changing definitions of THE NORMAL. Sometimes the normal seems to get the best of us, sometimes THE NORMAL has been ruthless and insensitive for so long that we forget what the initial truth is. Contemporary times have given us the freedom to reimagine everything to our convenience and desires. A direct positive impact of that is we have liberated ourselves from THE NORMAL. For centuries, a man was considered the bread earner, the tough guy, the rock, the provider. But with these titles, also came the concept of toxic masculinity. Often men have been closely associated with toxicity, aggression, insensitivity, unfamiliarity with feelings, cruelty and repressed emotions. The term itself was first coined by Shepherd Bliss during the mythopoetic men's movement in the 1980s. He coined the term- 'Mythopoetic' which itself has been taken from the Hellenistic Greek word- 'mythopoeia' which roughly translates to - 'myth-making.' ( J.R.R Tolkien previously coined the term - Mythopoeia in the literary niche during the 1930's) The mythopoetic men's movement was a self-help therapeutic movement, like a string of personal, group and community activities were launched and held to help a man regain his mental, spiritual and intellectual health. These activities were largely influenced by the Jungian concepts for an improved mental psyche of men who had lost their connection to their masculinity and existence. Since its inception, the term 'toxic masculinity' has been used and misused in various ways to

determine the probable cause of men's toxic behaviour. The outrage and negative connotations of the term has impacted a common man's image and presence in every field of human existence. Toxic masculinity implies that a certain set of characters and behavioural patterns of a man are detrimental to other people around and produce a fear or pose a danger in people. These characteristics could be physical, intellectual and emotional. The rough and tough build-up, hoarse voice, thick muscles, heavy beard, good physical strength and zero display of any weakness are the prime features of a 'real man', and anything apart from this is considered feminine or unmanly. This is where toxicity creeps in when the 'real men' bully anyone who lacks any of these characteristics. But with the role of social media and activism today, this phenomenon of toxic masculinity is being criticised and also being purged. People are becoming more aware of it and the first impact of such moral changes is always on and in literature. Further, this paper explores four poems which talk about the vulnerabilities and requisitions of gentle masculinity, a kind of masculinity which stands opposite to toxic masculinity and is what humans should be striving to have.

Chen Chen is a queer writer who is a native of China but has lived the life of an American citizen. He is an established poet and authored the famous- *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2017) which won the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize. 'First Light' by Chen Chen explores the concept of fear of emotional vulnerability in men. The poem is in free verse, describing his life events in a crux. He has assembled some major events of his life and executed them in brief lines filled with funny metaphors. He talks about uncertainty and also the fragility of men in emotional scenarios of life. His poem - *First Light* is based on an autobiographical note, wherein he describes his life when he left China at three. He doesn't remember much, but he already fills the gaps in his memories with some humorous cliches of kung fu movies.

*I like to say we left at first light,  
we had to, my parents had been unmasked as the famous  
kung fu crime-fighting couple of the Southern provinces,  
& the Hong Kong mafia was after us. I like to say  
we were helped by a handsome mysterious Northerner,  
who turned out himself to be a kung fu master.*

Chen navigates through the poem and life and shares his very first memory of self-isolation and the emotional upheaval of not being manly enough. He writes, that at the age of 13, he was disgusted and slapped by his mother for not being a 'man'. He was accused of being diseased and was insulted. Often Men are shamed for crying and expressing emotions of sadness or fear. The pressure of gender roles and gender bias put men in a cage of emotionless space, where crying is an ultimate weakness and tears are a waste of water trickling down the cheeks. But we see Chen exploring and putting down his pain and suffering beautifully in a string of words that explain to us his plight. The words explain to us the mental agony and emotional fright which caused him to run away from home only to return at first light. He distinctly remembers this incident as the time he cried and sobbed and this memory pops up first when he says he does remember something about crying.

*What do I remember of crying? When my mother slapped me  
for being dirty, diseased, led astray by Western devils,  
a dirty, bad son, I cried, thirteen, already too old,  
too male for crying. When my father said Get out,  
never come back, I cried & ran, threw myself into night.  
Then returned, at first light,*

The phrase- 'already too male for crying' shouts out at the solid stigma attached to a male's cry. male have to strongly guard their mental status and pose in strength for manhood's sake. Chen flies in a different direction. Chen believes, accepts and continues to put his feelings first and is not ashamed of crying even though he was made to believe it. A pervasive normal man's behaviour is to not cry because crying damages self-worth and reliability to be in charge of emotions and mental toughness. Chen targets this crude mentality through the humility of his poem and the normalcy of his tone while describing his emotional fallout. The societal conditioning of a man's psychological aspect of crying is now being diluted as we see literary pieces like Chen's poems which initiate a dialogue around a man's 'supposed inability' to cry.

Chen's poems discredit a major characteristic of a man- to not cry! And very subtly cusps a man's true thought turning into a tear just because he can! Chen has remarkably put his little seed of emotional revolution within us and we water it, removing a toxin of masculinity.

The next poet that rereads masculinity is Jericho Brown. Brown won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2020, which established him as a groundbreaking poet already. He has authored three collections of poetry, by far - *The Tradition* in 2019, *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014) and *Please* (New Issues, 2008). Jericho Brown is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award and fellowships from The Academy of American Poets, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Jericho Brown has often written about hope and fear and the choice to come out of misery only after you reflect on it. He has explored a lot of themes including black lives, identity, gay and queerness, social justice and human rights. This paper looks at a very short yet thought-provoking poem of his- *Duplex*

*A poem is a gesture toward home.  
It makes dark demands I call my own.  
Memory makes demands darker than my own:  
My last love drove a burgundy car.  
My first love drove a burgundy car.  
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.  
Steadfast and awful, my tall father  
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.  
Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark  
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.  
Like the sound of my mother weeping again,  
No sound beating ends where it began.  
None of the beaten end up how we began.  
A poem is a gesture toward home.*

This poem has a complex structure which has a mirroring effect of words, Brown uses the word mark twice and builds a relationship between his father, first lover and a car. The metaphors used are so strong and dependent on each other to bring out a larger meaning of the poem and in turn, explain the essence of the poem. The narrative is cyclic which shows his inability to escape a certain pattern of violence which began from his father. Brown's father is the first person to treat him with violence, a major attribute of manhood according to the patriarchal notion of society. A general trademark of toxic masculinity has been the term- 'toughness' what an essential definition of toughness that is to be physically stoic and aggressive. According to Bordieu (2001),

masculine domination often internalises symbolic violence. Brown has been a constant victim of this violence which has made marks on his body and scars on his memory. The resurfacing of the toxic violence coming from very important men in his life explains the masculine domination and the aggression which has been drilled into the personalities of men culturally. Home is generally considered a place of one's safety and warmth, and Brown puts out a contrast as the head of this home, his father made this place unsafe and cold for him. The words- 'dark demands' trace out the inhumane circumstances of his survival at his home. '*None of the beating end how we began*' shows the permanent damage that this violent behaviour and the toxic father and lovers have endowed on Brown, ruining his psyche and body. Brown has put out a vivid picture with his words. The poetic nostalgia might provide a catharsis of the current life, but it also calls on the torturing male domination and the unhealthy pattern of mental trauma that Brown suffered from. Of Course, he has grown out of it beautifully, being a voice of millions by penning down poems like these, but also he essentially brings out the vulnerabilities of men and manhood which derogates everything around it. He stands for a more gentle form of masculinity which appreciates people around him. His poems have been a source of pleasure reading, cathartic effect and nostalgic relief.

Both of the poems, *First Light* by Chen Chen and *Duplex* by Jericho Brown are first-hand expressions of versions of masculinity they witnessed. The kind of masculinity we all witness from time to time. The severity of these toxic masculinities has affected them in different ways, redirecting them to a better way of being masculine and a kind human at the same time. These poems show us a picture of the society which keeps promoting the harsh side of masculinity making it more common. These poems are an attempt to make society realise the damage and distress because of this kind of promoted toxic masculinity. The toxicity of these behavioural issues might not be uprooted right away but they can be improved and diluted the right way with kindness and awareness regarding the harmful patterns. The next two poems are a certain kind of poetic manual for nurturing masculinity the right way. To improve on the prospects of a gentle king of masculinity: a gentleman in true senses.

*Worldly Things*, authored by Michael Kleber-Diggs, has been awarded the 2020 Max Ritvo Poetry Prize. His contributions have appeared in *Water Stone Review*, *Midway Review*, *Lit Hub*, *Rain Taxi*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. He is a teacher of Creative Non-Fiction and Poetry. Diggs has very beautifully written a poem with such sentimentality and softness that it melts in the hearts of the readers, his first line-

*Let's fashion gentle fathers, expressive—holding us  
how we wanted to be held before we could ask.  
Singing off-key lullabies, written for us—songs  
every evening, like possibilities.*

Diggs has urged the readers to invoke a gentle touch at fatherhood, fathers who are not rough and tough and hold a child like a rock, but like fathers who sway them to the musical rhythms of lullabies, in the continuing lines he says, how fathers should keep the babies near to their chest, holding them breathlessly and humming tunes of happiness so that the child is calm. Diggs has created an imagery of a father playing blissfully with his baby, holding it like the most precious thing in the world. The image at once fulfils the wish that Jericho Brown or Chen Chen must have while growing up.

*Let's grow fathers from pine, not oak, coniferous  
fathers raising us in their shade, fathers soft enough  
to bend—fathers who love us like their fathers*

*couldn't.*

Diggs' use of metaphor is very direct and meaningful. He offers to explain the kind of fatherhood one needs uniquely. Oak is a hardwood tree, very resistant and does not bend easily, similar to the fathers of past ages who were not flexible enough to show humanity, only resilience from every kind of emotion and feeling. Pine trees are durable, have more shade and are very lightweight, similar to the fatherhood that Diggs wants to instil in the modern fathers of today who can support the child's emotional needs and are ready to face any challenges just to protect their child, instead of bullying the child into becoming a hard-wired person devoid of any emotional connect. Diggs further wants to fill in the gap between the generations of fathers with more tenderness and affection.

*Fathers who can talk about menstruation  
while playing a game of pepper in the front yard.*

Diggs beautifully slides in this line which means more than said/written. Proximity with the feminine energy and appreciation for women around should be thought of. Care and concern for the women in one's life could be the basic etiquette which could be taught. Diggs wants new-age fathers to be open about the menstrual health and hygiene of their daughters. This line stands out in the development of the poem because it makes the reader stop for a moment to look at the profound thoughts of the poet.

*Let's kill off sternness and play down wisdom;  
give us fathers of laughter and fathers who cry,  
fathers who say Check this out, or I'm scared, or I'm sorry,  
or I don't know. Give us fathers strong enough  
to admit they want to be near us; they've always  
wanted to be near us.*

Diggs proposes the idea of relaxed fatherhood, a fatherhood which is not uptight and suffocating. He wants fathers to laugh and cry and be honest with every emotion to their kids. He wants the fathers to be honest about getting scared or unable to do a task or to simply learn something new from their kids. Diggs measures the strength of the modern men not in holding back emotions or without tears, but by the desperation that fathers show for the kids to be around and bonds built over time.

*Let's create folklore side-by-side  
in a garden singing psalms about abiding—just that,  
abiding: being steadfast, present, evergreen, and  
ethereal—let's make the old needles soft enough  
for us to rest on, dream on, next to them.*

Diggs wants a masculinity which is subtle and steady. He wants today's men to have the kind of masculine energy that the children are fond of and not afraid of. Diggs presents a distinctive picture of masculinity. Painting a metaphorical picture of the forest just like The Superior, which is dense and vast but also has so much to offer. He writes that a father builds up the person his kids would come from and nothing could be more impactful than having a nurturing masculinity to feed the child's personhood and societal knowledge of relationships and families. And that Diggs mentions that would not come from just sitting in the next room, reading a newspaper. It would come from actively involving oneself in the life of the children, participating with them in everyday life to make them learn things and to strengthen the bonds. Diggs specifically unravels a layer of masculinity that builds on the section of society which holds gender roles

rigidly. Dominance of toxic masculinity overplays every role that a man undertakes. Diggs breathes in fresh air of poetry to make us rethink gender roles responsibly. And there comes a time when childhood comes to a halt and a father has to prepare his child for the rest of his life. Our next poet and poem is about the right advice and life mantras for a man who is yet to become.

Rudyard Kipling, the man who made our childhood worth reminiscing, the author of *The Jungle Book*, wrote many more short stories and poems. His writings had a detailed description of Indian landscapes and jungles. He is an icon in children's literature. Recipient of The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. *Life's Handicap* (1891), *Many Inventions* (1893), *The Day's Work* (1898), *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904), *Actions and Reactions* (1909), *Debts and Credits* (1926), and *Limits and Renewals* (1932), are some of his short stories collection that have their background set in India. *If*, is one of the most famous and loved poems of Kipling. It was first published in *Rewards and Fairies* in 1910. He was written to boost the morale of the British soldiers who had failed a mission in South Africa. It is essentially written in one single sentence with the structure of a conditioned statement. Kipling has shaped fatherly advice into a genuine poem. Kipling starts the poem by telling a certain young man to keep his calm in difficulties even if others doubt him. He should not be hating anyone or lying about or to anyone, even if he is being lied about. He has to patiently wait and trust himself all along the way. He should keep his wisdom, honesty, humility and determination. And most importantly,

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

Kipling stresses on self-perseverance because he believes it to be the prime virtue of a Man, the poem inculcates an idea of a real man or real tenets of true masculinity. The true traits of an ideal man lie nowhere in his physical abilities or body shape and size. The real manhood lies in the virtues and moral grounds on which he grows. Kipling has not mentioned any single bodily feature to be associated with masculinity. He instead has focussed on character building and mental strengthening, which makes this poem a complete piece of advice for a young man who is about to explore the world with his bare mind.

All the poems have depicted and defined a different shade of masculinity, which is crucial for human existence. The field of men and masculinities is gaining recognition globally. Masculinity need not be associated with toxicity anymore, and with time more positive virtues need to be affirmed with it so that they have a scope of development. All these poems not only fill pages in a literature book, but they are also a manual or guidance for men to understand the fragility of the scenario. In this gender transformative area, the roles of men and masculinities need to be redefined for a better outlook on life and the sustenance of all genders and sexual identities. Masculinity needs to be more inclusive. Traditional masculine gender roles and responsibilities need to be redefined according to the needs of the hour. For a long period, toxic masculinity has been used as a threat, insult, swag, a way of living, a cultural mindset and a slang term. It is now, we understand that it has been the repressed rights of other genders and age groups that toxic masculinity directly impacts. The exaggeration around masculinity is mostly hyped by the emotions of dominance, aggression, sexism and competitiveness, while Brown, Chen, Kipling and Diggs give preference to a gentle, inclusive, healthy kind of masculinity which learns to encourage and add positivity. Undoing Toxic masculinity is a rigorous and constant process, it requires accountability self-evaluation, and the spirit of reconstruction of a modern inclusive man.

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