

Queer Masculinity and the Unheard Voices of Men in the Novels of R K Narayan and Manju Kapur

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Abstract— *This paper argues that the novels of R. K. Narayan and Manju Kapur, though rarely read together, record a recurring figure: the Indian man who cannot or will not perform hegemonic masculinity and whose inner life the narrative nonetheless registers. Using “queer” in its broad critical sense, as a mode of reading that tracks deviation from normative gender and desire, rather than as a claim about the authors’ characters’ sexual identities, the paper reads Narayan’s Malgudi novels and Kapur’s middle-class family fictions to show how male vulnerability, tenderness, failure, and homosocial attachment are placed at the margins of narration, and how both writers make those margins audible. Yet the comedy repeatedly shades into a quiet record of masculine distress. The early *Swami and Friends* (1935) provides a useful starting point because it shows boyhood as a school of masculinity. Swami’s friendships with Rajam and Mani are intense, jealous, and physical in the way of childhood bonds, and the novel’s most serious emotional crises are not about girls at all but about male loyalty, rivalry, and shame. When Swami is humiliated by his headmaster and father, the narrative lingers on his fear rather than turning it into a lesson in courage. Here masculinity is not a possession but an examination that the boy keeps threatening to fail. The homosocial world of the school, with its cricket team, its hierarchies, and its public punishments, trains him to value toughness while the narration quietly values his tenderness.*

Introduction:

Indian English has long treated women’s silence as the defining problem of gender in the novel, and in doing so has left a corresponding silence undisturbed: that of the men. Manju Kapur is routinely read for her daughters, wives, and mothers; R. K. Narayan is routinely praised for a benign comic realism in which gender dissolves into the cadences of small-town life. Neither judgment is wholly wrong, and neither is adequate. Both novelists record, with more rigour than their reception admits, a recurring figure: the man who cannot or will not perform hegemonic masculinity. He is hesitant, dependent, grief-stricken, or emotionally starved; he fails as provider, patriarch, and lover. His voice is unheard in a double sense, for the characters around him do

not attend to it, and the criticism has not troubled to listen either.

This paper contends that queer theory supplies the method for hearing it. The claim must be stated precisely. Neither Narayan nor Kapur offers a sustained portrait of a self-identified gay man; Kapur’s *A Married Woman* concerns love between women. “Queer” therefore denotes a reading practice, not an identity: one that tracks failed gender performance, desire in excess of the family script, and the policing of male intimacy. Drawing on Connell, Butler, Sedgwick, and Nandy, the argument examines Narayan’s *Swami and Friends*, *The English Teacher*, *The Guide*, and *The Vendor of Sweets*, then Kapur’s *A Married Woman*,

Home, and *Custody*, and concludes that both writers make the margins of manhood audible.

Thematic Comparison

Manju Kapur writes a later, more overtly political fiction, set in the cities and joint families of north India during Partition, the post-Independence boom, and the turn to Hindutva politics. Her best-known concerns are women's education, marriage, and desire, but her men are not simply foils. Many are trapped by the same family system that constrains women, and their silence is part of its machinery.

A Married Woman (2002) is the obvious starting point for any queer reading of Kapur, because it follows Astha from conventional marriage to a passionate relationship with the widowed activist Pipeelika Khan. Astha's husband Hemant, a successful and unimaginative businessman, embodies hegemonic masculinity: he is a provider, a family man, and a defender of household order. Kapur depicts him not as a villain but as a man who has never been asked to examine his role. His emotional range is narrow, and his failure to notice his wife's inner life is a form of ordinary patriarchal blindness. When Astha's relationship with Pipeelika becomes known, the family's response reveals how fragile this masculinity is: it depends on a wife who remains inside the script. The novel's most important male counterpoint is Aijaz, the Muslim street-theatre director whose work Astha admires and whose death in communal violence around the Babri Masjid dispute binds the personal story to national crisis. Aijaz's killing marks the cost of a politics that polices male bodies along religious lines, and it is a reminder that Hindutva's ideal of virile Hindu manhood is built on the scapegoating of other men. Although the novel's erotic centre is between women, its map of masculinity is richly differentiated, and it shows how heteronormativity and communal nationalism draw on the same fantasy of the dominant male.

Home (2006) turns to a Delhi business family, the Banwari Lals, and the household politics of a saree shop. The novel is attentive to how sons are shaped by the joint family. The brothers Yashpal and Pyare Lal inherit business and responsibilities they did not choose, and the competition for authority between brothers is central to the plot. The younger generation includes Vicky, who sexually exploits his cousin Nisha, and Raju, who is made to take the place of a son in the household without an authentic claim to it. The book recognises that the family's male members are not equally powerful; some are made to serve, to wait, and to be silent. Importantly, the novel includes the abuse of Nisha by a trusted male relative as a quiet condition of home life, and the household's response, which is to suppress rather than to confront it, shows how male privilege is protected by collective silence. Yet *Home* is also sympathetic to the men

who are made to carry the family's expectations, particularly in its portrait of the elder brother's fatigue and anxiety about inheritance. The men are not heard because speaking would reveal how much the family depends on their performance of confidence.

Custody (2011) moves to the world of corporate India and the breakdown of a marriage. Shagun's affair with her husband's boss and her decision to leave her husband Raman provide the plot, but the novel's emotional force lies in the aftermath, when the children become the objects of a legal battle. Raman is a case study in the wounded middle-class man. He is rejected, he loses the narrative of himself as a successful husband, and he is forced to confront both his own fragility and the legal system's indifference to his grief. The book is hard on Shagun, but it is also unusually attentive to the male experience of being left. The cuckolded husband is a stock figure of comedy, and Kapur removes the comic frame to show the pain. The boss, Ashok, by contrast, is shown as a man for whom marriage is a series of reconfigurations rather than commitments, and the contrast clarifies how class and power shape what a man can afford to feel. Even here, though, the unheard man is not simply the injured husband. The children's father figures, the lawyers, and the extended family are all enlisted in a contest over what a proper father is, and the novel is shrewd about how that contest reduces men and women alike to roles.

The Guide (1958) offers a more complicated case because its protagonist is a performer who crosses categories. Raju begins as a railway-station guide, a talkative go-between who survives by pleasing others. His career is built on adaptability: he shapes himself to whatever his clients want. His relationship with the dancer Rosie then reverses expected roles. Rosie's talent and ambition define the partnership, and Raju becomes her manager, publicist, and dependent. Her art, not his, is the engine of their prosperity, and when she grows independent Raju's sense of self collapses. He forges her signature and goes to prison. The novel's final movement, in which Raju is mistaken for a holy man and gradually embraces the role of sage, deepens the performative texture of his masculinity. The villagers' reverence makes him, finally, a different kind of man: ascetic, fasting, and weakened. The novel presents this transformation with irony, but it also grants him a quiet dignity. Raju's masculinity is always a performance, and the book never pretends otherwise. In Butler's terms, he reveals gender as a script a person may repeat, revise, or be trapped by.

The Vendor of Sweets (1967) tests masculinity at the level of the father-son bond. Jagan, a Gandhian sweet-seller who has withdrawn from ordinary ambition into a private philosophy of renunciation, cannot understand his son Mali,

who returns from America with a Korean-American companion, Grace, and plans to manufacture story-writing machines. Jagan's own asceticism makes him a puzzling patriarch. He is gentle, evasive, and given to abstraction, and his authority rests more on habit than on command. The novel reveals how little he knows of his son's life, and how little his son knows of his father's inner world, which is shaped by the long absence of his wife and the memory of an early unresolved life. When Jagan finally abandons his shop and walks toward a retreat, the gesture reads both as spiritual freedom and as escape from a masculine role he cannot play. His voice, which the town hears only as shopkeeper's patter, is in truth a voice of grief and bewilderment. RK Narayan does not present the unheard man as a rebel. He is comic, hesitant, and often self-deceiving. Yet the narration's refusal to punish his deviation from the norm, and its patient attention to what he feels, makes Malgudi a space where non-hegemonic manhood can exist without being named a problem. The silence is not an absence of voice but a texture of the prose, which listens for what the men themselves cannot say. Although masculinity might be thought of as a state of voice – command, assertion, public speaking – one of the most striking things that has emerged in the last four decades of gender research is that dominant masculinity is constructed as much as it is asserted by silence. The man who embodies the hegemonic ideal is the man who does not speak of fear, tenderness, doubt or of desire outside the narrow channel of the mastery of the heterosexual man. The subject of this essay is two concurrent silences and voices that pierce them. The first is the silence of queer men over desire, whose desire is unspeakable, denied by law, religion and social sanction in much of modern times. The second less said, is the muteness which silencing imposes on men in general, gay or straight, the "emotional muteness" that hegemonic masculinity demands.

Theorizing Queer Masculinity

The concept of queer masculinity has to start with R. W. Connell's formulation that the term helps to describe a field of relations, rather than a single entity. Along with this, Connell separates a "hegemonic" masculinity, the culturally privileged masculinity that legitimates men's dominance, from the "subordinated" and "marginalized" masculinities that it distinguishes itself from, such as gay men's masculinity. Hegemony is not brute domination here but the production or construction of consent – most men are not the ideal, but most men are complicit in this, and the subordination of gay masculinity is one way in which the ideal polices its own borders. So, queer masculinity, in this sense, is first of all a position, a structural position, the outside that shapes the inside.

This relational image is radicalized by Judith Butler's theory of performativity. But if gender is not the expression of a prior essence, but rather a repeated stylisation of the body, a citation of norms that will create the impression of a natural core, then in principle the norm of masculinity might be cited other ways (Butler). Queer masculinity takes advantage of this citational flexibility, in which manliness is dislodged from its presumed heterosexual-male basis, and the entire configuration is revealed as a construct and not a fate. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick joins them. Tackling the "homosocial continuum"—the seamless yet violently contested continuum between "men bonding" and "men desiring"—Sedgwick uncovers the centrality of intense male bonding in patriarchal culture and the desperate attempts to deny it its erotic content, which makes homophobia the armour of male solidarity itself (Sedgwick). The closet, on this reading, is more a public building of knowledge, around what perhaps is not spoken, than a private secret (Sedgwick, *Between Men*).

For the culture as a whole, Sedgwick's later efforts ratchet up the pressure of this hush. She separates a "minoritizing" perspective that defines homosexuality as a problem of a small, fixed minority, from one that was "universalizing" in which the hetero/homosexual definition is an unstable fracture located in each one of us (Sedgwick, *Epistemology*). The distinction is important for the argument here because it is on the universalizing view that queer masculinity isn't a topic for the closet minority, but rather what it is: a series of statements about desire, disavowal and secrecy that frame the identity of every man, not just the one who claims to be queer. The unheard voice is not the voice of a minority group but a pressure on masculinity in general, in other words.

Lastly, Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* breaks the tie between masculinity and men entirely, claiming that masculinity is a set of accessible codes that are not just made by women and butches, but also used by them, often in a manner that makes masculinity and its male identity seem natural (Halberstam). Together, these thinkers make it possible to define queer masculinity in two ways: the masculinity lived by men who do not conform to the norm, and a critical lens that reveals the need to exclude, disavow, and keep silent to make manhood appear natural. The second sense to which this essay mainly aspires is queer masculinity; there, the unheard voices of men are aspects of a single problem.

Unheard Voices and the Architecture Of Silence

What makes silence so special? The wittiest response comes from Michael Kimmel's essay "Masculinity as Homophobia". But for Kimmel, in an era when men are supposed to be less interested in women, and more

interested in one another, masculinity is a performance for a male audience that cannot finally be obtained, and its dominant emotion is fear—fear of being perceived as unmanly, that is, as gay (Kimmel). This leaves a system of hints and counter-hints. To be a man is to hide: to hide weakness, need, anything that might seem feminine; and to police that hiding in others with the common cruelties of insult, mockery, exclusion. This is not a part of the masculinity, this is the masculinity. What feminism failed to acknowledge for a long time, however, is the profundity of the male anguish this engenders, anguish that can't be accurately described for fear of losing the manhood it exposes. Here these two silences that were mentioned at the beginning unite. The straight man is silenced by a code that prohibits him tenderness; prohibition silences the gay man; and both are ruled by the same homophobic logic, it is the fear of the queer, the “unmanly” that makes both of them mute.

Although Narayan and Kapur differ in period, tone, and politics, they share an interest in how social institutions shape masculine behaviour. Narayan's Malgudi is a world of small enclosures, the school, the shop, the household, the temple, and his male protagonists are defined by the pressure to perform within them. Kapur's world is more crowded and urban, and its enclosures are the joint family, the marriage, and the nation. In both, men struggle with the mismatch between an inherited script of authority and their own less confident selves.

Their methods of listening differ. Narayan relies on irony and gentle detachment, which allows him to include male weakness without dramatizing it. The effect is to normalize non-hegemonic manhood: Krishna's grief, Raju's theatricality, and Jagan's withdrawal are rendered as aspects of ordinary Indian life rather than as pathologies. Kapur, writing under the influence of feminism and in a more polarized political climate, is more explicit about structural harm. Her men are often agents of patriarchal violence, and she holds them accountable. Yet she also shows their vulnerability, and in doing so avoids the reductive equation of masculinity with domination.

A queer reading further highlights the role of homochirality. In Narayan, the affectionate bonds between boys and the loyal but unspoken attachments of men to their teachers, friends, and sons are consistently rendered with warmth. They are never sexualised, and the novels offer no explicit queer male desire, which the historical context of colonial and early postcolonial censorship makes unsurprising. Yet their intensity shows what Sedgwick calls the continuum between homosocial and homoerotic bonds, a continuum the surrounding culture keeps carefully policed. In Kapur, homosocial relations are more often competitive, as among

the brothers of *Home* or the professional peers of *Custody*, and they enforce the norms that the novels criticise. Where she does represent same-sex love, in *A Married Woman*, it is between women, and the novel's relative silence on male same-sex desire is itself a significant limit. A fuller queer literary history of Indian English fiction would need to read these novels alongside works by writers who do centre gay men.

There is also a difference in how voice is distributed. Narayan's narrator often speaks in a free indirect mode that permits sympathy with confused, ordinary men, whereas Kapur's narration tends to move among a wider range of focalisers, giving women the greater interiority while letting men appear largely through action and dialogue. This helps explain why Kapur's men are “unheard” in a more literal sense: the form itself gives them less room. A reader who attends to the gaps, to what Hemant, Raman, or Yashpal fail to say, can reconstruct a portrait of masculine constraint that the novels imply rather than state.

It's not the law or the pulpit that silences the people, it is the everyday business of life. It runs on one of its more benign forms—taunt from the schoolyard, ranking from the locker room, and using the word “gay,” and its less benign synonyms, as the universal term for “failure”—before boys can begin to learn what they are avoiding. As Kimmel says, this policing is continuous because manhood is never earned but has to be re-earned in every encounter, and the cheapest and easiest way to earn manhood is not to feel it, and to make someone else feel it (where possible). Such a masculinity can not afford to look inward, after all, that is the first commandment it has denied itself. The silence thus becomes a self-perpetuating one: the man who could crack it is trained to hear what is happening in his own mind as a danger. Thereafter, Sedgwick's closet is not only the gay man's issue, it also provides a general epistemology of masculinity—the structuring of the sayable and the unsayable that influences the speech of all men. That is why queer masculinity is not a peripheral issue of the study of men, but a privileged perspective on it: a perspective from which the architecture of silence becomes evident, and is most blatantly challenged. In this essay, the focus is on the archive, the archive that has best captured that refusal; the archive of literature.

The Literary Archive of the Unheard Voice

The voices of queer and vulnerable men have been muffled in public discourse, but not in literature; indeed, the act of preserving the voices in literature is in turn the subject of the discourse, and the act of preserving in the name of delay, secrecy, or in the name of an impossible listener. The prototype is E. M. Forster's *Maurice*. The novel, written in

1913-14, was too late for Forster to publish, and did not appear until after his death in 1971, and well past the period in which Forster lived (Forster). The moral of happy marriage between the lovers who crossed the class barrier was an irrepressible virtue, and Forster knew that the novel's insistence on this was irreflexive; why this should be, why a novel about gay love which refused to take tragedy he could not have foreseen. The novel's publishing history is in this way a continuous theme with the novel, and the voice that is not heard is one that is actually heard, one that is documented as a fact of the archive.

Giovanni's Room is a poem of silence from within the closet mind of James Baldwin. In retrospect, the American in Paris (David) tells of the love affair he cannot claim to and the shame that makes him flee and leave his lover, Giovanni, to be swept into catastrophe (Baldwin). The confessional first person carries the weight of all things American manhood wouldn't admit, desire and dependency, the inability of the flight into respectable heterosexuality, including exactly what the man of this novel doesn't want to say. Dramatically, silence is used in Tennessee Williams. Brick's alcoholism and his grief over his dead friend Skipper evoke an attachment the play never actually calls by its name; Brick's own characterization of the world's evasions, "mendacity," indicts a whole culture of the unsaid; and the homoerotic truth at the heart of the drama is structurally unsaid, though it organizes everything around it (Williams). The strength of the play is just in that it's what you don't say.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* carries over the tradition into today and the voice that isn't heard is perhaps the most literal of all. The novel is in the form of a letter from the narrator to his mom, who is not able to read English and thus can't read it (Vuong). The narrator pours his queerness, the tenderness for the boy Trevor, and the weight of war, migration, and addiction, into this guaranteed silence. The epistolary form, which explicitly comments on the earlier texts, is no less significant than the novel itself because it renders the queer male voice, which has been listened to yet not heard, audible to the listener, while also rendering audible the earlier texts, which have been listened to yet unheard. Over the course of one hundred years, then, the literary archive not only represents queer manhood, it is also the enactment of the drama of its belatedness, its coded address, its address to the unreachability.

A Doubly Unheard: Postcolonial Queer Masculinity

Queer masculinity is silenced in the postcolonial world, and especially in India, with a second history on top of the first. Colonialism imposed a hyper-masculine ideology which belittled the Indian man as effeminate and aggressive potency the measure of the modern man, as Ashis Nandy has demonstrated (Nandy). It was the same colonial order

that had criminalised "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 and thus brought a lawful silence that would only be broken by the Supreme Court's decriminalisation of consensual same-sex relations in 2018. This queer Indian man was thus double-muted: a law of the colonial regime made his desire a crime, and a national manhood made it a betrayal of cultural authenticity. His desire was both double-muted—first by a colonial law that declared it to be a crime, and second by a national manhood that declared it to be a betrayal of cultural authenticity.

Conclusion

The relationship of queer masculinity and the unheard voices of men is therefore not a juxtaposition of two distinct issues, but the naming of a single structure from two perspectives. Hegemonic masculinity maintains its power by deciding what a man can not say, both about his desires and attachments, and about his pain; it will force a queer man into subordination and it will force a straight man to be muted. Theory suggests that this silence is unmasked and disrupted by queer work, specifically the work of Connell, Butler, Sedgwick and Halberstam, whose work exposes manhood as a policed construction and not a given; and imaginatively, in a literature that ranges from Forster's post-humous novel to Baldwin's confessions, Williams's withheld word, Vuong's unreadable letter, to the recovered and contemporary voice of queer India.

Reading Narayan and Kapur together reveals a shared if uneven attention to men who do not fit the dominant model of Indian manhood. Narayan's Krishna, Raju, and Jagan are men whose tenderness, performance, and withdrawal expose the artificiality of the masculine ideal, while Kapur's Hemant, Raman, and the men of the Banwari Lal household show how that ideal is enforced by family, marriage, and communal politics. Neither writer is a queer novelist in the narrow sense, and this paper has not claimed otherwise. The argument has been that queer theory offers a method for hearing what these novels register at the margins: male vulnerability, affectionate male bonds, and the quiet cost of conformity.

These voices are not voices that can be heard out of the way. These voices are listenable voices, an ethics of listening, an ethics of listening to what a culture has been set up not to listen to. While masculinity has long been conceived as the right to speak, the voices which remain silent serve as a reminder of the other kind of freedom, the freedom, at last, to be heard. That freedom is the promise of queer masculinity and not just for gay men, but for anyone who has been taught to be silent by the code of manhood.

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