

# Desire and Denial: Masculinity Crisis and the Politics of Intimacy in *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi

Graciana Kathryn S<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Shantichitra<sup>2</sup>

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India.

ORCID iD: 0009-0008-7468-9580, [kathy2152000@gmail.com](mailto:kathy2152000@gmail.com).

2. Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai, India.

ORCID iD: 0009-0008-4917-6564, [shanthik@srmist.edu.in](mailto:shanthik@srmist.edu.in).

## Abstract

The present research explores the issue of intimacy and masculinity crisis in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's memoir titled *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016) using the theory of hegemonic masculinity by R.W. Connell. According to the paper's main postulate, hegemonic masculinity constructed by society in India is inherently fragile in its confrontation with male lust for a transgender person. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research detects the presence of four major themes in *Red Lipstick* (i.e., desire and denial, secrecy, power disparity, and emotional labour). Based on these themes, it is possible to conclude that the characters of the men depicted in the book tend to pursue intimacy in private and disown it publicly in compulsive manner. By referring briefly to the ideas of Butler regarding gender performativity and Sedgwick about the closet, the paper demonstrates that *Red Lipstick* becomes an essential field for understanding the disruption of hegemonic masculinity due to the presence of transgender individuals.

**Keywords:** *hegemonic masculinity, transgender studies, masculinity crisis, intimacy.*

## Introduction

The interaction of transgender studies with masculinity studies in relation to non-Western autobiographical texts is an aspect that requires more investigation and has implications on an academic level. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a well-known Indian transactivist and a famous hijra, provides a rich theoretical discussion about how men failed in their attempt to handle their desire for her in her autobiographical work entitled *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016). The failure and attempt to handle their desire generate what this paper refers to as a 'masculinity crisis': a structural crisis in hegemonic masculinity, which Tripathi's men should address, cover up and finally ignore. *Red Lipstick* is not a conventional love story. It is a candid autobiographical account of men who loved Tripathi secretly, exploited her, desired her with intensity but feared the social consequences, and ultimately chose normative conformity over genuine intimacy. The text is, in this sense, not merely a personal narrative but a sociological document; one that exposes the inner workings of hegemonic masculine identity in contemporary India with a precision that academic sociology rarely achieves. It reveals how masculinity, far from being stable or natural, is a precarious social construction requiring constant performance and the active suppression of destabilizing desires.

This paper argues that the men in *Red Lipstick* experience precisely this crisis. The central thesis is as follows: masculinity, as represented in Tripathi's memoir, is inherently unstable and enters a structural state of crisis when confronted with desire for a transgender woman, exposing the performative, fragile, and deeply contingent nature of hegemonic masculine identity.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The foundational theoretical framework of this paper rests on R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Developed in *Masculinities* (1995) and *Gender and Power* (1987), Connell's theoretical framework posits that masculinity is a product of society rather than biology and operates in relation to a hierarchy of gender practices. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell describes it, is 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' (77). It operates in accordance with cultural norms

## **Desire and Denial: Masculinity Crisis and the Politics of Intimacy in Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi**

and expectations, becoming hegemonic not by way of coercion but of consent, whereby the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as heterosexuality, emotional restraint, and economic provision, are naturalized.

Connell posits that there are many masculinities operating in relations to each other, one of which includes gay masculinities. Gay masculinities exist 'at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men' (78), devalued in their failure to prove unambiguous heterosexuality. In Indian society, transgender femininity is positioned in this regard in such a way as to be simultaneously near and separate from the category. It is indeed, excluded from the normativity of it.

The most important aspect in relation to this research question is Connell's theory of the "crisis tendency" in gender order systems based on hegemonic masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt note in their reevaluation of this theory in *Gender and Society* from 2005, it must be emphasized that hegemonic masculinity influences men in their "embodied" and "psychic" realms (852). This is an important point because in *Red Lipstick*, crisis takes place not in men's behavior but in their desire. An additional source of insight comes from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (25). Since hegemonic masculinity is constructed through performance in the first place, the crisis experienced by these men in *Red Lipstick* is one of performance itself, where the carefully choreographed act of heterosexual masculinity begins to fall apart under the strain of repressed desires. Another important point to make is that these men are also in a form of closet created by themselves, though one in which they hide not homosexual desire, but transgender feminine desire.

### **Research Gap and Research Questions**

While the extensive existing literature on hegemonic masculinity and trans experiences is indeed rich and detailed, a notable gap arises when it comes to the interconnection between these two concepts. More specifically, the issue of male sexual attraction to transgender women causing a dilemma in hegemonic masculinity has yet to be systematically studied by academics. Moreover, within the South Asian context, despite the abundance of Indian narratives of transgender lives, they have yet to attract academic attention related to the issue of masculinity. This research seeks to fill that lacuna head-on.

The following are the research questions guiding this analysis:

- (1) What creates a sense of crisis regarding hegemonic masculinity due to male desire for Tripathi, and how are these crises articulated and handled within the texts?
- (2) What secrecy and denial tactics do the men use in their management of the discrepancy between private desire and hegemonic masculinity?
- (3) How does hegemonic masculinity come into play within these power imbalances between Tripathi and the various men in her life?
- (4) In what ways does *Red Lipstick* reveal the precariousness of hegemonic masculinity, and what can this tell us about transgender and masculinity studies in the South Asian context?

### **Analysis**

#### **Desire and Denial: The Structural Conflict at the Core of Red Lipstick**

The central struggle in Tripathi's book involves the repeating cycle whereby men desire her, become involved with her on a personal level, and then, just when she can publicly claim some recognition for herself, they deny it. While this series of events may seem like a string of personal ethical problems, it clearly demonstrates, within Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, how a man must present himself to the world as being heterosexual no matter his true sexual desires. In Tripathi's autobiography, she candidly describes how brutally honest she is with herself about how intense the desire for her is among men in the privacy of her bedroom. This is no ordinary, selfish desire but a deep-seated love that even these men cannot help controlling in the midst of the moment and which they themselves are unable to rationalize. But such is the nature of the intensity of their feelings that the denial becomes more painful. The very same men who confide in her in private that they feel she is a woman like no other turn out to be strangers, or worse, enemies when it comes to the possibility of making her presence public. This

## **Desire and Denial: Masculinity Crisis and the Politics of Intimacy in *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi**

act of denial has various forms. First, it appears as social denial, where Tripathi's presence in public places is denied. The second form is verbal denial, whereby the man, when confronted by either his family members or colleagues, outrightly denies that there is any association between him and Tripathi. The final form is hostile denial, where the man, having felt threatened by the possibility of being exposed, turns his anxieties about the threat he faces as a result of his masculinity into hostility towards Tripathi.

### **Secrets as Self-Protection: Managing Masculinity**

The notion of secrets also comes hand-in-hand with desire and denial as part of the process of managing the contradiction between forbidden desires and hegemonic masculinity. Every single one of the men who enters into an intimate relationship with Tripathi demands secrecy as a prerequisite for the existence of such a relationship. It is a relationship that is built on secrecy, as much as it can articulate in private. The model presented by Connell helps to explain the structural significance of secrecy. In order to ensure hegemonic masculinity, one needs social validation; identity as a male affirmed by the acceptance of others in one's peer group (Masculinities 79-80). For an acknowledgment of a desire for a transgender woman to be made public would be devastatingly detrimental to social validation. By keeping the relationship secret, the men in question have insured their status within the social hierarchy, despite the fact that they are consistently violating many of its rules. In regard to Sedgwick's "closet" theory, the men in the film are creating a closet of their own, hiding desire for a forbidden gender in conditions socially conditioned to punish such desire.

The price to pay for such secrecy falls primarily on Tripathi, who has to submit herself to invisibility as a means of access to intimacy, bear the emotional weight of being a secret, and renounce any hope of achieving the normal social validation of an affair. While the secrecy maintains his masculine identity, it also marginalizes her, thus creating in the private sphere the same gender hierarchy upheld by hegemonic masculinity in the public realm.

### **Power Disparity and Emotional Work**

A third significant theoretical dimension revolves around the power disparity in Tripathi's intimate encounters. In his theory of hegemonic masculinity, Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is a power system that exists beyond the mere ideal of masculinity and extends into material reality. The power system remains intact in the private sphere, where it may even be intensified through intimacy.

The men who come across the life of Tripathi have generally higher social, economic, and institutional status than she has. Being a hijra/transgender activist in India, she faces a lot of systematic oppression against her in terms of work, housing, and legally. However, in the case of the men who want her, they are privileged in terms of society: they are economically powerful; they are professionals; they enjoy institutional power and social prestige, things that Tripathi does not enjoy. In cases where economic dependence exists, it is neither random nor coincidental because it is an outcome of the economic deprivation faced by hijras.

The fourth theme relates to emotional labor, its gross inequality, and the inability of one party to reciprocate the emotional needs of another. According to Connell, "a key feature of hegemonic masculinity is emotional stoicism," such that hegemonic masculinity cannot be weak and must hide their emotions in such a way as to imply their weakness (Masculinities 79). These individuals are experiencing emotional turmoil; they love, desire, and yearn for Tripathi; but the hegemonic code forbids them from expressing such sentiments fully or at all. There is, therefore, a skewed emotional balance whereby Tripathi's labor emotionally remains unreciprocated.

### **Discussion**

In applying Connell's theory to *Red Lipstick*, a number of interesting results emerge. Firstly, and perhaps most fundamentally, Tripathi's story provides evidence for and supports the key point made by Connell's theory namely, that hegemonic masculinity is unstable and prone to crisis. Indeed, the male characters in *Red Lipstick* do not operate within hegemonic masculinity without effort; rather, they struggle to manage the crisis they create through their obsession with Tripathi.

Second, it becomes apparent that hegemonic masculinity requires constant maintenance even in the private sphere. Traditionally, the idea of hegemonic masculine performance has been defined as an expression of power and

## **Desire and Denial: Masculinity Crisis and the Politics of Intimacy in Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi**

heterosexuality in front of others. However, *Red Lipstick* shows that such performance is necessary even during the most intimate encounters because the recognition of any form of desire other than heterosexual desire within such a private relationship poses a challenge to the identity structure from which it is impossible to withdraw cleanly. Thus, the work extends Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity by showing how the issue of its crisis goes far beyond the public realm.

The third and likely the most political lesson to be gleaned from Tripathi's autobiography is the gendered burdening of costs involved in masculine crisis. In the event that a man's sexual interest in the transgendered woman brings about a crisis of masculinity, the man alone does not shoulder all the burden; rather, the transgendered woman, already marginalized by virtue of her position in the gender hierarchy, takes on an even greater burden of invisibility, denial, manipulation, economic risk, and the perpetual subordination of her sexual needs to those of his masculinity performance.

Another level is provided by Butler's concept of performativity. Since gender is "performatively constituted and not something 'essential' to the individual who ostensibly 'has' or 'possesses' it" (*Trouble with Gender* 25), then the problem of the men in *Red Lipstick* is one of failure to perform, when an act performed in accordance with a heterosexual script meets resistance it cannot reconcile. Through these stories of masculine failures of performance, Tripathi gives her readers access to a truth about hegemonic masculinity that its actors could not know, because they do not possess it the truth of masculine identity as constructed, unstable, and hard-won.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this essay, through the interpretation of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's novel *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* in light of R.W. Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity, has established that masculinity is an unstable, constructed, and precarious social institution that becomes structurally destabilized whenever faced with the sexual desire for a transgendered woman. In the process, four interrelated thematic axes have emerged as those most crucial to the construction, negotiation, and management of such a crisis within the novel: desire versus denial, secrecy, power dynamics, and emotional labor. The book *Red Lipstick* holds an important but underappreciated place in gender studies literature. In being a memoir written by a transgender woman whose work focuses on the gendered encounters of the male figures around her, *Red Lipstick* represents a rare instance of an insight into the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity that could not be gained through sociological or literary analysis alone. The research gap this paper attempts to fill the lack of scholarship investigating the connection between the crisis of hegemonic masculinity, attraction towards transsexual women, and Indian life writing is a gap whose filling is significant far beyond the realm of academia. Given that transsexual rights continue to be controversial within contemporary India and that masculine insecurities, as explored within *Red Lipstick*, persist in causing harm in both symbolic and physical form, then the ability to analyze these crisis tendencies of hegemonic masculinity through theory serves not only academic purpose but can further the cause of social change.

### **References**

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Carrigan, Tim, et al. "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity." *Theory and Society*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1985, pp. 551–604.
- Connell, R.W. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Connell, R.W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–859.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- Namaste, Viviane K. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

**Desire and Denial: Masculinity Crisis and the Politics of Intimacy in Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life by  
Laxmi Narayan Tripathi**

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. 2nd ed., Seal Press, 2017.

Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*. Penguin Books India, 2016.

Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Duke University Press, 2007.