

**Reconstructing Masculinity and Femininity in Amin Maalouf's
*The First Century After Beatrice***

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Abstract

The approach of Gender Studies as a critical theory has chiefly been to resolve the dilemma between masculine and feminine. Under the aegis of feminist studies, women's social and political identity is analysed especially as it is expressed in literary texts. On similar lines, Men's Studies or Masculinities Studies is also a recent offshoot of gender studies dedicated to scrutinizing the myths and markers of masculinity and manhood. The basic need to establish this branch of study is the realization arrived at by feminists that ultimately it is the man who has been conditioned with wrong notions of masculinity. Unless this kind of conditioning is done better, women have to deal with the existing patriarchal version of man. It does not mean that earlier attempts have not been done to comprehend manhood, yet his soft side has not indeed been probed. When Simone de Beauvoir remarks in her ground-breaking work, *The Second Sex*, that "One is not born a woman rather one is made" (1949), no one paid attention to the fact that the same can be said of man as well. Unless man discovers and accepts his original and naked self, his contaminated form would keep raising problems for men and women. This paper researches this above theory with reference to the novel of Amin Maalouf *The First Century after Beatrice*.

Keywords: Amin Maalouf, *The First Century after Beatrice*, Masculinity, Patriarchal society, Gender studies, sharing responsibilities.

In this field, R. W. Connell's foundational work marked a significant progress in understanding the basis behind masculinities. The first attempt made towards analysing problems of masculinity was centred on division of labour. There happened to be a clear demarcation between male sex role and female sex role. It became popular when in nineteenth century debates women's liberation was resisted by a scientific doctrine of innate sex difference. R. W. Connell writes, "Women's exclusion from universities, for instance, was justified by the claim that the feminine mind was too delicately poised to handle the rigours of academic work". (49) Its consequences were not measured at that time. When women were exiled from the public sphere, the extra burden of responsibility fell on the shoulders of men which resulted in various diseases like anxiety, disorder and sometimes even depression. From this doctrine is born the stereotype that only man should earn for the family:

In relation to production, masculinity has come to be associated with being a breadwinner. This definition will come under pressure when it becomes impossible for men to win the bread. Structural unemployment is now a reality for considerable parts of the working class, especially youth. Young working-class men without regular jobs were therefore chosen as a third group. (Connell 118)

Women could have shared this responsibility, but they were not allowed to. In the present time, therefore, more men suffer from unemployment anxiety rather than women because for them employability does not define their lives as men's lives are defined by it. "The male role literature took it for granted that being a breadwinner was a core part of being masculine". (Connell 56) For men, problems of hair loss, growing baldness, premature old age syndrome, anxiety and depression are some of the direct offshoots of this theory of masculinity. Though there is no denying the fact that this same theory of masculinity privileged man with more social power and liberated him from household chores and child-care responsibility, but it also made his personal experiences with family bitter and irritating.

This sex role theory is justified with time in reference to the biological sex differences. Therefore, masculinity and femininity do not remain mere two sexual categories but become two distinct ways of social behaviour. In this context, R. W. Connell states:

The idea that masculinity is the internalized male sex role allows for social change, and that was sometimes seen as role theory's advantage over psychoanalysis. Since the role norms are social facts, they can be changed by social processes. This will happen whenever the agencies of socialization – family, school, mass media, etc. – transmit new expectations. (51)

When researches are conducted on how new expectations have made the experiences of men more troublesome in the society, it comes to the surface that it also induced a conflict within masculinity born out of unmanageable social expectations.

With the advent of feminism especially in academia, female sex role theories were questioned. "But it was now generally assumed that the female sex role was oppressive, and that role internalization was a means of fixing girls and women in a subordinate position". (Connell 51) Such raised consciousness among women soon resulted in a gradual consciousness among men as well. Consequently, it was argued that male sex role was oppressive too and it ought to be changed or abandoned. Books that came in the 1970s were based on this oppressive aspect of sex role theory. As far as its impacts are concerned, its effects can be seen on both men and women. The self of the individual is burdened by the pressure of the role associated with it. "The concept of sex role identity prevents individuals who violate the traditional role for their sex from challenging it; instead, they feel personally inadequate and insecure". (Pleck 42) Thus, there is a dire need in sex role theory to change its orientation. This is high time when man has to violate the social code of masculinity so that a new and fresh identity is born, more consistent and mutually coordinating.

In this context, Amin Maalouf's *The First Century After Beatrice* published in 1992 is very significant in carrying out a different image of masculinity. Translated into English from French by Dorothy S. Blair, this novel is reviewed by Ziauddin Sardar as follows:

May your name live forever and a son be born to you. The ancient Egyptian prayer is elegantly transformed into a modern parable by Amin Maalouf. *The First Century After Beatrice* is a brilliant and succinct contemplation on what happens when modern science is placed in the service of medieval prejudices and traditional wisdom is abandoned in favour of contemporary expediency.

The book, on an apparent level, is a fascinating narrative about gender and population politics set in the initial decades of 21st century. The story of the nameless narrator who falls in love with a free-spirited woman raises certain questions about masculinity. He seems to be from a new branch of men who influenced by feminism transformed themselves into caring and soft men.

Amin Maalouf breaks a number of myths in this novel regarding the existing notions of masculinity. At the very outset, the narrator who is an entomologist defies the view that public life is the sole zone of the man. He may stay at home and still be constructive. He states:

This introduction may lead you to think I belong to the race of great travellers: a date on the banks of the Nile, a jaunt to the Amazon or the Brahmaputra . . . Quite the contrary. I have spent most of my life at my desk, my travels have been, for the most part, between my garden and my laboratory. For which, moreover, I have not the least regret; every time I applied my eye to the microscope, this was like setting out on a voyage of discovery. (5)

While describing his relationship with his beloved Clarence, the narrator makes certain useful remarks which are important enough in defying gender stereotypes:

In spite of all I have just written, I shall be close to the truth when I state that Clarence's beauty had little influence on our subsequent relationship. Not that I am, or ever have been, devoid of aesthetic sense, God forbid! But the only thing that can permanently attract me is the intelligence of the heart, providential if it is clothed in beauty, moving if it is not. (16-17)

The narrator is sapiosexual but it does not mean that Clarence is blind to her feminine aesthetic beauty. Amin Maalouf has portrayed the character of Clarence in a very diligent manner capturing the very essence of a fully-fledged individual. The narrator describes his first encounter with Clarence, "My visitor burst out laughing, she looked at me in the way any man would like to be looked at by a woman. Exhilarated, excited, reassured by seeing her replace the cap on her pen and put it away". (19)

The novel offers a lot more space to the issue of child-birth and its selective measures available in the market. The birth of a child is considered highly necessary for the prolongation of the family name. It is very rare that discussions are held before the planning of the family. But the couple before us seems to be a trend setter. The narrator is forty-one and his beloved is twenty-nine. When he presents the prospect of having a child, she does not disagree with the principle of a child, however she has her priorities and related objections at that time:

But she said, rightly, she was ‘doing well’ on her paper, she was anxious to write and be read, she was anxious and impatient to travel all over the world. . . She planned investigations in Russia, Brazil, Africa, New Guinea . . . To become pregnant in the immediate future would have been, in her words, ‘like shooting herself in the foot’; and so would a very young child. Later, she promised, when she was better known and virtually irreplaceable, she could take a year off. For our child. (27)

For women, the novel supports, conceiving a child should be a matter of choice rather than a burden of tradition. She must have the right to choose between career and child. Moreover, the narrator tends to break the myth – men for the patriarchy. He desires a daughter and stands aloof from the mad chase that seems to go on for the propagation of masculinity for which only sons are a matter of desire. He opines:

I don’t know if many men resemble me in this, but I always wanted, even as an adolescent, to hold a little girl of my own flesh and blood in my arms. I always thought that would be a kind of fulfilment, without which my life as a man would remain incomplete. I constantly dreamed of a daughter, whose features and voice I imagined, and I had named her Beatrice. (27)

Masculinity and femininity are not universal truths but mere socio-cultural constructs. “According to these constructs, ‘a real man should be daring, courageous, confident and command respect’, ‘should be responsible towards family’ and a real man should prove his manliness and masculinity.’ Description of violent behaviours was an integral component of describing a ‘real man’ and manliness”. (Verma and Mahendra 3) But the author reconstructs the image of a protective male in this novel. To be protective does not only mean to be muscular and assertive rather to be also emotional and sensitive enough – a man who can identify with the softness of the woman. Muscularity does no longer define masculinity. Man does not need to fight wars rather need to manage family with an alert mind and emotional heart. The narrator is expressive enough when he affirms:

I was much more shaken than she was by her silent sobbing, and thought the best thing was for me to act the protective male and whisper in her ear, ‘Have a good cry tonight, but tomorrow you’ll begin to fight back. People can only be defeated by their own bitterness.’ Then I added, with a naïve solemnity, dictated by my extreme emotion, ‘If need be, I will help you.’ She found the strength to smile again, raised herself on her elbows to place a tender kiss on my lips. And then dropped back immediately. (34-35)

Then the narrator's participation in a campaign to promote the birth of girls signals a different attitude of masculinity towards women and the possibility for them to have a life of their own. Initially the slogan of the campaign 'A father, a daughter' refers to the father's responsibility for his daughter which later takes a more positive turn: "But this anecdotal aspect is of little importance, the idea of the campaign went further than a poster and a slogan. It was a question of getting it into people's heads that a daughter-and-heir was as valuable as a son-and-heir" (114). Earlier it was believed that a daughter is only her mother's responsibility. The narrator states, "To be sure, at her birth and during the following months, I had spent many a sleepless night with her ravenous and bawling; I don't count those, that was different, she was just a hungry mouth, a larva" (131).

How the narrator supports the nomadic self of his companion and how he celebrates the wilderness of her profession as a journalist signals towards a new form of masculinity that is supportive, caring and humane in the real sense. After gifting the narrator, a daughter of his choice, Clarence takes to her heels in order to fulfil her professional aspirations. Her travels across many countries demonstrate the extent of potential a woman has in the company of a supportive man. The narrator remarks:

'I'm leaving you and your daughter,' she exclaimed one day, with a laugh of liberation, her hand on the door handle. Then she was off on her travels. . . . But I very soon lost track of her. In between taking two showers, she would shout that she was leaving for Rome or Casa or Zurich; two days later a scribbled note would inform me she had come home 'to change', then left again. This merry-go-round continued for three weeks. (76)

This shows how well she can serve her professional cravings. Motherhood does not deter her from exploring the world for her research. The writer breaks the myth that only a mother should raise her daughter and condition her well to suit the standards of society. With an understanding of a progressive man, the narrator clearly states:

Clarence did her job as a mother with professional efficiency, with the necessary affection, but without any extra fuss. It was understood that the child was a loving gift from her to me; she had promised it, she had given it, with her whole body, and much sooner than I had hoped. I never complained, I never tried to keep her lingering about too long over the cradle. Her path was elsewhere and she followed it. (81)

This approach to his companion gives the narrator an opportunity to furnish a new family structure where the couple is not fixed in the social roles of husband and wife, rather they are more individuals in each other's company. Their private life is not threatened by their professional commitments. In the preface to their book, Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Letizia Alterno state, "Individualism is a possible answer to this problem because it views men and women as individuals with distinct identities rather than as parts of a larger whole, and sex as a mere biological marker rather than as a social signifier". (ix) The narrator describes it in a rhetorical way, "Once, people would have

hooted with laughter at a couple where the father blossoms through the child and the mother through her work and fame. But that was how it was with us, and we were happy; was I any the less a man for all that, was she any the less a woman?" (81) This way, it can be stated that Amin Maalouf has turned the gender-centric social roles of a man and a woman upside down. In this new model of family, husband is not the only bread winner and wife is not the only babysitter. They both share each other's responsibilities with a loving and caring attitude: "We lived in this way, not husband and wife, not a conventional couple, nor concubines . . . What terrible words! We lived as lovers, with life giving us all we could wish for, were it not for the physical wear and tear of age; were it not, also, for the upheavals in the world". (82)

Amin Maalouf, it seems, believes in celebrating individuality instead of glorifying social roles both among men and women and among women as well. As far as the relationship between Clarence and Beatrice is concerned, it bears no trace of conflict. He states, "Between Clarence and Beatrice, I had never been able to detect the slightest collusion – there was no antagonism either, I may add, nor any friction; to me, they seemed to remain irremediably strangers to each other". (168) Even the narrator does not adhere to the stereotype of a patriarchal father. He shares more the bond of friendship with his daughter, Beatrice, than of the father. The existing conventional notion of masculinity is challenged by the very idea of father for the daughter:

It was to me that Beatrice confessed, when she first fell madly in love. I was so touched, so flattered that it never occurred to me to behave like a father, if behaving like a father means making some suitable remarks, using my authority to preach to her – this paternal role, written by others, did not attract me. (168)

When man in the family steps forward to create a loving relationship at the cost of abandoning his love for the traditional role of a strict father, it also provides scope for women to develop a bond of friendship. Amin Maalouf tends to subvert the dichotomy of mother-daughter to give it a new dimension. He writes:

As long as the mother was a mother and the daughter was a daughter, their relationship had been cool, somewhat starchy. . . . I have another framed picture on my table as I write these lines: father and daughter, arms around each other, leaning over a wheelchair. That is how we were united, by virtue of this reversal of roles; Beatrice was affectionately maternal, Clarence resolutely daughterly; friends at last. (169)

This becomes more significant when viewed in the light of a new image of man. This man of understanding who does not believe in dividing women in their social roles and thus wishes to reign over them with his masculine supremacy; rather this new version of 'soft' man is happy to see them in unison. The narrator is the embodiment of this new man when he states: "Any other person than myself would have felt threatened, dethroned; I am not like that, their reunion delighted me. I watched them; I listened to them; if I wanted to interrupt them, or call them, I would say, 'Girls!' delighted to group them together, without distinction of age, under this same protective word". (169-170)

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Too much importance given to the masculine principle or masculinity has resulted mostly in acts of aggression, crimes and wars. Now it seems high time when man needs to experience the feminine principle inside himself. The narrator opines, “there is, with human societies, as with individuals, a male principle, which is the principle of aggression, and a female principle, which is the principle of perpetuation”. (170) If the same conventional order persists where masculinity is weighed as superior to femininity, child-births will no longer be private affairs. It shocks the narrator when Beatrice declares that she wishes to have a son, but later he understands the insecurities of desiring a daughter when “baby girls were being kidnapped by gangs of sordid traffickers, to be sold in the countries where there was a shortage”. (182) Thus, it is in the interest of both men and women to evolve non-violent masculinity and assertive femininity by discarding the patriarchal ideology.

Thus, in the current scenario, if man feels less of a man and a woman feels less of a woman, there is nothing wrong since it can hopefully lead them in search of finding their essence as individual beings. The purpose of human life is not only to fight for the right and power, it has much to do with finding the ground of the being. Any step living beyond gender consciousness helps us move towards the realization of a neutral and pure existence. So in every age, certain changes are immanent. They can either be resisted or accepted. When they are resisted, changes become challenges, whereas when accepted, they pave the way for progression. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are also not static but dynamic. In every age, with every generation, they shed some of their rigidity and receive a smoothness fit for human behaviour.

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