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Inam Ul Haq & Uzma Rashid

1) University of Management & Technology - Lahore, Pakistan

Date of publication: June 21st, 2018

Edition period: June 2018 - October 2018

To cite this article: Ul Haq, I & Rashid, U. (2018). Masculinities: Tracing the trajectories of gender performance in war poetry. *Masculinities and Social Change*, 7(2), 110-123. doi: 10.17583/MCS.2018.3122

To link this article: <http://doi.org/10.17583/MCS.2018.3122>

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Masculinities: Tracing the Trajectories of Gender Performance in War Poetry

Inam Ul Haq & Uzma Rashid

University of Management & Technology - Lahore

Abstract

This paper critically examines the war songs and poems of men who fought in the post 9/11 Afghan war. The study locates the analysis within the socio-cultural influences that left an impact on the ‘manly’ soldiers, allowing a 'micro mapping' of masculinity to be revealed in these men’s writings. Using thematic analysis techniques, fifty war songs and poems from the years 2007 and 2008 are analyzed through the lens of masculinity and its performance. The critical investigation of the war songs and poems found that the performative dimension of masculinities in war spread around the themes of youth warriors; weapons; arms and war machinery; state of politics and need for an Islamic government; the motif of red color; and glorification of death. The religion Islam, their homeland Afghanistan and its traditional culture constantly act as a fuel to evoke overpowering emotions for the soldiers and their passion for fighting. It is found that the locally constructed masculinities informed the context of the Afghan War. This has implications for the way we understand masculinities especially in war poetry. As the paper demonstrates, the multiple ways in which the notion of masculinity is manifested in war poems point to the need to break free from the stereotypical understandings of warriors from conservative religious backgrounds.

Keywords: Masculinity; Afghan war; poetry; post 9/11; Gender performance

Masculinidades: Rastreado las Trayectorias de Género en la Poesía de Guerra

Inam Ul Haq & Uzma Rashid

University of Management & Technology - Lahore

Resumen

Este artículo examina de forma crítica las canciones de guerra y los poemas de hombres que lucharon en la guerra afgana posterior al 11/9. El estudio ubica el análisis dentro de las influencias socioculturales que dejaron un impacto en los soldados-hombre, permitiendo que se revelara un "micro mapa" de la masculinidad en los escritos de estos hombres. Usando técnicas de análisis temático, se analizaron cincuenta canciones de guerra y poemas de los años 2007 y 2008 a través del lente del desarrollo de la masculinidad. La investigación sobre las canciones y poemas de guerra encontró que la dimensión performativa de las masculinidades en la guerra se extiende alrededor de los temas de los guerreros jóvenes; armas; armas y maquinaria de guerra; estado de la política y necesidad de un gobierno islámico; el motivo del color rojo; y glorificación de la muerte. La religión del Islam, su tierra natal Afganistán y su cultura tradicional actúan de forma constante como un combustible para evocar emociones abrumadoras para los soldados y su pasión por la lucha. Se observa que las masculinidades construidas localmente informan sobre el contexto de la guerra afgana. Esto tiene implicaciones en la forma en que entendemos las masculinidades especialmente en la poesía de guerra. Como demuestra el artículo, las múltiples formas en que se manifiesta la noción de masculinidad en los poemas de guerra apuntan a la necesidad de liberarse de las comprensiones estereotipadas de guerreros de contextos religiosos conservadores.

Palabras clave: masculinidad; Guerra de Afganistán; poesía; post 11/9; desempeño de género

Masculinity and war have had a long acquaintance (Braudy, 2010) but as Higate (2003) observes, there is a dearth of research examining this connection. David (1994) argues that it is not only in war that men attempt to express and prove their masculinity but they do acknowledge that war acts as a rite of passage in which violence, aggression and self-sacrifice are essential vectors for the proclamation of masculinity. In war, the domination of men by other men can be interpreted as a product of forces of socialization that create dominant and subordinate masculinities. This results in certain masculine behaviors that are being valorized as manly and desirable and seen as the tangible products of being ‘real men’ (Barrett, 1996). How they ‘performed’ as men (Butler, 1990) and how they emotionally responded to this performance is also critical (Scheff, 2006).

Butler (1990, 1993, and 2004) argues that gender is a fluid construct that changes according to time and context where men and women ‘do gender’. For Butler, all humans put on a gender performance, this will essentially define masculinity; whether the core presentation of masculinity changes over time is irrelevant as it will always, according to Butler, be a performance. However, this performance is set in routine where the reality of gender is reinforced through such repetition, and the fictive nature of gender is maintained (Hey, 2006, p.440). Such performances are arguably, already ‘pre-scripted’ (Hey, 2006, p.444) and have been inculcated through for example social processes like education, family, literature and popular culture.

Therefore, gender (masculinity) is a performative act (Butler, 1990) that in order to operate must be successfully repeated (Butler, 2004). Putting in the simplest terms, ‘performativity’ is what a person does at a particular moment in time with respect to their gender (Butler, 1990, p.25). Men take part in a tacit collective agreement to perform masculinity (Butler, 1990), and this is achieved through an endless recital of social mores and social conventions. In speaking about them performatively, we discuss men engaged in wars, their passion for fighting can help reinforce the performativity of their masculinity, ‘doing gender’ translates into ‘doing it the warrior way’. The status quo of masculine hegemonic power is maintained partially by the repetitive nature of ‘doing gender’, in the way we walk, talk and interact as ‘manly’ men. In the context of this work, the narratives of the

soldiers also act as a conduit for them to ‘do gender’, to do masculinity. Gender is an act which is taken from a rehearsed culturally determined script and which we play out (Ezzy, 1998, p.247). He suggests that, ‘performing the self entails the ‘obligation’ to do gender not as an act of intentionality, but as ‘performance’ already set up by a pre-scripted rehearsal’, (2006, p.444). Thus the performativity of Butler can be used effectively to help tease out the nuances and subtleties of Afghan soldiers masculinity in action.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design with a particular focus on unobtrusive research. Unobtrusive research is a research that focuses on non-reactive data (Lee, 2000). Therefore, following interpretive paradigm, this qualitative research design seeks to portray war masculinities and performativity in the war poetry. Textual thematic analysis was applied for the analysis of the data available that was an anthology of verse (Bailey, 2008).

Study Population and Sampling

Population of the study was 235 poems available on the Afghan Wire Website and Media Monitoring Service from 1990’s to 2008 that were translated and compiled into an anthology of poetry in English namely, *Poetry of the Taliban*. For this research, the anthology in print form was used. The anthology is divided into five subsections. 50 war poems from the section namely, ‘The Trench’ was chosen. Purposive sampling technique is used, as the focal area of interest is war poetry. The selection criteria of the poems are based on two important principles: only the poems related to the war settings were selected and the time frame of the poem was post 9/11. The poems available were from 2007 till 2008. The lexical resource of each of the poem used was rich with war metaphors.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis is a quad-tier process. It involves reflection, deconstruction, reflection and reconstruction of ideas. After an exhaustive secondary data collection in the form of review of extant literature available on men and masculinities, a few deductive codes like religion, nationalism and war were explored. It paved a way for incorporating empirical findings from the poems. Later, the complete texts of the poems were deconstructed into phrases. The independent phrases of the poems were taken as a unit of analysis. They were helpful in gaining an in-depth insight into the notion of war masculinities. The data was analyzed using the themes that were generated after coding the data bank of phrases. Coding was used to expand, transform and re-conceptualize data, providing opportunity for more diverse analyses. Here, the research entered into the stage of reconstruction, when this data was recorded and classified on the basis of common characteristics. Before drawing inferences and conclusions from the data collected, data was interpreted and analyzed under specific themes derived inductively. Some of the themes are war machinery, politics and Islamic government, youth, motif of red color (blood) and glorification of death. The analysis chapter offers an explanation of different phrases. It is written by synthesizing the aforementioned themes as there were enmeshed boundaries within them.

Findings

In order to facilitate the data analysis, the findings of study are organized under the following major themes: of youth, madrassas and Islamic jihad; of war machinery, the foreign enemies, and Islamic government; of the motif of red color - blood imagery; and of the glorification of death. These findings are explanations of selected phrases.

Of Youth, Madrassas and Islamic Jihad

The poems predominantly employ a language that indicates teenager as the seeker of knowledge and pleasure of God. He is motivated by his elders, while his ancestors serve the purpose of making him proud in his progeny. The teenager is advised in the following words: “*Move youth! Get ready for some committed work.*”

Since, the alien invasion upon the Afghan land, these young followers have taken upon Jihad to protect their land. It represents a moment where they are reminiscent of their culture and liberty they once enjoyed. These adolescents are being trained to fight against the foreign army. This often takes place at the Madrassas (religious schools) which these juveniles are educated on religion and persuaded to take upon Jihad. They are taught the use of arms and ammunition and told the stories of the pious-men and warriors of God until they develop a similar fervour for war. However, the training for Jihad and self-sacrificial is not the only part of their stay at the Madrassas but they are also expected to serve their Ameer(leader). These phrases are admonishing the young soldier to recognize his enemy before setting out to fight. The US and the NATO army are intriguing against them; they possess clever minds and advanced weapons to delude them. It seems that these juveniles have no choice but to fight, their elders demanding from them to fight with zeal, take pride in the Afghan history and bring back freedom to their land. The soldier thus declares his high spirits: *“We are happy when we are martyred for our extreme zeal and honour.”*

These phrases manifest that the fate of every Afghan born lies perhaps only in war; the history of their people testifies to this fact that they are reluctant to merge with the outer world and prefer to live in the way of their ancestors. The young student of the Madrassa is being taught that their fate lies in Jihad and rooting out the enemy; their enemies have annexed their land and their culture is at threat of extinction. Thus, they must prepare themselves to bear hunger and pain for the sake of their land and future.

Of War Machinery, the Foreign Enemies, and Islamic Government

This theme would explain those phrases that show the extreme contempt that the Afghan hold for the US and NATO forces. It seems as if their complaints are endless and they continue to mention the atrocities over and over again in rage and avenge. The theme of weapons shows that war is an occupation of the Afghans then merely a temporary practice. However, this abomination is perhaps justified in the light of atrocities they have gone through. The poet complains that his house been destroyed, his cattle’s killed and grazing land burned, while he has been forced to relocate. The Talib explains: *“Englishmen have occupied my home, By no means, I cannot stay anymore.*

They play with our dignity and chastity, I shy with my conscience. It would be better at this moment to go to fight.” They justify their terrorism and bombing as justice to their people. They also aim to encourage their fellow men to march against this tyranny for the security of their family, if not for the sake of the country or God. Nevertheless, they never forget to mention their desire for Paradise. The Talib finds contentment in the fact that their efforts would be rewarded with Paradise. It also serves as a purpose and motivator for them in the dread of life-threatening scenarios they fight in.

These phrases show that the soldier feels cheated by the foreigner; they portray themselves to be helpers but in fact are ruthlessly murdering the helpless people. They have been attacking them from decades and have destroyed their country. The Talib reiterates that the US and NATO army would be decimated as had been the raiders before. They take war as a bounteous phenomenon. They are interested in serving at war because they want the celebrated title of Martyrdom and earn a celestial place in Paradise. The primal motivational factor behind this Jihad can be said to be liberation of the current trends of western culture that are eroding the Afghans archaic moral and ethical values. They theorize these changes as transcending the contours set by God and fear it would immortalize their society. The Jihad is therefore deemed to be eliminating these maladies that the Afghan people have become victims of. The soldiers are depending on their trust of God than mortal weapons. This is conceivable by their unshakeable believe in the power of God, as exhibited by their ancestors.

When panicked by warships, helicopters and jet planes they recall minding the incidents of the primeval era of Islam when its roots had only begun to stretch in Arabian but had to face the dread of the unbelievers at legendary battles of Badr, Ahud and Khunduk. The early Muslims relied more on divine help than their negligible resources. As recorded, they won a momentous victory, paving way for their posterity to disseminate to all corners of the Earth. The soldiers of the Afghan War are certain of their victory as they believe the American and the NATO army to be petrified of their march. They regard the pride and reliance of the foreign army on their technology and sophisticated weapons as their weakness against the Afghan who are being helped by God. They think so of their rigid confidence in their land. Being central and a gateway to Eastern Asia, Afghanistan has been the pivotal point of invasion for the foreign armies in history. However, the Greeks, Persians,

Sikhs and Europeans have all had their swords blunt and their bodies stained by the blood of their own bodies by the Afghans. The soldiers intend to preserve and maintain their legacy at all times. They express their antipathy in the most profound manner towards both as an intimidation and for the satisfaction of the own ego.

The soldiers are also being seen to be conceited in their art of war; they deem themselves to be invincible. They are preparing to set out for the Jihad and framing their strategy. They are speculating the fate of their enemy and the sequel of their destruction. They perceive it appropriate that the enemy should be butchered in lieu of the massacre they bought upon them. The Muslims all over the world would rejoice on their victory. At a particular instance, the poet contrasts himself to the savage wolves in lamentation of his home and the grazing land of his cattle that the US and the NATO army destroyed. A motivated soldier says that: *As long as an Islamic government is not installed, don't talk to me about laying down arms.*

Of the Motif of Red Color - Blood imagery

The phrases signify that the soldier portrays his contempt and avenge as symbolic of red blood. They are keen to spill and stain their bodies in the blood of their own. They mention writing their names in color red so as to decree the end of their lives. The soldiers also exhibit their antagonism with the continuous reference of lacerated bodies of their companions. The phrases also delineate that a soldier desires retribution of a similar instance as inflicted by the Europeans upon them. He also informs that he recognizes his enemy from those who merely serve out of subjection to the foreign army. The arrival of the NATO has been met with hostility by the Afghans and they mention them in aversion for having killed their nation. They collate their existence with the apostates of those who attempted to crucify Jesus; with a similar motive in mind with regards to them. The soldiers consider them to be the accursed nation owing to their misdemeanour and transgression their ancestors have committed. They accuse them of pride and instigators of cruelty who contaminated the world with red color blood throughout history.

These phrases highlight the red color as reminiscent of the atrocities that have been wrecked upon the Afghan land. The Afghan land, family, religion all fell prey to the massacre that was executed by the foreign forces. The

bustling home of the soldier now depicts an apocalyptic doomsday with houses engulfed in inferno and the valley flowing with rivers of red color blood. The west is also seen to be demoralizing the Afghan land through their motive of a secular and liberal Afghan state, where women are not restricted by their gender and are utilized as a weapon to drive people away from Islam. These soldiers are warning US and the west of dire consequence of their actions; the Talib satisfaction lies in revenge from the foreign army. They are plotting to carry out another 9/11 on the American land just as their land was rained in blood by the US and NATO army. The phrases also depict mourning of the Muslims who have suffered at the hands of the foreign army; the soldier perceives this as an open attack upon the Muslim Ummah (nation).

The phrases furthermore suggest that the soldiers are moaning on the desolation and ruining of Afghan land and culture and is determined to take revenge. They are also determined to bring about Islamic government and rule of law in their country. They are hopeful that the Afghan people would come out in large number to fight the Jihad. They are unwilling to lay down their arms until their motives are achieved and Shariah law established in their land. The soldier is also yearning for martyrdom and believes whosoever do joins this war shall meet God and join the company of his righteous and beloved servants. He uses this prose to motivate others to join him; however he is also apprehensive of a few. Since the Afghan government is an ally of the US, the soldier is also faced with traitors within his own army. He is also displeased that other Muslims countries and people have refused to join his cause.

The color red is used in different ways. It is used to show the blood of the soldiers fighting the war. It is used as a means to highlight the names of the intruders and enemies. It shows the blood of the people who raise the stature of Islam. In an image it covers the White House in Washington to show the victory of Muslims over Western intruders who have corrupted the land, history, geography and culture of the Afghans. Here are some of the phrases: *Don't be impatient; I head towards doomsday with a red shroud. I will raise the flag of Islam with my blood. My nation breaks the bloody heads; I will take revenge with my blood for them.*

Of the Glorification of Death

Death is an active entity. It carries positive connotations for these soldiers. The phrases represent the theme of death as the ultimate destination of the soldiers. It is being seen as symbolic of love of the motherland, culture and most importantly God. It encompasses the entire life of the warrior as a Momin(true Muslim). He expresses that: *We all are devotees for die sake of God. We do not care for death when we have our heads in our hands. Death is a gift and I thank God for that.*

Death also delineates the vicious personality of the soldier as well who are blood-thirsty of the enemy. Metaphorically, it defines jihad as route of attainment of God's pleasure, about his devotion and to gain a majestic station in the heavens. The poet shares his experience in his own words in the following way:

The loins of our village will come to the field in scores
Flame falls on them
The devoted mujahid doesn't know death
The lamp lights the blood on the path to independence
A believer doesn't know any other cup except that of martyrdom
The ghazis are fighting in it
The takbirs' will be heard.

For these warriors, death ensures a sense of positive liberation not only at terrestrial level but at a celestial level as well.

Discussion

The purpose behind this study was to analyze masculinity and war in the poetry of the Afghan soldiers. Moreover, an effort is made to elucidate a new form of masculinity known as the 'war masculinity'. The medium of poetry, to be more specific war songs, were used to facilitate the contention. The soldiers are generally assumed with a negative spectacle but this study has avoided such reductionism. Instead, this study focuses on the aesthetic dimension of masculinity and war and has avoided being propagandist.

The analyses show the interplay of masculinity and war. Masculinity as a fluid concept has been framed by theorists as dependent upon ideology

(Hearn, 1987; Brittan, 1989), culture (Connell, 2002), and geography (Woodward, 2000; Campbell et al., 2006). It is concretized when associated with a group and positioned in a time and situation for example, a war context (Segal, 1993). War masculinity is predominantly exhibited through bravery, patriotism and passion for fighting. These were the themes that were gained through surveying literature. However, it emerged as a multi-layered concept and therefore themes like motif of red color, youth, death, politics and Islamic government were added. It should be noted that all the aforementioned themes are enmeshed in each other. So they cannot be distinctly separated. The potential causes for the performance of masculinity in a war context were highlighted inductively. They were the youth, weapons, state of politics, need for an Islamic government and the glorification of death. The religion Islam, references to Afghan land and culture, the passion for fighting, jihad and the existence of foreign enemies remained a constant throughout the analysis.

As mentioned above, there is an ideology behind the social context of the war and it is informed by hegemonic masculinity. This hegemonic form of masculinity presents as the 'most honoured way of being a man' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.849) and is predicated on the power heterosexual men hold over non heterosexual men and women. It can be argued, therefore, that hegemonic masculinity dominates gender relations (both male to female and male to male) and the social interactions of everyday life. It is given high status and overriding power and authority and this comes about in a process whereby cultural definitions of hegemonic masculinity and power are reinforced and non-hegemonic subjugated (Segal, 1993, p.626). To illustrate the core of this research, war masculinity, is a good example to consider. Afghan soldier's masculinity embraces hegemonic masculinity as the ideal form and reinforces and rewards heterosexual behavior in men who embrace the warrior code, by acknowledging bravery and heterosexual behavior. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) presents its form of masculinity as the desired apotheosis of masculinity. How hegemonic masculinity is performed in a reinforcing repetitive way of behaving (Butler, 1990) and the emotional impact that it has on men is the core focus of the study. The social-ideological context of the war looks at the performance of masculinity that focuses on following the warrior codes. It was elucidated along the tangents of the passion for fighting to prove one's masculine ideologies. This emerged as the most vivid section of the research. The passion for fighting for example

that some of the soldiers express is arguably a direct result of men repressing emotions leaving them vulnerable to explosions of emotions, which can then be played out in collective violence of war (Scheff, 2006, p.172).

Conclusion

The paper has explored the critical application of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Having abstract hegemonic ideals is not enough, one needs to perform and show their manliness and it can be portrayed through fighting in war. Furthermore, the display of emotions remained a constant throughout the portrayal of masculinity. The themes of bravery, patriotism and fighting have an underlying emotional pattern. Apart from that, the motif of red color (blood), the concept of death, the presence of youth, government and politics and arms and ammunition are such themes that portray emotional endeavours.

In a nutshell, to be brave, showing courage, fighting to bring peace and order, doing jihad and safeguarding your religion, culture and homeland, degrading your enemies specifically USA, UK, foreign agencies and NATO forces is the gist of the thesis. Moreover, involving youth, developing bonds of camaraderie, having a staunch faith in God and keeping a hopeful, optimistic sensibility are some other significant aspects of the Talibs. It shows being masculine and doing masculine. Thus, it can be safely stated that masculinity mushrooms in a state of conflict. It has appeal for global sensibility as its findings can be used while formulating a strategy when entering into a dialogue about Afghan war.

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Inam Ul Haq is Lecturer & Erasmus Fellow in the Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences & Humanities at University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

Uzma Rashid is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology & Associate Dean (Research), School of Social Sciences & Humanities at University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Contact Address: Direct Correspondence at a Inam Ul Haq, C-II, Johar Town, Lahore-54770, Pakistan, email: inam.haq@umt.edu.pk