

Defying Norms: A Contrapuntal Reading of Gender Performance in the works of Amy Tan and Anita Nair

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Abstract

Gender is a complex universal discourse with culturally inherent dogmas and rigid social bias. Gender performativity, often framed in terms of masculinity and femininity, is frequently restricted by associations with biological sex. However, counter deliberations such as the notion of female masculinity challenges rigid gender role attributions of the conventional hegemonic structures, affirming the fact that the gender binaries addressed as ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, is not specific to any particular biological or social group, rather it enables women to transcend the stigmas associated with traditional gender roles, framed and maintained by hegemonic patriarchy. The theory of ‘female masculinity’, proposed by Judith Halberstam is the chosen axiom for the existing discussion. The proposed manuscript endeavors to apply the theory of female masculinity in two literary narratives, namely *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair and *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan. The study attempts to analyze the characters as depicted in the novels to explore the notions of female masculinity and how it acts as a strategic counter discourse against the suppression encountered by women in a patriarchal society. Although originating from different geographical contexts, the works portray the shared experiences and survival struggles of women across diverse societies, irrespective of time and place. The female characters of both the novels express traditional masculine traits, thus defying the norms of gender performance. It is thus anticipated that the works of Amy Tan and Anita Nair revises the traditional gender roles and that female masculinity subverts the gender performance practiced and maintained through patriarchy.

Keywords: female masculinity, heteronormative, masculinity, patriarchy, femininity, gender

1. Introduction

Masculine and feminine roles are not inherent or biologically determined, instead they are socially constructed gender roles formed by cultural expectations and societal norms. Sex refers to the biological and physiological attributes that define men and women, whereas gender establishes performative models that outline how men and women should embody certain roles in society. Thus, identifying a man or woman in terms of gender attributes is erroneous, owing to the fact that “it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p.519). Gender roles are a set of exploits that the society deem appropriate in order for men and women to fit in the society. The term masculinity is always associated with men and the word femininity is always correlated with women. In discourse the term masculinity refers to being strong, bold and aggressive and the appellation femininity refers to being nurturing, polite and accommodating. “Based on the traditional gender role, masculine always gives the idea of handsome face, brave, power, independent, leadership, power, courage, heroism and strong body. In another hand, feminine identic with characteristics of beautiful woman, emotional, dependent, passive, respective and sensitive character” (Wulandari, 2019, p.1). Masculinity studies focus primarily on men and the diverse expressions of masculinity, examining how patriarchy shapes male identities and pressures men to conform to socially prescribed masculine roles. Masculinity is different in diverse cultures, and it is a historical construct which has been followed by men since ages. The same applies to feminist studies as they mainly focus on the stereotypical gender roles that women should follow and the repression they face from the patriarchal society. The existing binaries of masculinity and femininity facilitate the unchallenged reinforcement of gender stereotypes, constraining individuals to predetermined roles and limiting the scope for diverse expressions of female identity and independence. It is in this context that the concept of female masculinity emerges as a possibility and a counter narrative against traditional gender roles.

The book *Female Masculinity* (1998) written by Jack Halberstam gives momentousness to women who accede masculine qualities. Halberstam says that female masculinity is a topic which is comparatively discussed in contrast to male femininity in the academic field. Masculinity studies emerged in the early 1990's and scholars have studied about masculinity in men for ages, but academicians showed no kind of interest in masculinity in women. The terms masculinity and femininity are a set of attributes set by the society which men and women are bound to abide. But, according to Halberstam masculinity or masculine qualities is not to be just followed by men, women can also possess masculine qualities. Female masculinity falls out of society's accepted heterosexual and gendered standards, “Female

masculinity must be seen not as derivative of male embodied masculinities, but as a legitimate gender formation on its own right; a position from which to successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity and generate social change” (Sutton, 2011, p. 13-14). Presently, people have started to unearth a personal sense of their gender, which can be distinct from their biological sex, that is conventionally considered fixed and natural. A few examples of gender identity include male, female, transgender, queer, gender queer and non-binary. Amongst these identities we can also find variations such as effeminate and masculine men, as well as feminine and masculine women. As stated by Halberstam, the study about female masculinity is very much scattered. An inquiry about female masculinity is pertinent in this situation for an all-gender inclusive society, especially in the case of women who display masculine traits. The proposed study dwells into finding female masculine characters from the select literary narratives. The outlined research applies Jack Halberstam’s idea of Female Masculinity on select female heterosexual characters in the Indian fiction *Ladies Coupe* (2001) by Anita Nair and American fiction *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991) by Amy Tan.

2. Literature Review

Masculinity studies is a multifaceted field that deals with masculine behaviors and identities and it proclaims that masculinity is a social construct just like femininity. It emerged from women’s studies and it also surfaced as a reaction against anti-feminist movements in the US. “Work on masculinity in the 1980’s was often responding, directly or indirectly, to the idea that masculinity was natural or essential, or, in the social sciences, was responding to sex role theory, in which male sex role was taken as uniform, stable, and normative configuration to which actual males do or do not conform” (Reeser, 2015a, p.13). Masculinity studies originated in the American academia and it is the outcome of efforts put by psychologists, historians and sociologists. “Masculinity studies thus argue that the masculine gender has little to do with the male biological sex or with phenotypic features, but is essentially the product of cultural codes, social norms and ideological imperatives which vary across time and space” (Pellerin, 2016, p.3). According to gender theory masculinity and femininity are social constructs, the attributes of masculinity and femininity can be expressed and embodied by both men, women and other gender non-confirming individuals.

The concept of Female masculinity was extensively studied by Jack Halberstam, who is also known as Judith Halberstam, in his work *Female Masculinity* (1998). Jack Halberstam is a scholar in the field of gender studies and queer studies, his work which was published in 1998 explains how masculinity can be embodied by women and he challenges traditional gender norms about masculinity. In literature the theme of female masculinity has been explored from multiple perspectives by various scholars. It has been examined through female literary characters, film studies, cultural studies, gender studies and video games. The concept of female masculinity has been applied on heterosexual female characters as well on female characters who belongs to the queer community. *Female Masculinities in Shakespeare* limns about how Lady Macbeth embodies masculine traits in the play *Macbeth* by Shakespeare, “Lady Macbeth reflects an interesting blend of masculine and feminine qualities. She is fully capable of a male role and behavior. Shakespeare’s idea about masculinity are the social view of what was traditionally seen as masculine at the time. Lady Macbeth’s ideas of masculinity are, when she wants to become more powerful” (Bhaskaran et al., 2020, p. 5577). *The Portrayal of Masculine Qualities in Female Characters in Shooting at Midnight Novel* by Aurora Nurhidayah Rifani illustrates the character Bridgett Logan who embraces female masculinity to break down patriarchal regimes which says masculinity only belongs to men (Rifani, 2017). In the article *Home and Hell: Representations of Female Masculinity in Action-Driven Science Fiction Literature* Anna Bark Persson exemplifies female masculinity on two masculine female characters in the two action driven science fictions, *The Spin Trilogy* and *The Bel Dame Apocrypha*. “The heroes in question are Major Catherine Li (*The spin Trilogy*) and Nyxnissa so Dasheem (*The Bel Dame Apocrypha*). They are both undisputed heroes of their respective stories and portrayed as masculine women- queer, racialized and cyborgs.... In short, they are examples of queer, masculine female protagonists- still a rare fare in most media, including (feminist) science fictions” (Anna Bark, 2020, p.75).

In cultural studies Made Fitri Maya Padmi depicts female masculinity through a certain cultural tradition known as ‘Bacha Posh’ in Afghanistan wherein families who doesn’t have sons make their daughters to dress up and behave like boys. This custom emerged as a response to the strong preference of sons over daughters in their community. “Instead of wearing a veil and female dress, the girl will get a short haircut and a pair of pants, and she presented to the society as one of the boys. Parents allowed to changing their female child into a bacha posh by cutting her hair and dressing her in boy’s clothing. The girl is also given a boy’s name” (Padmi, 2018, p.54). In the field of film studies female masculinity is probed in ‘*Female Masculinity*’ in *Dystopian Adolescent Fiction- Suzanne Collins Hunger Games Series*. The study focuses on Katniss one of the major female masculine characters of the Hunger Games Series, “she is depicted along the lines of ideal American Frontier Masculinity which values self-sufficiency, courage, individualism and the rough outdoor life” (Parvathi, 2017, p. 45). The theme of female masculinity has also been explored in the realm of video games. In *Female Masculinity Portrayal in Dota 2 Video Game* the writer ranges over the concept female masculinity through various female video characters who display masculine traits and the weapons that are allotted to these characters for battle in the video game (Ferdiansyah et al. 2020).

Scholars have inquired into the works of Amy Tan from the perspective of food narratives and domestic violence faced by women. Qiping Liu in *Food as Storied matter in Amy Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife* posits “besides developing her preferred narrative technique of maternal story-telling, Tan embraces the Asian American literary tradition of food writing. When Winnie narrates, her stories are filled with accounts of food shopping, preparation, cooking and consumption. Tans depiction of food has been addressed by critics who take food and things related to food as metaphors or symbols to enrich characterization, to delineate power relations between the feeder and the fed, and to portray the American-born daughters’ ambiguous cultural identity” (Liu, 2020, p.1). The affair of domestic violence is also addressed in *Domestic Violence in Amy Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife*. “Tan highlights the pathetic conditions of those women who are

victims of domestic violence and have to suffer within the four walls of a house, a world of wife beating, a torrent of malevolence, brutality and humiliation. Winnie is often raped and sexually abused and assaulted by her husband. She is regarded as a sex object and has to satisfy him whenever, wherever, and whatever time he wants” (Loktongbam, 2014, p.833). Academics have probed into Anita Nair’s works from the perspective female characters reclaiming their identity and identity crisis faced by women in a patriarchal society. In *Reclaiming Agency: A Socio Feministic Reading of Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe* the researchers delve into how the female characters in the work *Ladies Coupe* regain their identities by struggling with the patriarchal society, “Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Nair is one of the most perceptive explorers of women’s world of Indian women, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness.... In her novels, she reconstructed the female identity beyond the male-dominated society of India. Her women characters have a dignity and female desires to realize full identity” (Sarada, 2023, p.452). The article *Quest for selfhood: A study of Anita Nair’s The Ladies Coupe* illustrates how all the female characters suffer under patriarchal ascendancy, “the stories of Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu reveal how women are constant victims of gender-based violence and gender inequalities.... Their stories show how the invisible structures of patriarchy dominate women” (Basu, 2021, p.95).

An academic inquest is relevant in this context, as the concept female masculinity has never been explored by scholars in the works of Amy Tan and Anita Nair. The female characters of both the works display masculine traits and challenges the traditional gender roles by becoming independent, resilient and assertive.

3. Methodology

The discussion in progress explores the concept of female masculinity in Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*. The theory of ‘Female Masculinity’ by Jack Halberstam is utilized for the discussion, where it states that masculinity is not exclusive to men, but women can also possess masculine traits, acknowledging that traits commonly labelled as masculine are socially constructed. The female characters in these novels challenge the existing gender norms and, through their behaviors and practices, negotiating the power dynamics that exist in society. The study scrutinizes female masculinity in heterosexual female characters who exhibit conventional masculine characteristics. A study on female masculinity on the female characters in the select novels would allow the readers to have a broader idea about this gender identity as it challenges long established gender norms. A close analysis of masculinity in women would also ensure that the society would accept diverse gender expressions. The discussion, utilizing literary narratives from two different literary tradition, namely American and Indian literary tradition demonstrates the universality and authenticity of the ongoing discussion.

4. Female Masculinity

The theory of female masculinity states that masculinity does not belong to the male body i.e., maleness has no liaison with masculinity and women can also possess masculine singularities. Jack Halberstam, a renowned scholar in the field of queer, gender and cultural studies, introduced the term female masculinity to represent women with a masculine presentation in his work *Female Masculinity* in 1998. Female masculinity is a result of gender performativity and challenges the traditional gender dichotomy and societal representations of sex. Masculinity is often considered a set of actions stereotypically associated with men or boys. However, the existence of female masculinity introduces new perspectives, showing that masculinity can be performed outside the male body (Padmi, 2018, p.46).

Halberstam states that female masculinity is a topic which is less canvassed in the academic realm. Masculinity studies emerged in the late 20th century and it was built on the foundation laid by feminist theory. Masculinity studies also examined effeminate men, while feminist theory traditionally centered on women and their subjugation under patriarchy, rarely focused on masculinity in women. It was Halberstam who expanded the concept of female masculinity in 1998 by discussing masculinity in women and introducing this new gender identity into the realm of gender and feminist theories. “I am writing about women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine, and I am trying to explain why, as a culture, we seem to take so little interest in female masculinity and yet pay a considerable amount of attention to male femininity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. xi). The work *Female Masculinity* is particularly centered on non-normative gender expressions, such as butch lesbians, trans men and other queer identities. But Halberstam also acknowledges the fact that female masculinity can also exist among heterosexual women, and she challenges the idea that masculinity is exclusively connected to men or queer identities. “While much of this book has concentrated on the masculinity in women that is most often associated with sexual variance, I also think the general concept of female masculinity has its uses for heterosexual women. After all, the excessive conventional femininity often associated with female heterosexuality can be bad for your health. Scholars have long pointed out that femininity tends to be associated with passivity and inactivity, with various forms of unhealthy body manipulations from anorexia to high heeled shoes. It seems to me that at least early on in life, girls should avoid femininity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 268-269). A few examples of female masculinity in heterosexual women include- female athletes like Mary Kom in the field of boxing, female historical figures like Joan of Arc and tomboys who rejects traditional ‘girly’ activities. Women who engage in social activism like Mayilamma, Irom Sharmila, Phoolan Devi, Malala Yousafzai and Angela Davis embody so called masculine characteristics like leadership, defiance and strength. One of the examples of female masculinity and feminist resistance in literature is found in the work based on Mayilamma’s life. Mayilamma embodied non-normative womanhood, challenging traditional gender roles through her activism. “*Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* in 2018, holds a critical position in the Eco-narrative discourse of Indian literature. The narrative records the life of Mayilamma, the tribal woman who led the struggle against the Coca-Cola plantation established in Plachimada village in Palakkad District of Kerala. The narrative maps the childhood, marriage and the struggle of Mayilamma against the multinational corporation” (Varughese & Mukherjee, 2024, p.7). The representation of female masculinity can also be found in movies like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*

(1998), where the character Anjali plays the role of a tomboy in the first half of the movie. She is always looked down and made fun of by her classmates for her manly dressing and behavior. In the latter half of the movie, Anjali embraces her femininity and as a result, everyone, including the hero, begins to notice and accepts her. Tomboyish female characters in films are introduced to represent their adolescence and as they grow up, they are forced to submit themselves to traditional gender roles. "But as even a cursory survey of popular cinema confirms, the image of the tomboy can be tolerated only within a narrative of blossoming womanhood; within such a narrative, tomboyism represents a resistance to adulthood itself rather than to adult femininity" (Halberstam, 1998, p.6).

5. The Manifestation of Female Masculinity in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, published in 2001, explores the lives of Chinese immigrants, with a particular focus on the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. As a Chinese-American author, Tan delves into themes of cultural identity, family bonds, and the immigrant experience in her work. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the theory of female masculinity can be analyzed through aspects such as gender roles, identity and power in a patriarchal society. Winnie Louie is the main female character of the novel and the story limns about the hardships that Winnie faced from her childhood to her escaping to America for freedom and a better life. Other characters who displays female masculinity in the novel include Winnie's Mother and Winnie's cousin Peanut. Wen Fu, Winnie's first husband, is the antagonist of the novel, characterized by patriarchy, toxic masculinity and power.

The story is set in the premise of China- Japan War. Winnie's life was surrounded by women who wanted freedom and independence. Chinese girls were married off at a very young age and that same was the fate of Winne's mother, Winnie and her cousin Peanut. Polygamy was prevalent in that culture and Winnie's father had several other wives. Once married the family never interfered the girl's life, the young girls were treated like slaves and their husbands abused and raped them. No one to help, these girls either ran away from homes or committed suicide. Same was the fate of Winnie's Mother, but she was a strong woman who never wanted to be bound by the constraints of patriarchy. She was different than the other wives of her husband, "My mother was not like my father's other wives, the ones who used the same kind of fake manner, acting more pleasant than someone else, as they were in a contest to win something big" (Tan, 1991, p.92). Judith Halberstam in her work *Female Masculinity* (1998) argues that masculinity is not an inherent trait tied to men, but rather it can be embodied by women who resist normative femininity. "Sometimes female masculinity coincides with the excesses of male supremacy, and sometimes it confides a unique form of social rebellion; often female masculinity is the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation.... and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics if conventional femininities" (Halberstam, 1998, p.9).

Winnie's mother was her inspiration, the traditional gender expressions never halted her from getting what she wanted. She refused to engage in submissive and competitive performance expected of wives. "My mother was not like the Chinese girls Americans always imagine, the kind who walk around with tiny bound feet, choosing their words as delicately as they choose their steps. My mother was a modern girl. Many girls in Shanghai were. They were not peasants, nothing of the kind. When my mother was eight years old, her feet were already unbound, and some people say that that's why she ran wild" (Tan,1991, p.100). She was a female masculine figure because she sought and attained her freedom from running away from her abusive and loveless marriage. Both men and women looked down on women who spoke against or took action against their in-laws and husbands, they were emotionally bound by the gender norms which says that women are supposed to tolerate any exploitation, especially from husband and in-laws.

Winnie's fate was also similar to her mother's. She married Wen Fu thinking that her life would be different than her mother, but it turned out to be worse than that. Wen Fu was a man who lacked compassion. He was greedy and abused and raped Winnie every day. He was a misogynist who knew that masculinity held power, and hated women who stood for themselves. He cursed any women who spoke for themselves, "A woman like that, he said, is a whore and a fox-devil, all mixed into one. I would rather have a dead wife than a wife like that" (Tan, 1991, p.179). Men are always taught how to exercise power over various institutions of the society, patriarchy also teaches men to use power to control and subordinate women. Wen Fu used this freedom by indecently assaulting his wife. "The male child is conditioned not to express normal human feelings like fear, or sorrow and that is why the male mind has to banish the feelings of tenderness, rectitude, sensitivity from his mindset, and create defensive armor of audacity emanating estrangement, and loneliness. There begins his search for power and control to feel a sense of security. The race for power leads to the vicious circle of the inability to develop human relationships and then not realizing their worth" (Sivakumar et al, 2021, p.430). Wen Fu 's abuse of Winnie intensified when she began asserting herself, speaking up and resisting his violent advances. He realized that Winnie was adopting the so-called masculine traits to stand up to him. "Masculinity might suddenly become very visible because it is seen to reside some where it is normally or naturally housed or somewhere it should not be. In this case, it may be the threat of women appropriating masculinity that makes it seem so visible, as a cultural anxiety about men losing masculinity to women is expressed" (Reeser, 2010b, p.3).

The reader can witness the development of Winnie's character, from a scared young girl to a woman who doesn't wish to die by the hands of her husband, and finally earning freedom from her abusive relationship. Later on, she realizes that her mother has indirectly influenced her to seek her independence, "I heard my mother even learned English at the school.... New Aunt, who went to the same missionary school, said my mother was not a good student, not very good at all, maybe that's why I was the same way. She said my mother has a fighting temper, maybe that's why I was the same way. She was naughty, maybe that's why I was the same way" (Tan, 1991, p.102). Winnie loses all her children in that abusive marriage, she looked after all the expenses of her family from her own dowry money, while Wen Fu used up all the money for other luxuries. But nothing stops her, she became stronger year after year of exploitation. "After that day in the square, I changed my attitude little by little. I did not think I was ready to die, not yet, But I thought about it this way: If I have

to die soon, then maybe I won't have to suffer too much longer in this marriage. And if I do not die soon, then maybe I can find a way to escape" (Tan, 1991, p.284). If she wanted, she could have ended her life, but she was curious about the happiness the world had in store for her, she understood that she had the freedom to choose her husband and she regretted that she didn't do it in the first place. Female Masculinity as theorized by Halberstam states that autonomy, strength and defiance are inherently male characteristics and Winnie uses all these male traits to defy and fight against her husband.

In the novel, Winnie narrates her own story. She speaks about her life in China, the troubles and triumphs of her life. This can be seen as an example of 'textual masculinity' where female writers express various forms of masculinity through their characters, doing so without relying on traditional gender markers or physical bodies. "While Halberstam's study deals with actual masculine women, one can extrapolate from her arguments a corollary critical engagement with female writers' textual masculinity. However, there is a difference in this engagement: while it is, like Halberstam's, an engagement with a masculinity less explicitly tied to biological sex, it is not necessarily tied to common cultural markness of maleness, and is most certainly not tied to an immediate corporeality- or is at least tied to a different sort of corpus (the text)" (Winnberg et al, 2008, p.4).

Winnie realizes that whatever the society calls 'shame', shameful that her mother ran away, are all false stories that they make up to control the life of women. Any woman who chooses another path from the so called 'normal' way of living is a disgrace. Winnie breaks free from these societal expectations, by marrying Jimmy Louie and migrating to America and starting a new life free of sorrows. She was like a phoenix who rose from the ashes. "Forbidden stories.... I remembered those stories about girls who disregarded their parent's advice and married for love.... loose control, lose your life, fall into disgrace, throw away family values, throw your face away. I remembered the ones that made me cry the most- I use to think they were like my mother's own life, as sad as a story...I had imagined an unhappy ending to my mother's life. Like Peanut, I had allowed myself to be scared by those sad tales. And look at what happened. It did not prevent disaster coming into my life. Just the opposite. And then I thought this way: Perhaps my mother's life was now filled with joy. Perhaps I too could still find the same thing. This was my hope" (Tan, 1991, p.340).

Another minor character who rejected traditional femininity is Peanut, Winnie's cousin. She was married to a homosexual man and her husband's family forced her to remain in that marriage. But she refused to conform to idealized image of a dutiful wife and prioritized her well-being. During her childhood Peanut was headstrong and got everything that she wanted by herself. As she grew up, she never lost herself to normative gender roles and stood her ground of living her life by herself. She never behaved the way society intended her to behave, she says "I lost interest in everything, all my pretty clothes. They meant nothing. My life was just like a saying I read the other day; how we are living in a world where everything is false. The society is like bright paint applied on top of rotten wood" (Tan, 1991, p.352). Her statement in the context of female masculinity provides how gender norms give a false identity about femininity, that women are supposed to be compliant and passive about their sufferings in a patriarchal society. Peanut's will to forge her own path by defying her family, who gave more importance to their honor rather than their own daughter, reinstates Halberstam's definition of female masculinity that masculinity does not just belong to men, but to women as well.

The life of Winnie Louie, Winnie's mother and Peanut clearly portrays how they self discover themselves by asserting their needs and breaking away from conventional gender roles, while preserving their femininity. Winnie was a submissive wife and when everyone around her asked her to silently endure all the oppression she suffered from her husband, she took a stand for herself. Peanut on the other hand was in an unhappy marriage, she forged her path out of her marriage by defying rigid societal norms of gender. All the characters fought against the orthodox boundaries of femininity by embracing traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness, independence in making their own choices and resilience.

6. Reimagining Gender: Female masculinity in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair

Ladies Coupe by Anita Nair was published in the year 2001. Anita Nair is an Indian author hailing from the state of Kerala. Her works mainly depicts the life of women belonging to the southern region of India, her female characters always grapple with hegemonic patriarchal regimes and, they search and attain autarky. The novel *Ladies Coupe* centers around six women who meet in the ladies' compartment of a train to Kanyakumari and shares their life stories with each other. Akhilandeshwari is the protagonist of the novel, she is a female masculine who is unmarried and is the sole bread winner of her family. The other women are Janaki, Prabha Devi, Sheela, Margaret and Marikolunthu. Janaki is content with their married life, she says that she needs a man in life to sustain in the society. Prabha Devi belongs to a rich family and she is also a perfect daughter and wife. Sheela is Akhila's youngest companion, she is persistent in finding how various social orders connected to gender works in the society. Margaret is a teacher who is unhappy in her marriage because her husband is blind to her feelings. Marikolunthu works as a maid and she is a rape victim.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila undoubtedly embodies the female masculine character, exemplifying the idea that masculinity is not restricted to men. "In the argument that masculinity has nothing to do with men, we are not necessarily arguing, literally, that female masculinity isn't related to male masculinity; rather, we are arguing that, since masculinity now has nothing to do with male body, female masculinity is just another materialization, or form, of manhood- one among many, none of which is secured (or privileged) by a referent" (Noble, 2004,p.38). She challenges traditional masculine traits through her role as the family's provider and decision maker. Akhila subverts conventional gender expectations. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, critiques the notion of becoming 'masculine' by imitating men, characters like Akhila challenges this view by embodying masculine traits like authority, independence and rationality without losing her femininity. "I am aware of an obvious inference: from every quarter have I heard exclamations against

masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennoble the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind; all those who view them with philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p.8).

Akhila became the head of the household after the death of her father. “Sundays became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the family” (Nair, 2001, p.75). She was the eldest daughter and she had two younger brothers and one sister. She worked in the income tax department and looked after the needs of her whole family. No one in the family took the initiative to get her married, but it was Akhila who conducted the marriages of all her siblings responsibly. Her mother wanted Akhila to remain in the position of the provider of the family. She looked after her family just like a father or a husband who took all the financial burden of the family on his shoulders, “The next few years went by without much incident. Their lives were led with military precision. That was the only way Akhila knew how to preserve the order and keep her family from floating away from its moorings. Dawns diminished to dusk and Sundays dwindled to be the day she washed, starched, dried and ironed the six cotton saris that comprised her entire office going wardrobe” (Nair, 2001, p.76). From the perspective of female masculinity, Akhila held the patriarchal authority in the family, embodying self-sufficiency and carrying out all the responsibilities with military precision. She was the anchor of the family and sacrificed all her desires to fulfill her family’s wishes.

In the novel Akhila is a 45-year-old spinster who has taken all the responsibilities of her household. As a result, her demeanor, her way of speaking and overall mannerisms was more masculine than feminine. Janaki one of the fellow passengers in the lady’s compartment comments on Akhila’s masculine conduct: “I thought to myself, what a rigid looking woman, with capable hands and a stern face. I thought you were a school headmistress or a nursing superintendent” (Nair, 2001, p.41). To this Akhila replies: “I wasn’t always like this; so stiff and restrained. I had to grow a shell around myself. To protect myself. To deflect hurt and pain. If I hadn’t, I would have gone insane” (Nair, 2001, p.41). In a patriarchal society women are expected to be nurturing and emotionally available. Akhila rejected femininity in order to control her life. This shows that female masculinity is not mere imitation of men, but rather it is a tool used by women to fight against imposed femininity and societal oppression.

Akhila lived a life that she never envisioned, she wanted to get married and yearned to live a normal life. But the responsibilities of the family were so much overwhelming that she forgot to live for herself. “Akhila often thought of a Tamil film she had seen some years before. Of a woman like her who is destined to be nothing more than of a workhorse. A woman who gave up her life and live for her family” (Nair, 2001, p.84). She understood that she won’t get married at this age, so she decides to live by herself, but her family is against that. “Here is the proof of everything that my family has told me. A woman can’t live alone. A woman can’t cope alone” (Nair, 2001, p.16). But Akhila always wanted to pursue a life which she envisioned, she knew that she wanted a partner in life. But she was not ready to get married and take on the responsibilities of a husband and family again. “Akhila leaned toward her and said, as far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can’t live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself?” (Nair, 2001, p.21). A key question that Akhila constantly contemplates is whether she can live without a man and her life is testimony to that very question. She proved that a woman can survive without a man through her actions. “Female masculinity thus appears as an implicit gender ideal that survives the purportedly melancholy origins of gender or gender sculpting that constrain conventional gender acquisition” (Gardiner, 2009, p.12). After her mother’s death Akhila was once again pressured by her siblings to live with them. Her sister, Padma, took advantage of this situation to use Akhila’s income to support her own husband and children. However, Akhila was no longer willing to live that way. After dedicating 26 years to supporting her family, at 45, she decided it was time to live for herself. She stood up for herself by finally revealing her true feelings to her siblings. “For heaven’s sake, I don’t need anyone’s consent. Look at me, I am forty-five years old. And older than all of you. I will do exactly as I please and I don’t give a damn about what you or anyone else thinks” (Nair, 2001, p.204).

Akhila finally realized that she needed to carve her own path to freedom. For the first time in her life, she decided to travel alone to Kanyakumari. She decided to explore everything that she missed in her youth- her independence to explore the world using her hard-earned money, freedom to love again and the liberty to explore her sexuality. “Akhila discovers that she likes being alone. She has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone. It may not be what she dreamt it to be, but at least she would have made the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now. That she be allowed to try and experience it” (Nair, 2001, p.271). Akhila chose solitude over marriage, this shows how she embraces a form of female masculinity which prefers self-sufficiency and autonomy, the traits that are traditionally associated with masculinity. She decides to rekindle her relationship with Hari, who is younger than her. In the past, she had been afraid to pursue a relationship with him due to societal pressures and her family’s expectations. But now, she realizes that she has nothing to fear. In the end Akhila becomes Sakthi, she embodies lust and transforms into Akhilandeshwari, who is fragmented into ten powerful and complex female deities in Hinduism. “According to Halberstam, masculinity should be read as a historical mode of performance in female as well as male bodies. Halberstam’s insight is vital because gender theory has given masculinity too little attention; it has ignored the ways in which multiple masculinities might complicate the notion that masculinity is merely an extension of heteronormativity and patriarchy” (Worden, 2011, p.82). Akhila’s character aligns with female masculinity as she embraces independence, resists patriarchal norms and asserts her needs over societal expectations.

Margaret Shanthi is a minor character in the work who displays subversive masculinity. She was a chemistry teacher who was trapped in a

suffocating marriage. She starts to resist her husband's control over her by making him physically weaker through food. She reclaimed her power by feeding him rich meals to dull his arrogance and authority. This aligns with Halberstam's argument that female masculinity is not simply an imitation of male power but an alternative mode of dominance (Halberstam, 1998). Rather than asserting aggression, Margaret wields control over husband by killing his overt self-confidence through strategy and patience. Her character disrupts traditional feminine submissiveness

Thus, Akhila and Margaret retains their femininity while also embodying masculine attributes. She proves that masculine traits are not exclusive to men, women can also embody these traits while retaining their femininity. Both the characters gave more importance to their own desires and rejected traditional expectations of marriage and servitude.

7. Conclusion

In Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* the theory of female masculinity materialize as a response to personal struggles and societal expectations faced by the female protagonists. Both works traverse how women can occupy male-dominated spaces and roles. The female characters also subsume qualities which are associated with masculinity such as independence, strength, resilience. They create their own identity and also speak strongly against oppression. In the *The Kitchen God's Wife* female masculinity is embodied by Winnie, her cousin and her mother. Despite of their oppressive marriage, they challenged traditional gender roles, asserted their desires, and made strong decisions about their life by themselves, which are typically considered as masculine traits conventionally. This expedition of life taught them to reclaim their identity by breaking free from victimhood and challenging patriarchal norms that tried to define them, they attained emancipation without rejecting their feminine identity. Similarly, in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair, Akhila the protagonist and Margaret Shanthi a minor character, are the women who must contend with societal pressures regarding family, marriage and femininity. Akhila is a 45-year-old woman who rejects all the constraints and embarks on a journey of self-discovery. In her journey through life, she realizes that the only way to fight against patriarchy is by embracing qualities such as self-reliance, independence and authority- often labelled as masculine traits. She challenges the gender binary and reshapes her identity without losing her femininity. Margaret Shanthi prioritizes her own desires over a conventional life by subtly maintaining control over her disengaged husband without his awareness. She puts a stop to her sufferings by herself.

The life of all the characters suggest that female masculinity is not about rejecting femininity but expanding the scope of what women can embody. The true potential of women beyond societal constructs is being reaffirmed by both the authors. Thus, the works at the same time resist as well as subvert the notion of confining women into preconditioned social frameworks. Realizing the socially constructed shackles imposed by the gender binary can empower women to identify and resist hegemonic exploitation.

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