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The myth of masculinity

5-6 minutes

Kesang Tsetan's documentary Men at Work, to be released soon, explores the concept and definition of masculinity and questions its pervasiveness



If masculinity is pervasive, it must manifest especially in work situations. This is the premise, in Kesang Tsetan's own words, of his latest documentary entitled Men at Work. Tsetan tests his theory by filming men in different work scenarios: as car mechanics, as 'maids', as students learning to be priests and as applicants to the British Gurkha service (extended shots of the Gurkha recruitment process had gone on to become the other film Who Will be a Gurkha?). The results, however, show not that masculinity is pervasive but that it is a myth.

The film begins to dispel the myth of masculinity by leaving it undefined. As a silent observer, Tsetan challenges a viewer to define maleness and in doing so challenges her preconceptions. There is no single characteristic or a set of characteristics that box the four men observed in the documentary. The usual connotations of masculinity, as the desire for dominance, manifested mostly as hubris or fortitude, do not apply.

The protagonist(s) in each of the four sections in the film are subdued: the young apprentice at Lamaji's garage, who struggles to repair mangled vehicles, can only dream of being filthy rich; the lonely child domestic help, who only smiles when he finally notices the camera acknowledging him; young kids en route to priesthood who pine for home while dreaming of salvation inside mosquito nets; and young would-be Gurkhas who get measured up to serve a foreign queendom. If there is a thread that runs through these sections, it's the loss of masculinity—emasculatation.

The feeling of powerlessness that pervades the lives of the men featured emanates from their entrapment, both abstract and literal. The viewer sees these men only in the confines of their work places, from a repair shop to the terrace of a house and from a boarding school in Jhapa to a recruitment camp in Pokhara. Because the camera never follows them outside these limits, these men look literally trapped. With entrapment then, come the sense of isolation, humiliation, and the false notion of control over themselves and their surroundings.

As the viewer analyses the traditional concepts of masculinity with regard to these men, she is acutely aware that none of the definitions of masculinity or emasculatation or what leads to them is unique to men. Women, largely absent in the film, feel these

feelings just as well. A desire to control and the inability to do so is, in fact, universal or asexual.

The truth that masculinity is a myth, however, does not mean that people do not believe in it. The film might have shattered the myth, but the filmmaker's premise has already spoken of its existence, if only in people's minds. The question the film poses then is, if the overwhelming sense while watching men at work is emasculation, do men, who believe in masculinity, offset this outside work, where their 'opposites' (women) are? Is this how sexual entitlement butts in? Perhaps. The film has no answers. The viewer could try to infer them from the contexts in which the film was made.

The documentary is one of four in a regional package called Let's Talk Men 2.0, which, as the name suggests, tries to incite discussions on men and manhood in the broader context of patriarchy and violence against women. According to a UN study on gender-based violence conducted in 2010-2013 in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea, with interviews of more than 10,000 men and 3,000 women, rape of women is 'pervasive' in the region and is usually prompted by a sense of sexual entitlement, followed by boredom and then anger. Although no comprehensive data is available on violence against women in Nepal, unfortunately, the country is not an exception.

Acts of, or discussions on, sex is off screen in Tsetan's documentary, except in slight references, as in talks of marriage in Lamaji's garage and in unspoken vows of abstinence in the boarding school for priests. Anger is as well muted. But boredom and abuse underlies the film. So do the tendency to control and work-related depression, the other factors that the UN survey

found led to violence perpetration.

Of course, this does not mean that the men in the documentary once off work go home and beat their partners or that they will grow up to be violent. But given the contexts, the viewer has to wonder whether the traditional ideals of masculinity manifest most prominently outside 'male-dominated' spheres of work and whether they can only exist in opposition to non-masculinity, the most stated synonym of which is femininity. Could it also be that the more isolated the two are, the sharper the conflict between them? Should we not then advocate for gender-based inclusion in the workplace?

The film does not have to be viewed from the lens of gender, but could be taken as an ode to everyday humdrum. This, though, only goes to show that masculinity is just another lens.