

Rewriting the Metanarrative of Gender: Through Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming – Pool Library*

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Abstract

Postmodern theorists were the first to adopt a mechanism to subvert the so called ‘truths’ of the society. Gender roles and its further constructions in the society, therefore was considered a Metanarrative that has to be questioned and disestablished. This accounts to the postmodern attack on hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity, seen through the Metanarrative of all ages. However in the postmodern age, a role reversal takes place in the idea of masculinity and, subordinate masculinities took over the position. Writers and critics irrespective of gender started to pounce on strict gender codes. Gender restrictions and toxic ideals of men, primarily an untouched field of study when compared to femininity, gained more prominence in the postmodern age. Alan Hollinghurst became an ambassador to the marginalized males, by writing a novel, *The Swimming – Pool Library* (1988) where he portrayed the life an unapologetic gay thus questioning the Metanarrative of acceptable masculinity.

Keywords: Metanarrative, Masculinity, Postmodernism, Gender, Homosexuality, Deconstruction.

The growth of post- modernism and its adherers in historical circles have caused quite a stir in dealing with the validity of many historical documents. It is defined in various ways, however most critics agree to the fact that post modernism represents the rejection of the modernist tenets of rational, historical and scientific thought in favor of self- conscious, ironic and experimental works. This ambiguity in defining the term post modernism also can be seen in its approach to gender related areas as well. Gender in fact is an obsolete idea in post modernism, characterized by an inherent motive of questioning Metanarratives present in the society. Stress is given more on the attack of toxic masculinity in the postmodern age. Wars and revolutions of the 1950s and 60s paved way for the emergence of toxic male behaviors that urged men to maintain unemotional, violent and sexually aggressive manners of conduct. Toxic males of the age considered sensitive and impulsive men as effeminate or as marginalized males. Shere Hite, a German feminist and writer, in her book *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality* (1981) very promptly exposes how men in the postmodern age felt like about their own gender definition from the past years. She says, “Men are trained at an early age to disregard any and every emotion, and be strong. You

take someone like that and then wonder why they don't and sometimes can't express feelings" (76). She argues that men in postmodern age go through frustration and aggression in response to the demands of adhering to the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. She further adds that men are conditioned in certain ways to behave and live, just like women in the patriarchal society and urges to escape themselves from the strict policies of dominant masculinity. In her another influential book, *The Sheer Hite Reader: New and Selected Writings on Sex, Globalism and Private Life* (2006), she observes how rigid masculinity exasperates men in the postmodern age,

Trying to live by the male code, being totally self-sufficient, emotionally and economically, always providing shelter and food (or sex and orgasms), never receiving or needing anything, never needing a woman's love more than she needs the man's – all this hurts and stunts men. (209)

The whole scenario of oppressing the masculine reality in the name of hegemony and patriarchy, under goes a huge change after the 1980s. Writers and critics irrespective of gender started to pounce on strict gender codes for both men and women. Gender restrictions and toxic ideals of men, primarily an untouched field of study when compared to femininity, gained more prominence when gender theorists like R.W Connell, John Tosh, John MacInnes and many others wrote works, emphasizing on the need to get away with rigid notions of masculinity. In John MacInnes's book, *The End of Masculinity* (1998), he says,

Men have lost a great deal of their power over men and women, have become more aware of this process, have started to realize that they too constitute a 'gender' and have started to discuss and debate this, usually in response to feminist challenge, rather than under their own initiative, producing books along the way...that 'gender' together with the terms masculinity and femininity, is an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where in fact there are none, and whose existence they at other times deny. (1-2)

MacInnes expounds in his book, the most striking theory of gender especially of masculinity that is ever proposed in the postmodern age. He tells that the new age draws an end to masculinity. It can be described as a crisis of masculinity in the postmodern age for those who have exercised hegemonic masculinity and a victory for those who were categorized under marginalized masculinity (homosexuals, effeminates, unemployed immigrants etc.). Men realize that they are trapped in gender constructions of the society just like women that subjugates them on the criteria of some popular notions accepted in the society.

Men in the postmodern or contemporary society, find it as their responsibility to destabilize these unwritten Metanarratives of masculinity to break free themselves from the gender

codes made for them. Also postmodernism features a comeback of marginalized masculinities to lash out hegemonic and toxic masculinities. Homosexuals and effeminates were not even included in the group of males in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century society. Homosexual masculinities were forced into the bottom of male sex hierarchy. However in the contemporary society of the postmodern age people are less surprised when men belonging to marginalized masculinities try to redefine their masculinities by coming into the forefront along with dominant masculinities. In fact there is a blurring of the line between dominant and marginalized masculinities in the postmodern age. None of it claims its superiority to each other, for nothing is considered superior in postmodern age. Earlier homosexual men were included in a circle of straight men only if they could perform at least some of the codes and notions of accepted masculinity. In the postmodern age, no men try to fit in to the hegemony of masculinity; instead they try to question the gender constructions. In an era where gender binary is considered as outdated and old fashioned, how masculinity and its hegemony will survive is a tough question for all hegemonic males. In nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women writers were the ones who mostly initiated to deconstruct the Metanarrative of gender, both masculinity and femininity for a gender neutral society. The achievement of a major victory of women liberation from gender restrictions, stimulated writers of the postmodern age, especially male writers to fight against the norms for masculinity in the society. Many writers like Allan Hollinghurst, Nick Hornby and Irvine Welsh wrote novels explicitly about the life of so called 'marginalized' males(homosexuals) to expose and unveil a life unapologetically lived in opposition to popular norms.

In Allan Hollinghurst's novel, *The Swimming – Pool Library* published in 1988, he presents the life of few Metanarrative unrepentant homosexual men living in 1983 London. William Beckwith is a twenty five year old idle young aristocrat, privileged, frequently gorging on culture and young men representing a culture emerging as a counterpart for the accepted culture. He meets with an elderly homosexual man, Charles Nantwich whose encounter teaches Will (William) about the history of homosexuals in the early twentieth century London. Other characters including Dr. James Brook, a close companion of Will who is also a homosexual, Arthur Edison Hope, the black boyfriend of Will along a few other homosexual men living in the postmodern London. Allan Hollinghurst's novel is in fact an unlatched attack on the false morals of the society and most importantly on the hegemonic masculinity of the past ages. William, along with Charles and Arthur though are portrayed vulnerable due to their 'unpopular' sexuality still are irresistibly 'masculine' otherwise. William is quite uninterrupted in his ventures of sexuality with other men he meets in the 'swimming pool library' a changing room for men to meet other men. His whole life is what Hollinghurst use, as a tool against the hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity. William Beckwith, in the novel is not even bothered about how 'normal' people live in his society, for him his way of living and sexuality along with masculinity is normal. The very title becomes interesting once William reveals the atmosphere of the "dingy, dignified underground bath" (16) area what they call as swimming pool library. The place is not strictly for homosexuals and even straight men spend time in there.

However William never mentions about any of them, much likely ignorant of a ‘normal’ heterosexual world just like how heterosexual world conveniently ignores the homosexual world. Hollinghurst includes explicit explanations of how homosexual men disestablish the Metanarrative of heterosexual relationships and pictures gay relationships just like heterosexual relationships.

It would be in vain to pretend that all the men at the Corry looked like the stars of a physique magazine. There were gods – demi – gods, at least...this naked mingling, which formed a ritualistic heart to the life of the club, produced its own improper incitements to ideal liaisons, and polyandrous happenings which could not survive into the world of jackets and ties, cycle-clips and duffel – coats. (22-23)

William and Dr. James talk like any other two hegemonic heterosexual men talk about their crushes and relationships. William at times makes any reader conditioned by the Metanarratives of hegemonic masculinity forget about what they have learnt about disregarding homosexuals as ineligible men. Nevertheless William Beckwith is an undoubtedly eligible young male living in London just like any other heterosexual man. This remorseless character of William about his sexuality and masculinity is subtly contrasted with the characters of Dr. James and Arthur, both close companions of William. Dr. James, a doctor by profession is slightly troubled by his homosexuality because of the hostile society around him, “Being a doctor, too, made him circumspect, as well as giving him kind of authority for his lack of adventurousness” (27). He also got arrested once for his homosexuality even when he was not public about his sexuality. Arthur, a black young man who fetches shelter in William’s home, also his boyfriend not as confident in his sexuality and masculinity as William. His consciousness is disturbed by his survival both as a black and as a homosexual in a white dominated hegemonic heterosexual world. However William stands as a foundation for the sexual uneasiness of both Arthur and Dr. James and exists as a support system for them.

The homosexual masculinity that was marginalized earns much freedom and acceptance in the postmodern age. The novel, *Swimming – Pool Library* by Alan Hollinghurst is a proof of how postmodern writers destabilize the narrative of masculinity and introduces characters that live beyond the gender restrictions of the society. The novel is a vehement attack on toxic and complicit masculinity. The characters in the novel like Charles and William Beckwith are not complicit males like those who do not challenge the hegemony of masculinity even though they know that gender restrictions are social evils. Till the modern age, few characters have evolved outside complicit masculinity that questioned the idea of hegemonic masculinity as they only form of dominant masculinity. However Charles and William are not ready to sit back and enjoy the limited privileges they are supposed to get as males. They stand up to voice their sexuality and masculinity and do not step back from asserting their right to live in the world just like any other heterosexual man. Toxic masculinity that urges men to be arrogant, rough and insensitive and that forbids anything that is effeminate and considered not ‘masculine’ is slapped on its face by

postmodern masculinity through this novel. William and characters are pictured showing emotions to each other and becoming sensitive to each other's feelings. William mentions Arthur as being shy and timid ('feminine' qualities) yet fiercely built and 'masculine'. Hollinghurst breaks the Metanarrative of toxic masculinity by introducing characters who do not shy away from sensitivity and showing emotions. In fact Allan Hollinghurst reflects to the 'new man' emerging from the burial ground of Metanarratives of masculinity.

Charles who was brought up in a more sexually sensitive age and era fights more vigorously to break the stereotypes of gender and sexuality.

It would be unedifying to describe as it would be needless torture to recall those days when the world first changed, and became a world without my Taha. It was a terrible destitution, and my knowledge is all bound up with my physical experience of the hard coir mattress where I lay, the few properties of my cell, the bladeless razor, the little framed square of looking glass in which I caught my tear-blotched face, the steady night-time smell of the chamberpot. As the autumn drew on it grew colder in prison, but if one held one's hand to the black iron vent through which warm air was supposed to issue into each one felt only a slight chill stirring, which seemed to come from far away. (372)

Charles puts into words the torture he had to face in the prison and from the officials when he got arrested for his homosexuality around the time of the second world war. Despite his high position in Foreign Service he was prosecuted and was sent to jail for his indecency in public. His black boyfriend Taha was forced to marry another woman and leave the place. Through the life of Charles Nantwich unveiled through his diaries, Will gets a clear picture about the plight gay men had to go through and even gets a shock when he gets to realize that the politician that ordered the ruthless arrest of Charles and ruined his life was none other than his own grandfather, Sir Denis Beckwith.

I see in The Times today that Sir Denis Beckwith, following calls in the House for the reform of sexual offence law, is to leave the DPP's office and take a peerage. Oddly typical of the British way of getting rid of troublemakers by moving them up – implying as it does too some reward for the appalling things he has done...And he is the man I could hate, the one who more than anybody has been the inspiration of this 'purge' as he calls it, this crusade to eradicate the male vice. (373-374)

Will, himself a gay becomes devastated to know that his wealth, his rank and his leisured gay existence are all built on a foundation of homosexual persecution. Through Charles' diaries Will learns that Taha the African gay man has been killed in an incident that was apparently racially motivated. After being educated on his own past and the past of his marginalized community, William becomes increasingly conscious to make sure he and other homosexuals get to live peacefully in the country.

In *Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst brings out the key point of marginalized communities coming to the forefront, stamping on the hegemony of masculinity that subjugated men who are racially attacked, migrants, refugees, homosexuals and unemployed. In the novel Charles acknowledges how racially different men live and love each other without any hesitations. In fact both Charles and William had African partners, Taha and Arthur respectively, irrespective of black and white binary. Hollinghurst does a brilliant take on the postmodern masculinity through *Swimming-Pool Library* deconstructing the Metanarratives of traditional masculinity making it a postmodern classic on new gender and sexuality.

Citations

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