

Negotiating Masculinity: The Performance of Gender in Anubha Yadav's *The Anger of Sainly Men*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.28>

Abstract

This paper examines masculinity in Anubha Yadav's The Anger of Sainly Men through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. By analysing the characters of the father and his three sons Sonu, Anu, and Vicky, the study argues that masculine identities are not inherent, but are produced and maintained through repeated, socially regulated acts. Set within a patriarchal lower middle-class Indian household, the novel depicts masculinity as fragile, shaped by negotiations around control, dominance, and heterosexual competence. The paper interrogates how these expectations manifest in familial roles, sexual conduct and silence, and how moments of failure, shame, or quiet resistance reveal masculinity as a contested and evolving identity.

Keywords: masculinity, anger, submission, patriarchy, performance

Introduction

Masculinity in India is a complex construct, shaped by colonial modernity, nationalist ideologies, and entrenched patriarchal structures. Rather than being a singular identity, Indian masculinity emerges as a spectrum of performances that men must repeatedly negotiate in both public and private spheres. In the Indian context, masculinity functions as a culturally sanctioned performance, tightly policed by family expectations and broader social norms. This is particularly evident among men from lower middle-class or marginalised backgrounds, who must continuously assert their masculinity to retain social legitimacy.

The representation of masculinity in Indian English fiction has changed significantly from the 19th century to the present, reflecting the broader shifts in Indian society, politics, and culture. In the 19th century, Indian English fiction was still emerging, influenced heavily by colonial education and social reform. In *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, one of the earliest Indian English novels, the male character Rajmohan represents a masculinity caught between traditional patriarchal control and the rise of moral consciousness. His aggression, rooted in feudal values, contrasts with the emerging modern ideals that began to influence Indian society during the colonial period. In the early 20th century, during the nationalist movement, masculinity in fiction was shaped by ideas of sacrifice, morality, and resistance. Mulk Raj Anand's

Untouchable (1935) introduces Bakha, a lower-caste sweeper whose masculinity is marked by inner strength, dignity, and suffering in a rigid caste-bound society. His character challenges dominant upper-caste masculine ideals by foregrounding vulnerability and social marginalisation. Similarly, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) presents Moorthy, a Brahmin who rejects orthodoxy in favour of Gandhian principles. Moorthy's masculinity is shaped by spiritual commitment and non-violent resistance, portraying an ideal of the ethical, self-sacrificing male aligned with nationalist aspirations. In the decades following independence, writers like R. K. Narayan focused on the everyday struggles of men in a newly independent nation. In *The Guide* (1958), Raju undergoes a transformation from a cunning tourist guide to a spiritual figure, reflecting the tension between personal ambition and moral responsibility. His masculinity evolves through guilt, redemption and a desire for meaning. In the 1980s and 1990s, postcolonial narratives added complexity to male identity. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) presents Saleem Sinai, a protagonist whose body and identity are fractured by history and politics. His masculinity is unstable, shaped by the trauma of Partition and the burden of national destiny. Similarly, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), characters like Tridib express masculinity through imagination and emotional depth rather than dominance or control. These men challenge conventional masculine ideals by embracing sensitivity, ambiguity, and intellectual reflection. In the 21st century, Indian English fiction has critically examined masculinity through the lens of caste, class, neoliberalism, and sexuality. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) explores a darker form of masculinity through Balram Halwai, whose journey from servant to entrepreneur involves murder and deceit. His masculinity reflects the aggression and amorality encouraged by a hyper-competitive, unequal society. In Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012), male characters are shaped by addiction, urban decay, and existential disillusionment, portraying masculinity steeped in escapism and alienation. In *Serious Men* (2010) by Manu Joseph, the protagonist Ayyan Mani uses deceit and manipulation to challenge systemic hierarchies, revealing how masculinity can become a tool for both resistance and self-destruction. Contemporary fiction has also embraced queer and alternative masculinities. Works like *She of the Mountains* (2014) by Vivek Shraya blur the boundaries of gender, offering fluid and non-binary perspectives on masculinity. These narratives dismantle the rigid norms of traditional manhood and explore how gender, sexuality, and identity intersect. The representation of masculinity in Indian English fiction has thus moved from the moral and nationalist ideals of the colonial era to a more complex, fractured and critical portrayal in the contemporary period, capturing the evolving realities of Indian men across time.

Discussion

Anubha Yadav is a prominent Indian writer, academic, and filmmaker whose work engages deeply with themes of gender, identity, and social change in contemporary India. Her debut novel, *The Anger of Sainthly Men* (2021), provides a nuanced exploration of masculinity rooted in the socio-cultural realities of a lower middle-class Indian household, reflecting the complexities traced in contemporary Indian English fiction. In addition to her novel, Yadav has published numerous short stories, essays, and academic articles in reputed Indian and international journals and anthologies. Her stories are known for their emotional depth, strong characterization and ability to capture the complexities of modern Indian life. Yadav also has a rich background in media and communication studies. She serves as a professor at the University of Delhi, where she teaches broadcast writing and documentary filmmaking. She

has also worked extensively in documentary filmmaking and has written scripts for television and digital platforms, further showcasing her versatility as a storyteller. Her academic work often intersects with her creative writing, and she uses both platforms to interrogate issues of gender justice, social inequality, and cultural representation.

The Anger of Saintly Men centres on three brothers—Saurabh (Sonu), Anurag (Anu), and Vikram (Vicky) and captures the everyday rituals of masculine identity through silence, anger, dominance, and emotional repression within the Indian family. This paper employs Judith Butler’s theory to argue that masculinity in the novel is not a stable identity, but a performative construct. As Butler notes, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (179). This view is also reflected in Srivastava’s assertion that “masculinity is enacted rather than expressed,” and that “the very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced . . . says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender identities; they must continually be reinforced” (Srivastava 15). Hence, the novel’s nuanced portrayal of masculine identity as fragile and constantly contested, occupies a critical place within contemporary gender theory.

The performance of masculinity in *The Anger of Saintly Men* is closely tied to the socio-economic precarity of the household. In a small-town in India, where opportunities are limited, the pressure to fulfil the masculine role of breadwinner and protector becomes both burdensome and often unattainable. The father’s struggle with joblessness is recalled through Sonu’s childhood memory: “After giving details of a job he still didn’t have, Papa would relish dinner like he had earned it” (ch.1). The act of relishing a meal becomes a simulation of success, a performance of masculinity intended to preserve the father’s authority and self-worth. His satisfaction lies not in actual employment but in the convincing portrayal of fulfilment, both to others and to himself. This act of pretending exemplifies what Judith Butler defines as performative gender. As she explains, gender is “a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (177). Complementing this, Srivastava frames patriarchy and masculinity as interconnected but distinct processes: “Patriarchy makes men superior, whereas masculinity is the process of producing superior men ... the very notion that masculinity must be continually produced and reproduced highlights its social and historical nature” (16). The father’s symbolic act of possession when the family moves into the small house, announcing “Now we are a family” (ch. 1), thus becomes a reassertion of masculinity through patriarchal authority, spatial control, and material markers. Ironically, the house, nicknamed the “chuhedani” (ch.1) by the children, represents the fragile threshold at which patriarchal masculinity is reclaimed.

Sonu, the eldest son, inherits the patriarchal model of masculinity defined by dominance, control, and protection. Yet, he fails to fully perform this ideal, bearing the psychological burden of inadequacy. His childhood memory of being unable to protect Anu from a beating and instead urinating against a wall while repeatedly chanting “*Dekho yahan gadha moot raha hai*” (ch.1) exposes the deep internalisation of masculine failure. In Indian idiom, the *gadha* or donkey symbolises a creature that is overworked, ridiculed, and seen as unintelligent or

ineffective. By aligning himself with the donkey, Sonu unconsciously performs the role of an ineffectual man who fails to meet patriarchal expectations of masculinity. Sonu's masculinity is further complicated by his attraction to his cousin Anju, both victims of the flour mill owner's abuse. Although Sonu was too afraid to retaliate, he fabricates a performative act of courage: "To look angry and exhausted I ran the last leg, opened the first two buttons of my school shirt and tore the third off... 'He said sorry and was crying'" (ch.1). This episode reveals masculinity as imitation rather than authentic agency. Later, Sonu's exposure of Anju, motivated by jealousy and wounded pride after she kisses Anu, reflects a fragile masculinity struggling for validation through control.

Sonu's sexual insecurity becomes clear in his adolescent memory of learning "Night King" from his younger brother Anu. The shame of needing to be taught, combined with the pressure to compete in a secret ritual of male masturbation, deepens Sonu's internal conflict. Anurag excels in this domain and mocks Sonu, "You are a kid with a moustache, don't worry I will make you a man" (ch.5), thereby further undermining Sonu's precarious masculine identity. Sonu is manipulated by his Malik, a member of his friends' gang, into having sex with a mongrel, Brownie, in a misguided attempt to reclaim dominance: "I imagined telling the colourful details to Anu. For once, I would have done something risky, something that would make Anu look tame, something deserving of the title of an elder brother. A man who did things" (ch.5). Sonu attempts to transcend the humiliation of being overshadowed by Anu by performing an act meant to assert his superiority. This logic is mirrored in Michael Kimmel's assertion that "Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood" (232). It is also relevant here to point to the role of what Radhika Chopra calls the *yaari* gang, or the friendship group located in the street: "The friendship group counters the hierarchies in which boys, as adolescent 'incomplete men' are placed within familial relations ... Hanging out with their friends at street corners enables these 'incomplete' men to articulate and capture a sense of autonomy, lost or muted in the family context" (Chopra 56). However, in Sonu's case, his attempt to reclaim masculinity by following Malik's advice is so traumatic that when the dog dies days later, he believes it is a curse upon him.

Sonu grows into a man still defined by his father's authority. At Tanya's birth, Papa's sigh signals disappointment at the absence of a male heir, prompting Sonu to follow his father's implicit demand for prenatal sex determination and termination of two female foetuses. When a son is finally conceived, Papa declares, "You are a full family now... Tum do tumhare do" (ch.5), revealing how patriarchy equates masculinity and familial success with producing a male child. Sonu briefly asserts autonomy when Surya impregnates a girl; unlike Papa, who laughs it off, he pays the girl's father and considers moving out. This signals a shift toward responsibility and independence, yet the next morning he recalls it "like a dream one takes under a spell" (ch.5), exposing the fragility of his resolve and the tension between duty and defiance in his masculinity.

While Sonu's path reveals the strain of trying to break free from patriarchal expectations, Anu, the middle brother, embodies a more visibly conflicted negotiation of masculinity. Educated at IIT and IIM, Anu performs a socially sanctioned version of hegemonic masculinity through his academic achievements and professional competence. As Srivastava notes, "The heterosexual, white-collar married male who is the 'breadwinner' is a useful (if somewhat caricatured)

type to think about hegemonic masculinity. For, embedded in this representation is “an entire inventory of the behaviours and roles that have been historically valorised as becoming of ideal masculinity” (14). However, this conformity is undermined by his inability to sustain a marriage, which he conceals from his family. The concealment suggests a deep-rooted anxiety about deviating from the normative masculine trajectory of marital stability and patriarchal authority. His initial silence about the divorce reflects the pressure to maintain the appearance of masculine competence, even in the face of personal failure.

Anu’s encounters with queerness complicate his gender identity and reveal the anxieties surrounding non-normative masculinity. In school, Anu’s naive sexual encounter with a classmate, Dhillon, leads to Dhillon’s rustication and leaves Anu with unresolved shame and confusion, intensified by silence and internalized guilt. Later, when Anu learns that his college roommate Nikhil’s father is gay, he expresses both fear and discomfort, illustrating how queerness provokes anxiety and denial within masculine spaces. As Srivastava explains, “Dominant masculinity stands in a relationship not just to femininity but also to those ways of being male that are seen to deviate from the ideal. It is in this sense that masculinity possesses both external (relating to women) as well as internal (relating to ‘other’ men) characteristics. Both these contexts assist in bolstering what scholars have referred to as ‘hegemonic’ masculine identity” (14). At IIT, Anu’s long ponytail and engagement in non-traditional activities like writing poetry and blogging represent a defiant identity against Chuhedani’s hegemonic masculinity. However, after being called a “sissy” by Nikhil for refusing to drink beer, Anu cuts his hair to conform, demonstrating how homophobic policing regulates gender performance. Kimmel’s observation regarding homophobia is highly significant in this context: “Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay... Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (233). Anu’s post-divorce marriage proposals further expose the pressures to reclaim masculine reputation. His feeling of being “saleable” (ch.6) reveals conflicted validation-seeking even as he resists paternal and societal demands by avoiding his father’s calls while maintaining an outward performance of compliance.

In contrast, Vicky, the youngest brother, presents a different trajectory of masculinity. He initially struggles with a stutter that undermines his masculinity but gradually finds his voice through poetry and political activism inspired by his cousin Mahesh. After a police raid targeting Mahesh, Vicky faces intense anger from his father but remains silent, reacting with frustration toward his mother, who mocks him as an “angry saint” (ch.10). This moment embodies the contradictions of Indian masculinity, where idealized discipline and emotional restraint are enforced through suppression of vulnerability. In college, Vicky joins a radical circle whose revolutionary masculinity collapses under police brutality and fear. During detention, Hem’s idealistic recitation contrasts with Vicky’s emotional breakdown and accusation, “You’ll get us killed” (ch.9), signaling the rejection of heroic masculinity. His inability to recite the lines of Sancho Panza signifies the end of unrealistic expectations of heroism associated with masculinity. After their escape from detention, Vicky murmurs Sancho’s lines about knights being beaten one day and crowned the next, implying not masculine aggression, but the endurance required to survive in this world.

Vicky’s emotional vulnerability finds a parallel in his relationship with Priyamvada. Here

too, Vicky is silenced, though this time by intimacy rather than state violence. In the college broadsheet, Priyamvada describes his penis as fragile and transforms his body into a public object of irony and ridicule for the sake of a feminist critique. When he protests, she silences him with condescension: “Don’t be a drama clown” (ch.11). The college broadsheet and the detention mirror one another as both are spaces where Vicky is exposed, made vulnerable, and robbed of voice. Together, these episodes offer a scathing critique of masculinity—not as dominance, but as a state of precariousness.

Vicky’s disownment by his father and his return to care for his father suffering from dementia reflect a complex negotiation of masculinity. “His forgetting forged a new relationship between us,” Vicky observes (ch.12). “Sometimes, Papa did remember clearly and on those days I felt as insufficient and angry as before” (ch.12). It is significant to note that it is only when his father’s memory fails, that patriarchal authority is temporarily suspended, allowing both men to exist outside the hierarchical structures of patriarchy. It is in these moments that Vicky finds happiness as he is no longer under compulsion to perform masculinity in opposition or submission to his father’s authority.

Conclusion

The Anger of Sainly Men offers a nuanced exploration of masculinity that aligns with the broader trajectory of Indian English fiction’s evolving portrayals of male identity. The novel’s shifting perspectives, and interspersed flashbacks reinforce the instability of masculinity as a coherent identity. The absence of a single, authoritative narrator mirrors the absence of a singular, stable masculinity. The brothers’ diverging responses demonstrate that masculinity is not monolithic, but fractured, contingent, and constantly under negotiation. Each character performs masculinity in ways that reveal both personal struggles and societal constraints. Papa represents the traditional, hegemonic model of masculinity, but his decline due to illness exposes the limitations and vulnerabilities of this ideal. Sonu, grappling with violence and feelings of inadequacy, embodies the tension between the desire for dominance and the internal conflicts that undermine it. Anu, whose failed marriage and homophobic attitudes point to his internalised masculine ideals, struggles with intimacy and emotional connection, ultimately demonstrating the isolation that results from rigid gender expectations. Vicky, in contrast, expresses a more emotionally sensitive and vulnerable form of masculinity, which is both punished and silenced by the world around him, particularly in his relationships with the state and with Priyamvada. Through their distinct experiences, Yadav critiques the emotional and psychological costs of adhering to patriarchal masculine norms, highlighting how these ideals constrain both emotional expression and the pursuit of genuine human connection.

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