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Masculinities in Flux in Akhil Sharma's *A Life of Adventure and Delight*

Abstract: The article analyses representations of masculinities in selected stories from Akhil Sharma's collection *A Life of Adventure and Delight*. It examines the ways in which male protagonists, Indian immigrants in the US, relate to the discourse of hegemonic masculinity realised as patriarchal masculinity. It is argued that Sharma tries to revise negative stereotypes of Indian American masculinity, indicating critical moments which carry the potential of transformation from patriarchal into more positive models of masculinity. Sharma's re-Orientalist narrative techniques reinforce his criticism of patriarchy.

Keywords: patriarchy, stereotypes, Indian diaspora, re-Orientalism

Introduction

Two decades ago Rajini Srikanth complained about stereotypical accounts of South Asian gender and sexuality in the Western media, expressing her hope that South Asian American writers should examine their own views on gender and sexuality.[1] For a long time, mainly female writers were dominant on the literary market, representing the culture and experience of both genders, and becoming the "creators and keepers of the global literary image of South Asian culture."[2] Female experience has been seen as crucial for the representation of diaspora,[3] thus becoming a frequent subject of scholarly examinations, while male experience has been somewhat

1. Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 128.
2. Lisa Lau, "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2009), 572.
3. Sandhya Rao Mehta, "Introduction: Revisiting Gendered Spaces in the Diaspora," in *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Sandhya Rao Mehta (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015), 4–7.

neglected.[4] Popular female writers have managed to instill certain images of South Asian American men, for instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni[5] overwhelmingly portrays Indian men negatively – even as immigrants to the US they are dominant, insensitive, prone to violence, and rooted in their patriarchal beliefs (a notable exception is her story "Clothes"). The generations of younger female writers portray equality of the sexes and more positive male-female interactions, which both reflects the changing reality and promotes more equitable relationships, thus subverting the stereotypes. Srikanth gives the examples of Jhumpa Lahiri's and Tahira Naqvi's fiction, claiming that "great sensitivity and nuance in their depictions of the partnerships and conflicts between South Asian women and men"[6] defy easy assumptions of patriarchy or women's oppression, simultaneously pointing to more positive images of masculinity.

As the numbers of South Asian American male writers are growing, the questions about their self-representation can be raised. How do they respond to the burdensome stereotypes concerning South Asian masculinity, rooted either in Western Orientalist perception or reflecting adherence to the patriarchal traditions? How do they represent the changing reality, the changing gender roles, and the growing equality between men and women? Another issue is a writer's positionality. Does a diasporic writer located in the West identify with the Western or Eastern values? What impact may it have on the strategies of representation?

This study of Akhil Sharma's short story collection *A Life of Adventure and Delight* aims to shed some light on the masculinities rendered in the selected stories from the collection. The focus falls on the examination of male characters in four stories set in the United States: "Cosmopolitan," "You Are Happy?," "A Life of Adventure and Delight," and "The Well." I argue that Sharma deliberately reconstructs stereotypical patriarchal heterosexual masculinity in order to criticize traditional patriarchy and interrogate the ways in which it is damaging not only to women but also to men. Sharma's male characters are often constrained by rigid social expectations and deprived of the emotional competencies necessary to build and sustain meaningful relationships, resulting

4. See: Sandhya Rao Mehta, ed., *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015).

5. Divakaruni is a writer engaged in working in organizations that help battered women and strive to eliminate domestic violence and abuse especially in South Asian and South Asian American households.

6. Srikanth, *The World Next Door*, 136.

in superficial connections and a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. His narrative strategies create the reader's empathy for his protagonists by foregrounding their suffering, confusion, and emotional vulnerability. At the same time, the narratives suggest that the only viable path toward a more satisfying life lies in moving away from entrenched patriarchal ideals of manhood towards more positive masculinities: non-dominant, sensitive, and caring. Crucially, some stories reveal moments of moral insight – small epiphanies that gesture toward the possibility of future transformation and signal the gradual erosion of long-standing masculine norms. Importantly, changes may not always be traceable within a single lifetime but become visible across generations.

Even though Sharma treats his characters with much tenderness, his depiction raises questions about his participation in the discourse of re-Orientalism, in other words, the process of negative stereotypization of the East and simplification of its presentation. As Lisa Lau argues, Orientalism described by Edward Said is continued by Easterners, or Orientals, themselves,[7] its role being preparing the East for easy consumption in the West, marketing the margins through ostentatious exotica, creating a spectacle of the East, in a comprehensible and "charmingly different"[8] way. Similarly to Orientalism, re-Orientalism often sets the East in a binary relation to the West, or at least adopts a Western point of reference, thereby perpetuating stereotypes, creating distortions and dogmatic totalizations. In their more recent studies of re-Orientalist practices, Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau point to the literary constructions of "Dark India," a space depicted as grappling with profound socioeconomic and political challenges, including moral corruption, injustice, and violence, identified as a practice to cater to a Western appetite for voyeuristic viewings of India as a backward, poverty stricken, and crime-laden country. While the scholars attend to the "exotica of poverty" in particular, resulting in "poverty tourism" or "poorism," they note an interest in exposing India's moral depravations,[9] visible also in many Sharma's works.

Akhil Sharma is a diasporic writer, born in India and raised in the United States, and from this position he explores sensitivities and mindsets of Indian men, also those in the diaspora. As a whole, his collection appears to present negative stereotypes of Indian masculinity, showing Indian men

7. Lau, "Re-Orientalism," 572.

8. Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau, "India through re-Orientalist Lenses," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 5 (2015), 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.984619 (23.11.2025).

9. Mendes and Lau, "India through re-Orientalist Lenses," 13.

as dominant, violent, and insensitive; this general unpleasantness of men is captured by Adrian Tomine with the title of his review: "In Delhi or America, the Men in These Stories Behave Badly."[10] Nevertheless, there are stories which depict men in a positive manner, most notably, "Surrounded by Sleep" explores a boy's and his father's vulnerability and sensitivity, while "A Heart is Such a Heavy Thing" ultimately reveals a father's deep concern and care about his son's well-being in the future.

Sharma's sustained emphasis on the Indianness, and thus the alterity of his diasporic characters, combined with their generally negative stereotyping, may be regarded as a form of re-Orientalist engagement, depicting Indian masculinity as deficient and in need of improvement. At the same time, Sharma subjects his male characters to an honest examination exposing their misconduct, investigating their frustrations and unhappiness, as well as indicating the moments of gaining deeper reflection, feeling shame or guilt, and through these subtle depictions the writer signals a possibility of change to non-dominant models of masculinity.

Sharma has already proved himself as an insightful explorer of Indian and Indian American masculinities in his other works. His first novel, *An Obedient Father*, set in India, explores Indian patriarchal society and makes the narrator Ram Karam its vivid representative. Karam is a repulsive figure, deluded with his male power and control, "a monster of inculpability" who is "disgusted with himself, but at the same time quite incapable of change."[11] Karam receives no saving grace and is viewed as "the product of a society saturated in cruelty and corruption, from the sadism inflicted on animals by country children, to the machinations and graft at every conceivable level of society."[12] In contrast, *Family Life*, a novel about Indian immigrants in the US going through a family tragedy, offers the opposite image of Indian men (father and son) who immigrate to the US and are presented as decent, honest, hard-working individuals, who are additionally sensitive, fragile, and extremely vulnerable figures. Generally, Sharma's depiction of men embraces a diversity of masculinities. Also in *A Life of Adventure and Delight* a wide

10. Adrian Tomine, "In Delhi or America, the Men in These Stories Behave Badly," review of *A Life of Adventure and Delight*, by Akhil Sharma, *New York Times Review*, August 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/books/review/a-life-of-adventure-and-delight-akhil-sharma.html (7.11.2022).

11. Nicholas Lezard, "Moral Corruption in Delhi," review of *An Obedient Father*, by Akhil Sharma, *The Guardian*, May 15, 2015, https://www.inkl.com/news/an-obedient-father-by-akhil-sharma-review-moral-corruption-in-delhi (15.09.2024).

12. Lezard, "Moral Corruption in Delhi."

spectrum of men and their experiences is offered; although patriarchal masculinities prevail, they are by no means fixed and stable, but either transforming, or with a capacity to transform.

From Hegemonic to Alternative Masculinity

Masculinity is never unproblematic, it is fluid – constantly transforming. Forever changing, challenged and adjusting in various ways, masculinity is "*always* in crisis."[13] According to Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt, multiple masculinities exist in every culture, moreover, they are hierarchical, with hegemonic masculinity legitimizing men's dominant position in society, subordinating women and men whose ways of being may be perceived as marginalized.[14] The concept embraces patriarchy, the long-term structure of subordination of women and of privileging men. At the other extreme is the concept of alternative masculinities, which embraces non-dominant models of masculinity that represent gender equity in profeminist ways, and thus creates "profeminist men."[15] Alternative masculinity is considered a path to a better world which must entail men's engagement and willingness to change, their capacity to understand injustices as well as inequalities. Importantly, for alternative masculinities to emerge, the notion of power should be redefined, instead of oppression, male power should stem from developing better quality intimacy, ability to give love or care, to rear children, and accepting the emotional work involved in these practices, as this is a way to move beyond the patriarchal system.[16]

Because of its historical and geographical variants, discussions of masculinity should be situated in a particular locale. Connell and Messerschmidt speak of the "geography of masculinities" recognizing the interplay among the local, regional and transnational/global levels. This approach is particularly important for an investigation of cultural identities of diasporans, which

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13. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 70.

14. Raewyn Connell, W. James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005), 835.

15. Bob Pease, "Reconstructing Masculinity or Ending Manhood? The Potential and Limitations of Transforming Masculine Subjectivities for Gender Equality," in *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World*, ed. Àngels Carabi and Josep M. Armengol (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18.

16. Pease, "Reconstructing Masculinity or Ending Manhood?," 18.

have roots in their countries of origin, in other words, have histories, and most importantly, are not fixed but constantly in the process of "becoming."[17] Moreover, the current increased rate of transnational mobility and connections requires that one takes into consideration the entanglements of time and space which create and re-create various identities, including masculinities. In order to comprehend the complexity of Indian masculinities and their representation, it is necessary to have at least a cursory look at the socio-historical background of India.

Historical and Social Context of Indian Masculinities

For the British colonizers the masculinity of an Oriental male is a question of representation rather than a subject of thorough examination. An Oriental male is constructed as almost the exact opposite of the Western colonizer.[18] On the one hand, Indian men are accused of predatory nature, lack of control, which endangers a woman, especially from the West,[19] and therefore legitimizes rational British colonizers' management over the indigenous natives. The image of a hypersexual native male from the colonial times is still a potent stereotype in India at the beginning of the 20th century, even though various attempts are made to counter it and promote de-eroticization of the Indian male sexuality.[20] On the other hand, the need to manage or control the native stems also from the opposite way of viewing him, showing him as emasculated, immature, and lacking agency – a strategy aiming to display the "manliness" of the colonizer. Convinced of their moral manhood and treating the colonial mission as a rite of passage, the British colonizers as "real" men believed they were justified in their conquests. The masculinization of Britishness brought about the emasculation of the native, which helped to victimize him and keep him in an inferior position. Edward Said deconstructs this binary thinking in his work *Orientalism*, revealing Western stereotypes involved in the representation of the East, masculinity included.

17. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222.

18. Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 198.

19. Rohit Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing, "Introduction: Perceptions of Masculinity and Challenges to the Indian Male," in *Masculinity and Its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions*, ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 8.

20. This lifestyle of self-discipline and self-restraint was encouraged, for instance, by Mahatma Gandhi.

At present, the Indian male is caught between the patriarchal values and feminist calls for alternative masculinities. The patriarchal system, strong both in India and in the diaspora, privileges men's authority and dominance, thus it results in rigid social expectations towards women, but most dramatically, in violence against them, which remains one of the crucial challenges in Indian society.[21] The rise of feminism in India and globally, which calls for equality between the sexes and for redefinition of gender roles, enables the empowerment of women, but it leaves "masculinity […] in a period of flux, with the definition of what a man is and how he is to behave being uncertain."[22] The long-held ideas of masculinity understood as aggressiveness, strength, protection, or procreation are questioned and rejected, which opens new ways of understanding masculinity. Indeed, sociologists identify the emergence of the "New Man," who is softer and caring. In general, the complexity of Indian masculinities resulting from the cultural and social changes is a subject of various sociological studies.[23]

Sharma's construction of masculinities in the stories selected for examination recreates various negative stereotypes but also revises them. Masculinity is realized as patriarchal privilege, dominance (often sexual) over a woman, and even violence, but it is shown as unfulfilling, even frustrating, therefore in need of correction. Furthermore, the Indianness of his characters (even though they are diasporans) is explicitly stated, while the narrator sometimes explains, or "translates," Indianness to the Western reader. All that raises questions about the writer's positionality and his participation in the discourse of re-Orientalism.

Ambiguities and Tensions: "Cosmopolitan"

The opening story of the collection, "Cosmopolitan," introduces Sharma's typical male character, one that is confused, unhappy, vulnerable, yet quite insensitive to women, unconsciously imitating patriarchal patterns of

21. Rupaleem Bhuyan and Susan Ramsundarsingh, "Of Intersecting Oppressions: Domestic Violence and the Indian Diaspora," in *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Radha Sarma Hedge and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

22. Dasgupta and Gokulsing, "Introduction: Perceptions of Masculinity," 12.

23. See: Radhika Chopra, Caroline Osella, and Filippo Osella, eds., *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004); Dasgupta and Gokulsing, *Masculinity and Its Challenges in India*.

behaviour. The protagonist is a retired Indian man living in the US who suddenly has to cope with a lonely life, when his wife unexpectedly returns to India and his grown-up daughter leaves the house to live on her own. Sharma depicts the world of growing female autonomy, women making their own decisions and men who are unprepared for this kind of reality. Gopal cannot cope with emptiness in his life, which gives him much suffering, his "loneliness [makes] him fantasize about calling an ambulance so that he could be touched and prodded."[24] The narrative concentrates on the protagonist's attempts to improve his situation, that is, to enter a relationship with another woman. Gopal becomes obsessed with his American neighbour, Mrs. Shaw, who is divorced and lives alone. He reads her as sexually open and is immensely attracted to her. Despite Mrs. Shaw's initial hesitations, they soon develop a casual relationship.

Throughout the story Sharma locates Gopal's negative traits in the context of his cultural otherness. Exposing Gopal's selfishness and manipulativeness designed at fulfilling his sexual desires and satisfying his needs, the narrator highlights his Indianness. Gopal does not try to be just a decent and loving man but decides that he needs to learn American ways of winning and keeping a lover. He follows articles from *Cosmopolitan* (and later other women magazines) in hope of learning what American women want; obviously, the efforts render him immature and naïve, even though they guarantee somewhat artificial and yet quite effective conversations with Mrs. Shaw. His hesitation about him loving her recurs several times in the narrative, rather than sincerity, he offers her control: "To show that he loved her, he had arbitrarily forbidden her to ski, claiming that skiing was dangerous. He had hoped that she would find this quaintly immigrant, but she was just angry."[25] Importantly, Gopal confesses to Mrs. Shaw that he has not Americanized completely, which suggests that his beliefs may still be entrenched in conservative Indian culture and a traditional model of masculinity.

"Cosmopolitan" sets the scene for other stories in the collection demonstrating the importance of women in shaping masculinities. Connell and Messerschmidt indicate that "women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities – as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives; as workers in the gender division of labor; and so

24. Akhil Sharma, "Cosmopolitan," in *A Life of Adventure and Delight* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 15. All the following short stories are from this edition.

25. Sharma, "Cosmopolitan," 36.

forth."[26] Gopal transforms owing to his relationship with Mrs. Shaw, who is sensitive, sincere, but wants to remain self-sufficient. When she decides to end the relationship, Gopal is deeply hurt but the situation prompts him to rethink the notion of a successful and fulfilling relationship. It is certain that he grows emotionally; he genuinely starts to care about Mrs. Shaw – he becomes more sincere and respectful of her boundaries. At the end of the story he asks: "Why should we need anything else to fall in love? We learn and change and get better."[27] With this realization Gopal moves toward a more equitable view of relationships and during his next visit at Mrs. Shaw's he no longer hesitates what he should feel for her but is filled with genuine affection – he has become a more caring man.

A Flicker of Freedom: "A Life of Adventure and Delight"

The protagonist of the titular story of the collection seems to embody the Oriental stereotype of an Indian male rendered as a sexual predator in the Western world. A closer inspection reveals the protagonist who is trapped by traditional expectations of Indian patriarchal society, wishing to escape them but unable to fulfil his plan. Gautama is a twenty-four-year-old PhD student at New York University, addicted to pornography and services of prostitutes, which occasionally leads to his problems with the police.

The patriarchal values of the protagonist, such as women's subordination to men, or female chastity as one of the highest ideals, are explicitly stated by the narrator: "Gautama was an ordinary middle-class boy. He knew he would have to get married one day, and he hoped to have as much sex as possible before then, but he also believed that any Indian girl who had sex before marriage had something wrong with her, was in some way depraved and foul and also unintelligent."[28] Gautama's expectations put him in a trap: he lives a life of lies, indecency, and immoderation. He does not give a serious thought to a long-term relationship but focuses on maximizing his pleasure. Simultaneously, he is disrespectful and abusive, he mistreats the escorts he invites to his apartment, either offending them verbally or refusing to pay the full price for their services.

26. Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 848.
27. Sharma, "Cosmopolitan," 45.
28. Sharma, "A Life of Adventure and Delight," 129.

Gautama is cruel and selfish but with a potential for change. After being arrested he decides to change his habits and starts dating Nirmala, another PhD Indian student, who turns out to be an excellent companion. This relationship opens him up, shows his need of honesty and intimacy. Importantly, he discloses to Nirmala the family secret of his sister's illness, epilepsy, which "[i]n India […] would have marked the whole family as defective."[29] How burdensome the secret is for Gautama is visible only when the narrator describes the cathartic effect of sharing the secret: "he began to feel an unclenching. Having told somebody about his sister made the world feel bigger, as if there were more space around him."[30] Sharma makes it clear that the intimate and sincere relationship is beneficial for the protagonist, it gives him a long-wanted relief and carries the promise of transformation into a decent man who can build a satisfactory relationship based on trust, honest disclosure of feelings, and support.

Nevertheless, the constraints of the traditional and patriarchal society loom large in the story. For a long time Gautama does not inform his family of the relationship with Nirmala, discouraged by his family expectations regarding the amount of dowry, which should be quite high for a man educated in America, but impossible to be met by Nirmala's family. As predicted, his parents do not approve of the relationship, so Gautama breaks up with Nirmala and returns to his old habits. The narrative closes with a somewhat grotesque scene of a prostitute allowing the protagonist to hold her breasts while jumping, which gives him temporary and intense delight, yet with a view to a miserable new day – he "knew that tomorrow he would feel guilt and shame."[31] Clearly, the title of the story is an ironic rendition of the protagonist's situation and satisfaction he may derive from life, revealing his frustrations and disappointment. As the title of the whole collection, it ironically captures the predicament of male characters in the stories, who wish for a more satisfactory life but are constrained by their culture and rigid social expectations.

Generational Shift: "You Are Happy?"

A possibility of a generational shift in the models of masculinity is one of the themes of "You Are Happy?." The story contributes to the image of

29. Sharma, "A Life of Adventure and Delight," 139.
30. Sharma, "A Life of Adventure and Delight," 134.
31. Sharma, "A Life of Adventure and Delight," 145.

"Dark India," it foregrounds the depravity and the criminal side of the Indian patriarchal system, showing how especially first generation diasporans, if they maintain transnational connections with their homeland, may be under a profound impact of Indian culture. It is suggested that the change in values can occur with the next generation, raised in a different culture and exposed to new patterns of thought and behaviour. The narrative examines the gradual change of the perspective of a boy becoming a teenager, who witnesses a long-lasting conflict between his parents. It records the character's growing understanding of patriarchy's oppressiveness, which may result not only in unhappiness or misery, but also in the loss of life.

The conflict between Lakshman's parents, Indian immigrants in the US, leads to the wife's alcoholism and the husband's double life with a mistress in India, and ultimately ends in a tragedy. The whole disagreement has roots in the arranged and loveless marriage, followed by the neglect of the woman's needs in the name of her husband's family business. Lakshman's father does not want to divorce his wife, who is undoubtedly unhappy. At the same time, she is unable to undergo a full therapy in a detox center, even though she tries several times, while the family finds no other means to support her. The situation is complex, the parents are caught in a no-win situation, when separation cannot be considered as a solution. Even though they are immigrants in a more liberal country, due to maintaining transnational connections with relatives in India, they feel obliged to conform to Indian traditions and social expectations. As the narrator explains, even a casually drinking woman is an oddity among Indian diasporans, thereby a source of shame for the husband and extended family. Lakshman's grandmother, who lives in India, suggests beating as a solution, which is not implemented only because of the legal circumstances: "What she said made sense. Lakshman's father refused to beat her, though. 'This is America. I will go to jail and you will be sitting in India eating warm pakoras.'" Lakshman is still young at the time and harshly assesses his father for lack of decisive action: "his father seemed unmanly for not taking charge."[32] Finally, the woman is sent to India, where she allegedly dies in hospital of dengue. The father's complicity in the act of murder is undeniable, but it is only later that Lakshman realizes this fact. A general pattern of male privilege and female subordination is clearly evident throughout the story. Sharma describes women's predicament and the restrictiveness of Indian society, which may result in a tragedy or crime; at the same time, he points to the oppressiveness of the system for men as well.

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32. Sharma, "You Are Happy?," 167.

This story resurrects a deeply negative image of India as a barbaric country, permeated by violence towards women. The use of an omniscient narrator who provides the Western reader with additional explanations about the intricacies of Indian culture is a technique quite characteristic of re-Orientalism, called by Lau totalization or generalization. This way of writing is a way of establishing a certain truth thus ignoring exceptions or changing trends, and in consequence offering a distorted image, far from reality. In the story, the narrator explains in a matter-of-fact tone how the problem of Indian female alcoholism is dealt with in India, demonstrating male privilege and violence against women, which may lead to a woman's death:

> The way an alcoholic woman's murder gets arranged is that her husband sends her to her parents and tells them she is a drunk and not to be trusted and that he does not want her back. As long as he does not do this, as long as she is under his protection, she won't be killed, because she belongs to the family and not her father's. But once she is returned, her family will kill her, because the shame of having an alcoholic as a daughter or sister is staggering.[33]

In another place the narrator explains the sexualization of teenage girls on Indian farms, who "have nothing to trade other than sex and physical labor and often they are raped,"[34] which is explanatory of how Lakshman's father found a mistress in India, while his wife still struggled with her alcoholic illness in the US. This important comment on the destitution and desperation of Indian country girls is an accusation of a system that commonly allows their abuse. Clearly, Sharma's choice to create such a totalizing image is an effective way of highlighting the violation of women's rights, which is still an important issue that needs to be tackled, because, as various studies indicate, violence towards women in Indian culture, also in the diaspora, is generally accepted.[35]

The narrative traces Lakshman's growing understanding of the conflict between his parents as well as his moral progress, which promises the emergence of masculinity rejecting patriarchal privileges and dominance. Lakshman experiences a moment of revelation when he visits India and a teenage farmgirl tries to win his affection. He then understands how his father found

33. Sharma, "You Are Happy?," 176.

34. Sharma, "You Are Happy?," 174.

35. Anitha Venkataramani-Kothari, "Understanding South Asian Immigrant Women's Experiences of Violence," in *Body Evidence: Intimate Violence Against South Asian Women in America*, ed. Shamita Das Dasgupta (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 15.

a mistress, and how the affair possibly contributed to his mother's death. The story ends with an expression of the boy's "certainty that he could never come back to the farm again, that whatever happened he could never come back."[36] The story accumulates various depravities of the patriarchal system, but at the same time, it expresses a hope that the next generation may develop a different consciousness and morality, just as Lakshman grows into a different kind of man and decides not to follow in his father's footsteps.

Shame and Reconciliation: "The Well"

Written in the first person "The Well" displays how certain norms and patterns of behaviour can be transferred onto children, who internalize them and reproduce them unconsciously in adulthood. Once again, the model of hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity is shown to be ineffective in fostering meaningful relationships between men and women, leading to dissatisfaction, generating frustrations and suffering, instead of any positive outcome. The conclusion of the narrative foregrounds the protagonist's growing self-awareness regarding his selfish and insensitive conduct, prompting feelings of shame and guilt. As the final story in the collection, it functions as a compelling summation of the various forms of male wrongdoing depicted in the stories.

"The Well" begins with an important retrospection presenting two tracks along which the story will develop, namely love and violence, thus disclosing the complexity of human relationships. The Indian immigrant family, Pavan and his parents, go through a certain disturbance of their eating routine on a Saturday – the only day of the week when the mother is relieved from cooking and has some free time for herself. This is when the father fails to fulfill his duty, that is, forgets to buy pizza for dinner. The jar of mango pickles he brings instead is not merely a replacement of American food with Indian food but it rather symbolizes a violation of the family's habit as well as disrespect for the mother's position established in the US, which was a step toward a greater female equality and freedom. All this makes the mother resentful – she complains she is not taken care of but treated like a servant and so she refuses to eat a slice of pizza he eventually delivers. What follows is even more significant, when the couple's son, Pavan, who narrates the story after years but at the time is just a few years old, is eager to eat his mother's pizza. His

36. Sharma, "You Are Happy?," 184.

excitement in the middle of his parents' argument inflames the father so much that he reacts with violence – he smashes the slice in the boy's face.

The narrative later focuses on grown-up Pavan, searching for love and a fulfilling relationship, who is unconsciously oppressive towards women. Simultaneously, he constantly fears that his masculinity may be threatened. For teenage Pavan a satisfactory relationship involves domesticity: "In my fantasies, we were always married, although this idea was vague to me, represented mainly by our living in a house that had a dining table."[37] The tradition and value of marriage are explicit, while the woman is relegated to the sphere of home and domestic duties. Pavan's "first true love," American girlfriend Betsy angers him with her independence, makes him jealous because of her frequent contacts with other men, and unwillingness to commit to a serious relationship. The fact that she lets him drive her home on Friday nights, after heavy drinking, is not flattering for Pavan but he feels it ridicules his maleness: "This belief of hers, that she was safe with me, made me angry. It was because I was Indian, I told myself, it was because she did not see me as a man."[38] Associating Indianness with emasculation reveals his deeply entrenched fear of being perceived as weak, of returning to the colonial image of an emasculated native. In order to escape this image, the protagonist asserts his manliness through sexual domination. He eventually impregnates the woman, disregarding her fears, health problems, and history of former abortions. Betsy rejects his marriage offer and decides to undergo another abortion. Pavan's behaviour is a copy of his father's selfish conduct, violent inclinations, and mistreatment of women. He is an insecure man operating within the patriarchal framework, with a capacity for violence, disregarding the woman's feelings and transgressing her boundaries in order to satisfy his desires.

Bob Pease indicates that members of privileged groups may not realize that they are oppressive, which can be explained through the concept of "internalized domination." Prejudices against others are often incorporated and accepted within a community or a particular culture, which makes Pease claim that "dominance is socially constructed and psychically internalized."[39] The protagonist's confusion and inability to treat women with respectful attention may be a result of what he internalized while growing up, which is effectively rendered in the initial scene of the story. Pavan relies on the cultural

37. Sharma, "The Well," 188.
38. Sharma, "The Well," 190.
39. Pease, "Reconstructing Masculinity," 20.

scripts instilled in him by the parents, but they turn out to be insufficient for creating a satisfying relationship in changing cultural circumstances – he is unable to understand and accept the lifestyle of a woman who is single and independent, definitely not a stay-at-home type.

Ultimately, the protagonist signals a possibility of opening to a more reflective and possibly softer masculinity. At the funeral ceremony organized by the Mishras for the baby after Betsy's abortion, Pavan realizes his wrongdoing: "I started crying at how selfish I had been. I had been cruel and indifferent and had learned nothing from my own life."[40] After the ceremony, when the family are driving in the car, Pavan's mother unexpectedly starts hitting him in the face and ears. The man accepts it as a punishment he deserves, so he bears it with some kind of consolation: "I thought, Good, I should be hit."[41] Pavan acknowledges his guilt and feels shame about his behaviour, an important step towards a change in his mindset. As Pease indicates, shame is an essential emotion on a path to a better communication between genders, "Acknowledging shame is […] important in healing and reconciliation."[42] Significantly, this is the last story of the collection and its last words can be therefore read as a confession of male errors of the past, acknowledgment of their misconduct, insensitivity and selfishness, hopefully opening the possibility of non-dominant versions of masculinity.

Conclusion

Even a cursory look at masculinities and their cultural representations shows a great diversity of ideas and images, conditioned by time and location. For instance, reflecting on white American culture in the 1960s, literary critic Leslie Fiedler demonstrated how masculinity was realized as freedom, motion, and adventure, while women stood for entrapment and stasis. Commenting on the classics of American literature he identified a powerful theme – male flight from women, which was also called a flight from "mature heterosexuality" on the part of men. In canonical American literature, the plot often revolved around a man escaping a mature relationship, be it a chase of a white whale or floating down the Mississippi on rafts.[43]

40. Sharma, "The Well," 198.
41. Sharma, "The Well," 199.
42. Pease, "Reconstructing Masculinity," 20.
43. Barbara Ehrenreich, "Decline of Patriarchy," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995).

In contrast, the selected stories from Sharma's collection *A Life of Adventure and Delight* reveal that Indian American men do not evade women but, at times, depend on them with a sense of urgency – an attachment that does not necessarily signal mature heterosexuality. Sharma acknowledges the persistence of patriarchal masculinities and culturally specific customs or restrictions that diasporic subjects may carry into their new homelands (which are themselves seldom free of patriarchal structures). While patriarchy is undeniably harmful to women, Sharma draws attention to its damaging effects on men as well, including emotional crises, unfulfilling relationships, and a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. Crucially, he imagines the possibility of emotional and moral development for his male characters, suggesting the potential emergence of alternative, gentler, and more caring models of masculinity.

Sharma's stories are not simplistic or "charmingly different," in a way which could raise their sales in the West, but they uphold a Western point of reference. Importantly, Sharma's narrative strategy avoids conventional exoticism; in other words, he does not indulge in a fascination with everyday cultural practices and artefacts such as yoga, arranged marriages, saris, elephants, spices, or food. Nor does his fiction reduce the Orient to a simplified spectacle crafted for effortless Western consumption, which is a feature of re-Orientalism. The four stories examined in the article seem to reinforce Western preconceptions about the East, returning to negative stereotypes about Indian men, also in the diaspora. However, at the same time, they revise these stereotypes – explore the damaging impact of the patriarchal system on men in particular, thus fostering a critical stance rather than maintaining Western expectations. Finally, it may be tempting to interpret the confession of men's moral failings in the collection's final story, "The Well," from a re-Orientalist perspective, as offering a gratifying resolution for Western readers, in which the East acknowledges its failings and the West reasserts its moral authority. But that only proves that often it is virtually impossible to escape the Western points of reference when attending to diasporic fiction, because it combines insider and outsider perspectives.

Although Sharma's stories foreground male concerns, emotional well-being, and vulnerability, his persistent critique of patriarchal masculinities positions him as a profeminist writer attentive to women's rights and to the necessity of transforming oppressive masculine norms into more positive formulations of manhood. What becomes central in his reimagining of Indian American masculinity is selfreflection, and the capacity to cultivate intimate relationships

grounded in trust and care – qualities that hold the potential to benefit individuals across genders.

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