



THE INTRICACY OF RECLAMATION AND RELEVANCE OF EMOTIONS AND MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH: A FEMINIST DISCERNMENT

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Abstract

As humans, one is entitled to emotions and sentiments, regardless of gender, sex, class, creed, status, race, and colour. Restricting emotional expression to males is an inhumane obstruction of their rights as human beings, as feelings and emotions are quintessential attributes of being a human, and are experienced and felt by each individual. Society at large operates through patriarchal norms, which stereotype and ridicule men who express their feelings, branding them as 'weak men', or 'unmanly'. However, Feminism understands the relevance and significance of intricate human emotions. It confronts and challenges stereotypical statements and judgments about men by tirelessly working towards a positive change in society. To be able to express one's emotions is to be a human in all its spirit. To connote the emotive aspect exclusively to females and assigning rationality to males is an absurd stance. The motivation of this paper is to argue that emotions are not gender-specific but inclusive of all humans. Through the lens of feminism, this paper seeks to demonstrate how emotions are universally indispensable, and how categorising the emotional sphere solely to females strengthens toxic masculinity and, in turn, hampers men's mental health. This paper attempts to offer a possible solution to handling toxic masculinity through reclaiming and embracing the realm of emotions and empathy.

Keywords: Emotions, Empathy, Feminism, Reclamation, Toxic Masculinity.

I

Introduction

Expressing our feelings and emotions acts as a regulatory medium for keeping our mental health and well-being healthy, stable, and in order. Emotional intelligence and maturity are crucial life skills that are navigators for understanding human relationships and fostering strong bonds between one human and another. Patriarchy undermines the importance of expressing emotions to men, which sabotages men's mental health and instils a fear of being tagged as 'unmanly' and 'behaving like a woman'. This paper argues that discarding and unnecessary suppression of one's emotional expressions are forms of alienating oneself from oneself, and implicitly dehumanising oneself. A man showing his love and compassion for his own community, or country, is just as valid as a man expressing his intimate and vulnerable feelings, sadness, and affection naturally by virtue of being a human being. To ask men to suppress their intimate and delicate feelings is to ask them to be unreal and inauthentic. Moreover, we are suffocating ourselves as humans and limiting ourselves to the possibilities of achieving remarkable things in life if we are not giving emotions their due essential relevance.

In this paper, I have explored how emotions and the expression of emotions are crucial aspects of being human. Every human being, including men, has a fundamental right to have emotions and to express them. As humans, we are all endowed with this alluring gift. Emotion, in itself, transcends being confined to a particular section of humanity. Men and their expression of emotions should not be controlled rigidly by patriarchal norms. Patriarchy has assigned women since time immemorial as inferior, emotional, and irrational beings, whereas men are associated with superiority and rationality, thereby attaching a sense of inferiority and insignificance to the essence of emotions and relegating them to the realm of immanence, illogical and non-scientific. To quote Beauvoir, confronting Aristotle's view on women, "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 5).



This paper shall highlight the relevance and importance of the utilisation of emotions. This paper will demonstrate that emotions and empathy are as valid as reason, and also attempt to find a redress for the gendered conception of empathy by acknowledging it as a neutral dimension of human attributes. To urge people to embrace and read empathy in a positive light is also another paramount aim of this paper.

The Relevance of Emotions and Empathy

This paper intends to argue that emotions are not gender-specific but inclusive of all humans. It is an illusion if one thinks that only women are exploited by patriarchy, and men benefit wholeheartedly from this systematic oppression. To supplement my statement, the observation made by Siti Amirah in her writing, "How the Patriarchy Also Hurts Men's Mental Health", asserts that "Research done by American sociologist Christian Munsch, found that such expectations of men being breadwinners can have severe repercussions on their mental health, such as anxiety" (Baer, 2016). In a patriarchal setting, it is a stigma, a shameful dogma of some sort, a sign of weakness, for men to be emotional. Society discourages them from being expressive and sentimental. It pressures men to be tough, strong, fearless, and to lead at all times, expecting them not to reveal their delicate and vulnerable emotional sentiments, which are indeed unrealistic expectations. Emotions are innate and universal. Emotions such as fear, anger, happiness, hatred, and disgust are felt by everyone, which run parallel to different countries, cultures, communities, classes, creeds, races, sexes, or genders. Although their objects of feelings and how they react to them may exhibit meanings differently. Quoting Bortolami,

Emotions provide a special kind of information. Indeed, one prominent characteristic, or the 'essence' of emotions (Salby, 2014, p. 32), seems to be their ability to inform us of what matters to us. This facet of emotions has been explored by feminist epistemologies (among other disciplines), which makes a case for emotions as evidence or guides in our knowledge processes (as values and emotions are connected, Jaggar, 1989; Anderson, 2004), and investigates the role of interpersonal and collective activities in these processes (Jaggar, 1989; Candiotti, 2023), (Bortolami, 2025, p. 2).

Emotions are shared human traits, which can never be reserved exclusively for some section of humanity. They are an embodiment of an essential source of knowledge and a guiding principle for transformative societal change. The relevance of emotions is immense- in every field, it penetrates deeply- social revolutions, freedom struggles, emancipatory movements. To ask men to restrict their emotional expression is to ask them to feel less, to become insensitive, to dehumanise themselves, and ignore their natural human endowments. Emotions should not be a 'social labour' constructed exclusively for women. Feminists recognise emotion as something that is beyond the individual: its foundation is moulded by social structures, aspects of culture and politics, and power dynamics. Emotions are discerned as a quintessential fountain of motivation and a mandatory equipment to comprehend oppression, discrimination, and our relation to the world. Thus, feminist scholars critically examine the conventional dichotomy of emotion and reason.

In the words of Rebekka Hufendiek, "Emotions are notoriously difficult to categorise, and they seem to cross borders between categories that philosophers traditionally have wanted to separate, like body and mind, nature and culture, rationality and irrationality" (Hufendiek, 2016, p. 3). This reflects the complexity of emotions as a subject of study, where it is demanded to be approached cautiously with anti-dualist perspectives, of demarcating the mind and the body, the rational and the irrational; natural and cultural, implying that the best stance would be to approach the phenomena of emotion through a multidisciplinary apparatus. Skeptical of naturalised and phenomenological perspectives are considered most reliable and significant in discerning the theme of emotion (Bortolami, p. 2). This is so because, according to her, "...[a]s it does not separate the knowing subject(s) from the object they know and the context, that is, the reality in which they are embedded" (p. 3).

The pinnacle of the debatable question of who is more empathetic- men or women- has no doubt been heated up for quite some years. As far as I am concerned, both men and women possess empathy. It's not the case that men are empathy-deficient beings, and women are naturally endowed with some extra sense of empathetic feeling. Empathy is not to be identified as an exclusive attribute of one community, culture, race, gender, sex, class, or creed. But it is a universal



human feeling. The complex question of whether women are better equipped or naturally more empathetic, or behave more empathetically than men, is beyond conventional expectations. A study of 'empathy tests' conducted by Simon Baron-Cohen affirms that empathy is highly contextual and can be extended to situational manipulation. To further substantiate my argument, quoting "Klein and Hodges (2001) tested the premise in a series of controlled experiments and concluded that any sex variation in empathy was 'due to motivational differences and not due to any simple difference of ability between men and women" (Lobb, 2013, p. 428).

In Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, the author observes that "Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body (Spelman 1989; Jaggar 1996)". Throughout history, there has been an enormous hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason. However, there are deviant hierarchies between emotions themselves: some human feelings are graded as a symbol of civilisation, whereas some are downgraded as being weak, or lower forms of emotions (Ahmed, 2014). Crying or showing one's vulnerable feelings is shunned and mocked, and is erroneously termed as a sign of weakness or inferiority. However, aggression or anger is validated as an emotion that is justifiable to males, thus putting a dichotomy between emotions themselves. This is a subtle form of politicising human emotions, which in turn divides humanity. This understanding of hierarchical emotions played out by patriarchy puts men's mental health at risk, by recognising 'anger' as the only form of expression which is 'acceptable' and 'suitable' to men. Thus limiting their natural expression of crying or barring them from exposing such 'soft' emotions. Consequently, suppressing and bottling up their emotions can ultimately cause depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, and the inability to express their intimate and vulnerable feelings.

In this paper, I seek to persuade the readers to keep aside the heated, never-ending, infinite controversial debate of which sex, or gender should be held more accountable for empathy, whether women are capable of being more empathetic than men, and vice versa, instead, one can impulsify and focus on how being empathetic can be fruitful in solving societal problems, mental health, and in understanding one another, conclusively striving for peace and harmony. However, confining and expecting a particular section of humanity to be more empathetic than the rest is gravely wrong and unwise.

Reclaiming Emotions and Dismantling Toxic Masculinity

Although it is a tough task to define feminism, with its multifaceted strands, nonetheless one indispensable commonality that is shared by all feminisms is to challenge the discrimination and subjugation of women in the social, economic, political or cultural spheres, and to effect a positive change (Freedman, 2002). Feminism's enduring support for men to express themselves is not only commendable but also a pivotal threshold that assists in combating internalised toxic masculinity. However, theories of feminism and feminist scholars are often highly misunderstood rather than appreciated, or acknowledged for attempting to dismantle virulent toxic masculinity. This fiasco reminds us that sexism is everywhere; it is not an issue of men vs women. Cixous believes that feminine and masculine modes of behaviour are not biological: "Evoking her insistence in 'Extreme Fidelity' that masculine and feminine modes of behaviour are not tied to anatomy but derive from our response to life, she argues here for the complexity of gender. Only writing, Cixous suggests, can at present convey the truth about identity" (Sellers, *The Helene Cixous Reader*, p. 198).

Suppressing one's feelings is to suppress one's identity. Assigning empathy to a particular section of humanity and relying on them for empathetic actions is morally not right. The suppression of emotions imposed by patriarchy upon men walls up the possible paths of understanding, of building a harmonious and revered relationship, and primarily equality between the two sexes. But also poses a threat to men's mental health. Feminist scholars reassert and reclaim emotions as a central aspect of value in comprehending power dynamics, social movements, inequalities, exploitation, subjugation, and personal experiences, and challenge the dismissal of conventional emotions in favour of rationality. It is important to note that advocating for men's mental health does not imply that the challenges that women go through are ignored or sidelined, but rather, it is about accepting and conceding that equality is in the interest and welfare of society and humanity at large, by dismantling toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes, which are detrimental to everyone.

Kevin Foss, a renowned licensed therapist specialising in OCD and related anxiety disorders, stated, “Academically speaking, toxic masculinity is the way men are culturally trained and socially pressured to behave” (Foss, 2020). Toxic masculinity is understood as the over-exaggeration of masculine social norms that propagate misogyny. The consequences of toxic masculinity are alarmingly destructive: men are forced to be emotionally restrictive and suppressive and, ultimately, shy away from asking for help, seeking health support, both mental and physical, which is pernicious to their overall well-being. Thus, Foss analyses, “Emotional suppression lays the foundation for shame when unsanctioned feelings arise, which positions anger and rage as the only acceptable masculine emotion. This ‘man up’ attitude matures into a rejection of empathy toward others and repackages nurturing impulses as ‘weak’” (Foss, 2020). The adherence to societal expectations of ‘manliness’ behaviour, emotional hardening, may lead to depression, anxiety, frustration, emotional unavailability, expressionlessness, and a lack of emotional maturity and understanding. “Popular discourse has recently begun to link the term ‘toxic masculinity’ to men’s reluctance to express their feelings and their resulting poorer mental health (e.g., Sheppard, 2025)” (Horton, Schermerhorn, Hanel, P. 1). Patriarchy programmes toxic masculinity to ignore and refrain from seeking help, mental and physical health treatment, even when they are emotionally struggling: “Additionally, suppressing mental health issues, such as depression, trauma, and anxiety, can worsen symptoms and precipitate isolation, loss of jobs or friends, and even suicide” (Foss, 2022). Toxic masculinity drives men to engage in excessive alcohol and drug abuse, an unhealthy diet, and an undesirable lifestyle, and also exudes control, dominance, power and entitlement behaviours.

The pressing affair of deconstructing toxic masculinity is a desperate need of the hour:

This topic is an important area of research due to a decreased likelihood of men accessing mental health support when facing mental distress and increased vulnerability of death by suicide. Addressing these challenges is crucial, given that death by suicide is often preventable with appropriate mental health intervention. By addressing aggression and dominance as predictive factors, due to social gender roles, society can begin to destigmatise restrictive emotionality in men. (Horton, Schermerhorn, Hanel, 2025, p. 7).

As members of a patriarchal society, men are taught and told from a tender age of childhood that becoming a man is about toughening up or not showing any signs of weakness or vulnerability. These are deeply imprinted in movies, social norms and culture of a patriarchal narrative. They might seem to be ‘acceptable’ or ‘harmless’; however, such norms drastically hamper men’s mental health and in seeking help of any kind. There is a need to summon and redefine what real strength is, and being strong means: to be strong is to be able to express our vulnerable emotions and to reach out for help or support, and to discourage linking emotions as ‘signs of weakness’. Breaking down the hefty barriers of toxic masculinity, men can be in a safe environment where they can finally reclaim their rightful emotional space, and express themselves freely and authentically, without having the constant fear of being ridiculed as weak or exhibiting inappropriate behaviour of a man.

Conclusion

Nowadays, feminism and feminist movements are perceived negatively, to the extent that they are dismissed as not relevant or significant anymore, or more precisely, the most popular misapprehension of feminist movements is that their goals have been achieved, which is quite contrary to the reality of what we face every day. Societal expectations of men to suppress their vulnerabilities, emotions, and feelings are not only absurd but also highly inhumane and pose risks to their mental health and overall well-being, followed by an outburst of negative reactions in the form of violence and suppressed anger.

In this concluding paragraph, I urge not just women, but men too, to take up and reclaim their emotional space and emotive aspects as much as possible. Because to be human is to have emotions, to be expressive is to express one’s identity and individuality, and to be free is to be authentic. Empathy is needed to understand that emotions are not exclusive to any gender, sex, class, culture, community, creed, status, race, or colour. Society should embrace the importance and urgency of emotional validation of men. Suppressing men’s emotional expressions and needs sabotages society itself. Therefore, instead of suffocating and encouraging men to bottle up their feelings, society should become more empathetic and kinder to them. Each individual is entitled to their own freedom and authenticity: one cannot be free if one obstructs another individual’s path to transcendence, but will remain in the state of immanence. If one restricts another person’s freedom to



express emotions, then one is not being authentic; rather, one is cutting off one's own possibility to transcend, and one is not being moral. A society that suppresses the emotional expressions and denies the emotional validity of men will, unfortunately, be stuck in the state of immanence and will never be ethical, as there is no ethics without freedom. Thus, de Beauvoir proclaimed, "To will oneself moral, and to will oneself free is one and the same decision" (The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 24).

In this paper, I conclude by encouraging everyone to dismantle toxic masculinity, and reclaim their rightful humanly attributes of emotional space by expressing their vulnerable, tender and intimate emotions; and not to focus on which sex or gender; or class and culture, should be more responsible, or is more suited to be empathetic and emotional, but rather to work together to foster empathy, kindness, and understanding for a safer, healthier, and harmonious world in which everyone feels safe, happy, and peaceful.

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