

Book Reviews

Matthew Maycock. 2019. *Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal: Transitions into Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Since the 1980s, when the publication of a series of books established men's studies as a field, research about men and masculinity has proliferated steadily and the growing literature on the topic has sought to expand the field beyond its originary locus in the West. Critical studies on masculinity have been on a mission to demonstrate that men are "engendered" and that masculinity is neither universal nor pre-determined. Like the concept of gender, masculinities are also fluid and contingent. Therefore, rather than supposing what being a man means, masculine identities are better understood in site-specific contexts through analyses of material and discursive practices that constitute them.

Matthew Maycock's *Masculinity and Modern Slavery in Nepal*, the product of his PhD research focusing on a group of ex-*kamaiyās* (Tharu bonded laborers) in post-conflict far-west Nepal, will receive a big share of credit for heralding masculinities studies in Nepal. In some ways, Maycock could not have landed on a better field site. The abolition of the *kamaiyā* system, formalised by state order in 2000, was one of the linchpin issues over which the might of the progressivist, developmentalist, and human rights minded civil society was being tested in the new democratic era of Nepal. The People's War further compounded the imperatives for social change and redistributive justice, intensely affecting the landscapes of the recently emancipated *kamaiyās*. In the period immediately before and during Maycock's fieldwork in 2009, Kailali district would have been the kind of place where everyday life was being radically reconstituted. It was a site where both macro and micro modalities of structural transformation could be comprehended within the temporal and scalar inscription of an ethnographic analysis. Such scenes of dramatic transition are infinitely conducive to masculinities studies. As works from elsewhere on former slave communities have shown, the vision of enslaved men assessing and comparing different, even contradictory, ideals of masculinity in order to justify their own honor and dignity in conditions of survival and violence

epitomises how intensely volatile the production of gendered identities can be (Marshall 2011; Lussana 2016; Doddington 2019). In situations of critical and rapid transformations, as the one from slavery to freedom, exploring the interactions and competitions between multiple styles of masculinity—including how conjunctures of change and continuity map onto male bodies as “malleable” and “sticky” aspects of gender as Maycock notes (p. 2)—can potentially illuminate broader dynamics of power.

At its best, Maycock’s book points to these shifting balances of power. Reformulations of the ideals of masculinity is nothing if not the production of new normativities. Deep in the book, Maycock writes in passing, “competence and masculinity closely link to how male bodies are experienced and given meaning” (p. 72). He offers this as an illustration of the primary objective of the book, which is to show the diverse ways in which *kamaiyā* men freed from the system of bonded labor navigate the meanings of being a man. This underemphasized insight is in fact the mainstay of Maycock’s research. The picture that his book helps us imagine is of men caught up in liminality—their rites of passage into the free world strewn with contesting logics of competence and dangers of failure, and the mutabilities of gender exposed at moments of transition tethered by (hetero)normative repetitions of success (Butler 1990; Halberstam 2011). The centerpiece of Maycock’s theoretical premise, “hegemonic masculinity” popularized by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, is also in a crucial sense a framework for understanding how “successfully” certain men maintain access to power and privilege by generating hierarchies between different versions of masculinities.

Maycock builds his case about the increased range of masculinity for *kamaiyā* men in the post-freedom context on the by-now standardized positions of masculinities studies, underpinning the social constructionist view of masculinity by showcasing how the jostle between hegemonic and subaltern forms of masculinities shape men’s thoughts, behaviors, and actions. After spending the first three chapters introducing his analytical and methodological categories, reviewing the literature on South Asian bonded labor, and describing the setting of his fieldwork, Maycock begins the monograph proper approximately halfway into the book. Chapter Four takes us through the novel circumstances *kamaiyā* men find themselves in as wage-earning rickshaw pullers in Dhangadi, paying particular attention to their increased participation in consumer culture. Maycock’s aim here is to show that post-freedom masculinities entail new practices of embodiment; and his

explorations here are guided by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "physical capital," that is, the capacity of bodily attributes to be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). To that end, Maycock also appends the chapter with sections discussing the rupturing effects of health and ageing. Chapter Five examines the new parameters of success for *kamaiyā* men afforded by changing patterns of vocation and migration as well as rising literacy. The paths opened by the People's War for local and national political careers find significant consideration here. Chapter Six articulates more specifically the consequences for *kamaiyā* men of leaving behind the system of bonded labor and partaking in the more general—and generically modern—ideal of "breadwinner masculinity." Maycock highlights this by observing the uneven effects of freedom and modernity on relations of marriage and fatherhood.

The range and richness of subjects open to study in Maycock's chosen field site are immediately palpable from these chapters. But there are several issues that hamper the account Maycock has assembled, the chief among which is the inadequacy of ethnographic rigor. His specified methodologies are collected life histories and participant observation. Without biographical depth or thick description, however, much of the suggested inferences remain stated rather than demonstrated. At key moments of analysis, Maycock has a habit of shunting fieldwork to insights drawn from other researches on South Asian masculinities. For instance, one of his principal claims that Brahmanic masculinity is the hegemonic referent against which subaltern *kamaiyā* masculinities consolidate is a potent one, but here it appears superimposed instead of mined from contextual evidences. The presence of other theoretical and methodological frameworks summoned in the text—such as, agency, performativity, corporeality, rumor, and so on—are also too patchy and gestural to have a significant conceptual impact.

Another problem that comes from this weakness of fieldwork is that we are unable to see exactly what about *kamaiyā* masculinity is specific and distinct from other rural, migrant, and working-class formations of masculinity in Nepal. The focus Maycock brings on patterns of embodiment, consumption, mobility, education, and family relations do not help in this regard. In fact, they compound the problem. For if, as it would appear, everything is generative of *kamaiyā* masculinity as they are of non-*kamaiyā* masculinities, we are essentially left without explanations of determinacy.

Perhaps the issue is also that Maycock is too beholden to the demands of masculinities studies, whose deterministic tendencies are well known:

men are men because of the structures that produce masculinity. Maycock by and large repeats this stance despite highlighting interest in questions of agency. Especially in the context of *kamaiyā* men's experiences, he would have benefited greatly from a processual and relational account of power rather than the possessive type that the theory of "hegemonic masculinity" espouses. This particular issue—of how are we to delineate power relations—has been the main point of dissonance between masculinities studies and feminist/queer theories over the past thirty years. Maycock's book will not do much for bridging these gaps. From his account of rickshaw pullers to the focus on male intergenerational relations within family, his reliance on male homosocial contexts as the main ground for understanding masculinity will not assuage the theoretical disquiet in analyses of gender that tend to maintain men's and women's experiences as separate spheres. Given also that feminist methodologies and frameworks are sparse in Maycock's bibliography, it is not difficult to see that what he has provided through this book is only a small part of the story.

References

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