



Masculinity Studies Yesteryear; Masculinity Studies Today: Tyrone Ali in Conversation with Professor Rhoda Reddock

In 1996, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, and its Caribbean crucible saw the formal recognition of Caribbean scholarship in masculinity studies in the first ever symposium, aptly entitled, "The Construction of Caribbean Masculinity: Towards a Research Agenda." Rhoda Reddock, Professor of Gender, Social Change and Development, birthed and spearheaded this seminal event. Almost twenty years later today, Tyrone Ali, Institute for Gender and Development Studies Ph.D. Candidate in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, interviews Professor Reddock and examines the philosophy, goal and retrospection of this scholar-activist in the realm of Masculinity Studies as it impacts on Caribbean states and development.



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Biography

Tyrone Ali is a Ph.D. candidate in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at The UWI, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad. His thesis interrogates gendered language use among Trinidadian men in the areas of love, intimacy and sexuality. His M.Phil. in Literatures in English examined these indices in selected Caribbean canonical works as well as current works. Tyrone delivers the course *Men and Masculinities in the Caribbean* and his research interests include Caribbean Literatures in English, Masculinity Studies, and Tertiary Level Writing by Caribbean students.

Professor Reddock, you have been a champion and strong advocate for masculinity studies/men's studies as a relatively new paradigm in the Caribbean. Why is such a stance deemed important by you?

Gender scholars, academics, activists and practitioners are often erroneously seen as having an interest only in women's issues. Once a person thinks about femininity, one has to think of masculinity as the two are constructed in opposition to each other. The reality is that when it comes to the transformation of women's position in society, gender analysis and action towards gender equity and social justice is necessary. To effect this, I felt that the then Centre for (now Institute of) Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) should take leadership in this discourse and not leave it to be steered by persons who were not deeply interested in the larger issues of gender equality and social transformation. I see our work in masculinity studies as very instrumental in this regard.

2. In 1996, the first ever men's studies conference, "The Construction of Caribbean Masculinity: Towards a Research Agenda" was held at St. Augustine. Tell us why you felt the need for such a symposium then.

There were many reasons that pointed to a growing need to focus on masculinity studies. The male marginalisation debate brought the issue into sharp focus and served as an impetus for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of men as gendered beings. It became clear to me and others that this should not be the only issue or debate that should emerge in

masculinity studies. I wanted to see masculinity studies in the region to emerge as part of a larger body of gendered scholarship.

An earlier discussion on male marginality had a history in this region beginning in the 1950s. It was related to men's role in the Afro-Caribbean family and it generated much discussion among British and North American social scientists and policy makers. By the late 1950s and 1960s, Caribbean researchers, academics and practitioners had stepped into the fray to contextualize the issue within the history and context of this region.

Years later, in the 1980s, we see the emergence of this new discourse on male marginalisation led by Errol Miller that focussed on education. Important additions to this new body of work were made by Caribbean researchers like Barry Chevannes and Janet Brown, for example, whose pioneering research in three Caribbean territories – Jamaica, Dominica and Guyana, resulted in the book – *Learning to be a Man*. Barry was also important as a founding father so to speak of the nascent men's movement in the region. His founding of Fathers Incorporated in Jamaica added a new dimension to the emerging focus on men's studies in a real and dynamic manner. Interestingly, Barry Chevannes identified as one of his reasons for the formation of Fathers Inc. the desire to respond to the feminist critique of men as being irresponsible. I have always felt that this was a misdirected assertion as I have never come across any statement made by Caribbean feminists to this effect. Much of this discussion on 'male irresponsibility' could be found in the earlier writings of the male marginality discussion. Caribbean feminist scholars would not normally adopt such a position but rather interrogate the underlying factors. I felt there was the need to develop a full body of knowledge on men and masculinities to help society understand this complex situation and guide public policy and social and gender interactions.

By the 1990s, there was the beginning of a related discourse and praxis as small men's groups were emerging. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago there

was the group, Men Against Violence Against Women (MAVAW) and the small campus-based men's group formed of UWI students who had attended gender courses – ARTOM – The Association for the Transformation and Re-orientation of Masculinity engineered by Jerome Teelucksingh but also including Tracy Hackshaw and Jacqueline Burgess¹. Jerome would go on to declare the first International Men's Day on November 19, 1996 and this has been accepted internationally. MAVAW and ARTOM were both included on the steering committee that planned that 1996 conference. The conference was therefore the culmination of a range of societal processes and interests and involved several renowned local, regional and international scholars.

3. A focus on masculinity studies then and a conference to interrogate the issue would have been very novel back then and may have raised an eyebrow or two. Was there any fall-out as a result?

Initially, there was the need to really sell the idea to some decision-makers as they saw it as an incredulous idea. After all, a focus on men's studies was not yet established and in some quarters many may not have associated it with the CGDS. But that was soon achieved. There may have been some questions from some individuals but the decision and the aftermath of the conference proved timely and very popular. Many participants expressed their pride and feelings of accomplishment to have been associated with the historic event.

4. Let's focus on the bit about "a research agenda." At that time, or even before, were there other agendas, perhaps particular feminist or political agendas, which led the Symposium Committee to identify its thrust as a research agenda?

No, because it was new. This new paradigm emerged as a result of ongoing research of scholars working in a broad range of areas, for example Calypso, sport, history, sexual behaviours, literature etc. It also emerged from

questions that arose in the work of women's and gender studies scholars and the emergence of themes that focussed specifically on masculinity such as educational performance. It was an opportunity for persons to showcase their research in the field and to look at their data with new lenses so it presented a platform upon which to build a new research agenda. It also ensured that a baseline was created for us to determine where we were and to use this baseline as a benchmark in moving forward.

5. What was the gender landscape like back then (19 years ago) in terms of gender awareness, gender relations, governmental policy and praxis related to gender, etc.?

It was a time when the Women's Movement was very strong; it is now less so although I am seeing some hopeful signs. Back then there was far more open, critical discourse. Locally, there was the relatively new Gender Affairs Division of the Ministry of Social Services - that was a new phenomenon that really set about trying to achieve its mandate. Internationally, the previous year 1995, saw the Global Women's Conference in Beijing with an international call for improvement and articulation of women's rights and gender issues. In fact, that conference marked a high point for the Caribbean women's movement and the Caribbean delegation made important contributions to the shaping the Beijing Platform for Action. At that time also the then CGDS at St. Augustine was just two years old. There was one established academic staff member – me - but I drew on a range of support from affiliate staff from other faculties, students and the small staff of the Centre at that time.

6. And the gender landscape now...?

It seems that globally today there is less critical interrogation of these issues and more conservative positions predominate. In the late 1990s and early

21st Century many Caribbean activists moved on to occupy leadership positions in international and regional organisations and agencies and there has not been the proverbial seamless filling of their shoes. There has not been a generational transfer, but I am beginning to see the emergence of some new initiatives among a new generation, regionally using social media but also locally using popular actions, so there is a new hope.

We have also been confronted with a shift in politics, a reduction in the state machinery's role and with local and regional gender institutions and groups receiving less funding for a prominent focus on gender. Now, in the context of the rise in fundamentalisms of varying kinds, including religious and economic fundamentalisms, that have occupied the focus and purse strings regionally and internationally; there has also been the emergence of identity-based politics with sometimes negative fallout for women. Importantly though, issues of sexuality, sex-gender identity and diversity, sexual orientation, etc., have increased in importance and are being incorporated into gender analysis and gender studies, and not understood as outside of gender.

The IGDS St. Augustine and regionally is now of course stronger with more staff. I am proud of what we have achieved generally and in the area of scholarship on masculinities. Masculinity studies courses are taught on each of our campuses and continues to be a theme in our research programmes.

7. Given your work towards that Conference in 1996, and based on what you perceive gender relations to be today, if you were given an opportunity to return to that period in planning for the Conference, what would you change or perhaps focus less on and/or more heavily on?

Off the bat, I will say that I would retain what the elemental issues were in that conference since they were very comprehensive and all-encompassing and engaged the discourse then.

8. Tell me then, how do you see masculinity studies and its impact on academia, the general society and gender relations today?

Personally, I am not too heartened at the outcome. I expected a greater impact on these life issues. I think that there should be social workers trained in the area of gender and masculinity studies since I retain the perspective and philosophy that 'gender' is of paramount importance in one's identity, structures of family/household and domestic organisation e.g. child socialisation; it is also important for us to move towards a life free from violence and other aspects of societal development today. I am saddened for example, that students in the B.Ed programme - teachers no longer have to take the course "Men and Masculinities in the Caribbean" which I felt was extremely useful and empowering to them. Those students are the decision-makers in schools and the ones who are expected to implement the curriculum. They are poised to effect positive change and their capacity to act as agents of change has been reduced. Maybe there is the need to do some evaluation of the impact and reach of that course to determine its impact on wider society. Even outreach in communities and the wider society has diminished. What is evident is a cultural resistance to challenging the status quo on sex and gender issues in society, especially in light of a powerful sexist and homophobic popular culture. There also needs to be a more general discussion on how boys become men through the gender socialization process which occurs in many different locations.

9. Now, popular culture and other male gender socializing agents have been paramount in shaping young men and even young women into the persons they are. There seems to be a clarion call in all quarters – religion, the education system, the average Jane on the street, the political sphere, the legal fraternity – about the direction in which society is heading. It is almost a devolution of sorts. Would you consider the perspective that gender has failed us as a society? And if not, how has gender actually helped in any way, given the reality of what is happening everywhere?

There is constant resistance to transformations in gender relations as patriarchy continues to assert its position and adjusts to retain its position in different ways. Coupled with this is a seemingly less impactful Women's Movement across the Caribbean. The grassroots women's movement has been severely challenged but at the same time we are seeing the emergence of new men's organisations and a regional network, the Caribbean Men's Action Network CARIMan. There is the recognition among some men of the need for a more informed position regarding men's issues and gender equality. There is also the recognition of the need for gendered scholarship on masculinities as a field that is critically important for societal change. Another important development has been the movement for equality in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation. This is a growing regional movement which has been primarily male-led although with some women activists and organisations. Organisations such as the Jamaican Forum for Lesbians and Gays (J-FLAG) and the Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) are important examples and have often found common cause with the women's movement.

Unfortunately there are also some men's organisations that are decidedly anti-feminist and in some ways even see the gains women have made as threatening. Through their activism there has been some de-legitimisation of the regional women's movement which is unfortunate. I feel strongly that gender analysis has much to offer both women and men in understanding the complexities of our existence and new ways forward for the future.

10. There has been a criticism that in a plural society that is Trinidad and Tobago, there is little coverage by academics and researchers on the Indian male's sensibility, replete with his history, culture, differences in social class, religion and his interface with his Afro-Caribbean brother. If this is so, why is there almost an invisibility of the Indian male and his struggles, triumphs and challenges in Men's Studies?

I ask myself the same question! From time to time there has been a published article stemming out of research in Indian masculinities; however the literature is still quite limited in comparison with the literature on Indo-Caribbean women. For example, I wrote a paper that will soon be published in *Caribbean Quarterly* called "Looking for an Indian Man: Popular Culture and the Dilemmas of Indo-Caribbean Masculinity" and the peer reviewers questioned the absence of literature on Indian masculinities. It's just the reality out there that there are so few research undertakings in the area. We need to work on changing this.

11. But why is Masculinity Studies in the Caribbean seen as Afro-Caribbean Men's Studies?

It shouldn't be at all. I think it's seen as such – incorrectly so – because Indo-Caribbean scholars have not been interrogating Indian masculinities in the same ways as Afro-Caribbean scholars have. Indo-Caribbean women have been writing a great deal in fiction and feminist scholarship but less feminist-related research on Indo-Caribbean masculinities. I have found though that in the interrogation of their fiction we may be able to discern much in that regard. When I first introduced the course on Men and Masculinities at St. Augustine, I included a module on Caribbean literature that you taught, Tyrone, and I was amazed at the good job that male Caribbean authors had done in capturing the situation of Indo-Caribbean men and gender relations more generally. Another possible reason is that Indian masculinities have not usually been perceived as pathological in the same way that Afro-Caribbean masculinities have. The early male marginality discussions are a good example of this. The truth is that all masculinities, just as all femininities, need to be interrogated, researched, analysed and understood if this project of social justice and gender transformation is to take place. Masculinity scholars need to pick up the mantle here. At the same time, we need to remember that the scholarship on Caribbean masculinities generally is itself still growing.

12. What has been the Women's Movement response to Men's Studies in the Caribbean over the last 18 years since the IGDS' Symposium on Men's Studies?

Very accepting indeed; perhaps this is because we conceptualise related issues in every aspect of our lives. The IGDS incorporates masculinity studies in its curriculum planning and course delivery on all campuses and there has been exponential growth and resultant interest, both among male and female students. The Women's Movement across the Caribbean sees masculinity studies as having a pivotal and sustained role in its quest to attain gender quality and social justice and recognises the importance of partnerships with men's organisations with similar objectives.

13. How has your work, not just before and at the Symposium, but your continued work on masculinity studies impacted on the Men's Movement/Men's Studies globally?

I would want to think in a very positive and real manner. I know my text that emerged out of the conference, *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses* is used internationally and it also earned the best-selling textbook award from the UWI Press in 2004 reflecting its popularity and relevance. It is no secret as well that the Caribbean remains at the cutting edge of work on masculinity studies and scholarship globally and so my focus is ever present in that area. In fact, a number of research issues involving masculinity that are now being undertaken internationally have been explored already to certain degrees right here in the Caribbean. In particular I can think of all the work on male academic performance carried out in this region over the past fifteen years. I attended an international conference recently and they were just beginning to look seriously at these issues in Europe and we have a longer record of this. Unfortunately, there is little international recognition of our scholarship. We need to do more to be visible internationally e.g. publishing in international journals, collaborating with international scholars in areas where

we have expertise. We integrate masculinity studies within our theorizing on gender in a way that is not done in many places. I see our role in this regard as vital especially since scholarship coming out of the Global North often marginalizes and ignores the theorizing from the Global South.

14. Give me a statement on the state of men's studies as you see it today.

Men's Studies, or Masculinity Studies as I prefer to call it, is a growing field. It is vibrant globally and carries with it its own repertoire of research interests, related publications, internationally acceptable peer-reviewed journals and global conferences. Men's Studies is also a diverse field with a range of different approaches and in some instances it is linked to a wider men's movement. At the IGDS and The UWI, I believe that significant inroads have been made in this area. It is my hope that exposure to masculinity studies through reading our publications or attending our classes can allow men to interrogate what it means to be a man in the same way that women's studies has, for the last four decades, been interrogating the construction of femininity and what it means to be a woman.

15. Finally, if you were to be engaged in a second Masculinity Studies symposium in 2016 – twenty years after the initial one – what would be some of the considerations you will bring to the fore to ensure not only a successful symposium but also a solid path for this area over the next 10 years?

There must be concentrated reflection on the aims, lessons and direction of men's studies as it has developed over the last ten years. The gains and losses must be assessed in order to determine where we must go. Although the last conference was extremely comprehensive, there are some issues that must certainly be addressed if one were to be held today. First we would need to examine in a much deeper way, issues of sexual orientation, sex/gender identity

and gender diversity as these are now firmly on the Caribbean agenda. Additionally, the issue of masculinity and political and ethnic/religious identity in conflict situations would be important especially in the context of the ethnic and religious-based global conflicts over the past decade. We would have to return to continuing concerns such as male youth criminality, violence, men, work and the sexual division of labour as well as the continuing challenge of educational participation and achievement.

I think it may also be useful to include some workshops for parents, teachers, social workers, police officers, judicial officers etc., on issues of gender and masculinity, I really feel that such knowledge would do much to educate but also empower and liberate us from many of the harmful ideologies that are really negatively affecting our societies today.

A second symposium will be everyone's symposium because Men's/Masculinity Studies is everyone's affair and a generation that may have missed it would certainly benefit!

¹ Interestingly this early men's organization included at least one woman.