

Lebanese Masculinities

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Dominant discourses surrounding gender tend to promote the view that the human race is naturally divided into male and female, where masculinity is fixed, stable and timeless, and where the natural difference between men and women is sharply emphasized. Nevertheless, gender studies are shifting from exclusive focus on women to a new interest in men, not as a monolithic group with fixed boundaries but rather as men whose masculinity is molded in particular times and settings. There are no significant studies that treat Arab males as gendered subjects, or products of "social conditioning."¹ Indeed, masculinity in the Arab world is generally treated as timeless and universal. In *Theorizing Masculinity*, Harry Brod and Micheal Kaufman assert that "we cannot study masculinity in the singular, as if the stuff of man were a homogeneous and unchanging thing. Rather, we wish to emphasize the plurality and diversity of men's experiences, attitudes, beliefs, situations, practices, and institutions, along lines of race, class, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, age, region, physical appearance, able-bodiedness, mental ability, and various other categories with which we describe our lives and experiences."² Indeed the history of Arab masculinity in the past forty years or so is composed of a number of elements that reveal the volatile nature of the culture's sense of masculinity and makes a study of male representation especially compelling and informative. As the older village and rural structures were being systematically destroyed and new urban values were taking precedence, men found themselves faced with disorienting challenges to masculine prerogatives. In a highly politicized and emotionally charged atmosphere there is the need to take on board the religiously diverse and ideologically divided nature of such societies and the forms of masculinity produced. Furthermore, the family, educational institutions, the state, all contribute to and are shaped by cultural constructions of gender. Since the Arab world is a region of diverse religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups with a plurality of experiences, one cannot look at it as a coherent whole. Accordingly, my focus will be post-war Lebanese society and the situation of men at this juncture. At a time in Lebanese history when men are becoming increasingly concerned over the feminization of culture and women are

beginning to make inroads into traditionally male territories, masculine identities are changing in complicated ways. This involves a radical questioning or redefinition of the meaning of masculinity in post-war Lebanon where there have been great ideological and political upheavals precipitating changes in social values, including greater freedoms for women. This complex gender dynamics has brought about a shift in the notions of masculinity within the Lebanese society. Today in Lebanon, women are still seen as bastions of traditional values. Their identities continue to center around the importance of virginity and on their achievements as wives and mothers. In other words, men are still in control of women's sexual behavior. Despite that, the ideology of patriarchal structure has undergone change in response to the complexities and transformations of the contemporary world. Indeed, if there are forces within the Lebanese society that insist on maintaining conventional ideals of manhood by stabilizing the idea of masculinity, and upholding the authentic ways, there are others who under the influence of modernity flout and contest these ideals. Masculinity is being reinvented and reinterpreted to meet the specific exigencies and complexities of current conditions. The Western cultural assault has penetrated an extensive range of institutions and socio-cultural realms making it impossible for many to resist an inevitable modernization. Indeed, many men see the need to embrace modernity to remain in touch with civilization. Accordingly, for a large section of the middle class urban sector of society, the meanings of masculinity and femininity are becoming increasingly blurred, varied, and problematic. For others, change is seen as a potential betrayal of one's culture, values, and language. As a result, regression towards original mythology appears to be the only way to preserve one's identity. Since the Islamic world has been unable to compete with the West at the scientific, technological, economic, and educational levels, Muslims present an alternative in the one area in which they take pride and feel secure, namely the realm of religion and culture. This perspective, however, demands that men adhere to essentialist definitions of masculinity, and ensure that women remain in their places since they are seen as the major symbols of stability.

Nevertheless, despite resistance by supporters of traditional masculinity, Lebanese culture is becoming more feminized where men belonging to the urban middle classes have started to adopt habits and embrace acts formerly reserved for women. Earlier on, it was women who cared about their physical appearance, while men's indifference over their own image was the male norm. Today, if one casts a look at urban areas inhabited and frequented by the upper middle classes, one notes that, in many cases, gender has become blurred. The clothes that are worn by young people in these places such as T-Shirts, sweaters and pants are predominantly unisex. Furthermore, androgynous fashion which presumably emasculates the male wearer is seemingly everywhere. The opening of our culture onto Western patterns and standards has created a breed of men who are very much concerned about body image. Captivated by new ideals of male fashion, style and beauty, these men polish their nails, wear earrings, diet, exercise, and undergo plastic surgery to improve their appearance. Young men wear trendy clothes, sport body piercing and tattoos, grow their hair long, wear ponytails, color their hair, apply styling gel, and pluck their eyebrows. Other older men, worried about hair loss, spend a lot of money on shampoos and chemical creams or go as far as undergoing hair transplants. Men's beauty salons have replaced the old barber shops while special cosmetics for men such as hydrating creams, anti-wrinkle creams, all kinds of face masks and many other kinds of cosmetics are readily available. Indeed many men are spending increasing amounts of money and time to improve their physical appearance.

Satellite TV channels are broadcasting programs that run counter to our culture and tradition. Despite reservations at various levels, reality TV has thousands of viewers. Star Academy aired on The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation has attracted a huge audience and fans. Even though the idea of young, unmarried men and women living together runs counter to our customs and traditions, the program was a great success. The young men and women who participated competed on equal basis without discrimination between male and female and won the love of the masses all over the Arab world. Furthermore, if the organization of Mr. Lebanon contest is not as popular as Miss Lebanon, young men are taking a chance that would put them in the limelight and ensure a better future for them. These young men do not seem to worry about the fact that they are becoming objects of the (female) gaze. Indeed, middle-class, educated women are beginning to look at men more boldly and valuing them according to their appearance.

Indeed, Middle class educated men have a whole range of other sources of identity open to them, through their work, through fathering, through the way they treat their working wives and through friendship networks. Men are increasingly sharing responsibility with their wives at home and with the children, where they are learning that they too can be nurturing, caring and emotionally expressive. They are more in touch with a feminine side that they thought did not exist.

Since women are working with men and competing with them, men feel the need to appear attractive in the way the women had to be. Indeed surveys conducted in the West found that the more financially secure the woman is, the more important a man's looks were to her.

As the new age of globalization, free market capitalism and consumer culture takes over, men who have been associated with power, dominance and strength because of the type of work and jobs that they have held traditionally, are taking jobs that no longer require physical fitness and where an increasing number of women compete with them. Men are more present in the fields traditionally reserved for women and women are getting more positions in social, and business life that used to belong to men. The growth of the service economy has removed physical strength and fitness as a requirement and thus has accommodated women, in addition to men, in the workplace. In an age where consumerism is the main vehicle of expression, men who have nothing to measure their achievements against, have increasingly sought approval not for their actions and feats, but for the commodities that they possess such as expensive cars, houses and their physical appearance. The growth of service economy worldwide has changed the way men do business. For many, work value rests solely in one's ability to earn money and capital to buy such commodities in order to influence the perceptions and views of those around them. The rise of the male fashion industry epitomizes the importance of male appearance in a world where the image and spectacle predominates.

Because masculinities are stretched by the exigencies of change, the process of accommodating old definitions to new conditions have driven men to reexamine their experiences and reinvent their masculinity. In Lebanon, one could say that masculinity imported from the West has a precarious existence. For some it is seen as a threat, while for others it is a blessing. The definition of manhood is changing and many men are searching for a new understanding of manhood suited to the modern age. Owing to changes precipitated by modernity and by the empowerment of women, the Lebanese culture is becoming more feminized causing men to adopt habits and embrace acts formerly reserved for women. Nevertheless, opposing forces of modernity and counter-modernity stretch and strain the country's social fabric, and cherished ideals of masculinity are being challenged and interrogated. At the same time, traditional masculinity continues to rattle its arms to ensure that the field is still under male control.

End Notes

1. See Scott, J.W., "Gender: A useful category of historical analysis," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), 1053-1075.
2. See Brod, H., and Kaufman, M. (1994). *Theorizing masculinities*, 5-6. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.