

What About Masculinity?

There is less focus on 'being a man' than on 'being good at being a man.'
Michel Herzfeld, The Poetics of Manhood.

Scholarly attention to gender issues in the Middle East has been focused almost exclusively on a quest to understand femininity. There are as yet no significant studies that make Muslim men visible as gendered subjects, and masculinity in Arab Islamic cultures has so far remained an unrecognized and unacknowledged category viewed in essentialist terms and perceived as natural, and self-evident. Indeed, men have been seen exclusively as oppressors of women, and the stereotype of domination and subordination remains dominant. Nevertheless, studies in the 1980's began shifting from women's studies to gender studies which are changing from an exclusive focus on women to a new interest in Middle Eastern men. Indeed, the aim is not to distract attention from women's issues, but rather to underline masculinity and femininity as relational constructs. The rigid demarcation of gender roles is gradually changing, and masculinity is increasingly being seen as an unstable sign which has changed with modernity and the various political, social and economic changes that have affected the Middle East, forcing men to look at themselves and the world around them with different eyes. This indeed is a historic turning point where ideas about what it means to be a man have been under maximum pressure at all levels. While men are the real beneficiaries of power in their societies it is interesting to note that men's dominance is not restricted to women but also to other men who are considered inferior. In other words, many men, like women, continue to be under the tight control of a limited number of men who actually possess the power. Patriarchy is being reinterpreted, and reinvented to meet the specific exigencies of current conditions, and gender relations are being seen as variable, shifting and changing in diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts. In reaction to the monolithic view of men who were viewed as the uncomplicated agents of oppression, the articulation of masculinity at this particular historical moment is more complex and more complicated where there is a great disparity between inherited masculine values and the patterns of actual behavior by men. For many men, masculinity is a goal to be achieved and experienced in particular times and settings creating a great deal of anxiety and trepidation. Furthermore, in the Arab world, it is clear that both men and women are subjected to oppression in an atmosphere of war and under regimes that continue to subject men as well as women to social and economic oppression as well as political control and violence. Indeed as Deniz Kandiyoti puts it, "the denunciation of men [by Feminists] as the main enemy could easily go against the cultural grain in societies where both men and women are tightly enmeshed in familistic networks of mutual rights and obligations, where

both sexes may be laboring under much harsher forms of economic and political oppression". (Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives. London: I.B. Taurius Publishers, 1996, 15).

This issue of *Al-Raida* attempts to show how various masculinities are defined and redefined in particular times and settings and the plurality and diversity of men's experiences, attitudes, beliefs, practices along lines of class, sexual orientation, religion, region, and various other categories. The file in this issue includes several articles dealing with different forms of masculinity in the Middle East, from the early Twentieth Century until the present. "The Turban, the Tarbush and the Top Hat" underlines the interconnectedness between masculinity, modernity and national identity in interwar Egypt where the tarbush was seen as a sign of the modern and the traditional, the national and the foreign, and the masculine and feminine helping to define Egyptian masculinity at the time. Another article "Male Infertility: Masculinity and New Reproductive Technologies in the Arab World" reveals changing views among Lebanese men to male infertility and the belief by educated middle-class men that infertility has nothing to do with virility. Cathie Lloyd's article studies the crisis of masculinity in Algeria through the press, feature films and literature. "Female Genital Mutilation and Constructions of Masculinity in Twentieth Century Egypt" deals with entrenched as well as changing attitudes among Egyptian men to Female Genital Mutilation. Nadia Zibani and Martha Brady's article deals with adolescent boy's responses to gender differentiation in rural upper Egyptian villages. "Humiliation and Masculine Crisis in Iraq" studies the impact of targeting men in Iraq on Iraqi masculinity and self-image. Azzah Shararah Baydoun presents a field study on the ways Lebanese university students perceive their preferred partners. "Masculinity in Morocco" is based on a field study that focuses on views of sexuality and masculinity in Moroccan ministerial administrations. Elisa Perkin's article focuses on the effects of the 2004 Mudawwana Reforms on Moroccan masculinity. The file contains an intriguing interview with Mosbah Baalbaki, the only Lebanese male belly dancer in Lebanon. The last three articles deal with masculinity in modern Arabic fiction and film. The file is completed with a review of Mai Ghosoub's and Emma Sinclair-Webb *Imagined Masculinities* (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

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