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Sociology of Masculinity in the Middle East

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Abstract

Analysis of masculinities in the Middle East is relatively a new field of study and research. Globalisation and growing cultural influences of the West are creating new challenges in this part of the world. In a post 9/11/2001 environment, Western popular cultures depict the Muslim male from this region as an existential threat. Yet Middle Eastern Islam is in the grip of powerful changes. Masculinity as a social construct may take a variety of forms in the Middle East. Some are tolerated by the larger society, while others may incur serious consequences. Yet gender, as social construction, in the Middle East is certainly shaped by, and works within, a patriarchal society; and Islamist masculinity is grounded within cultural institutions and has endured through cultural practices. This paper aims to discuss this process and make Muslim masculinities visible in the Middle East, and to elaborate on the future trends of gender and masculinity in this region. The future trend in the Middle East indicates that economic and cultural forces of globalization combined with demographics will strongly influence reconstruction of masculinity and gender roles in this region. While political change may take place rapidly, attitudes towards gender equality are changing more slowly. Social factors leading to intensification of the growing disparity among social classes will hinder the progress towards the gender equality.

Introduction

Analysis of masculinities is a relatively new Western discourse which is spreading to other cultures and regions including the Middle East. However, globalisation and growing cultural influences of the West are creating new waves of conflicts and challenges in this part of the world. In a post 9/11/2001 environment, Western popular cultures depict the Muslim male from this region as an existential threat. Yet Middle Eastern Islam is in the grip of powerful changes. The quest to renew Islam has always gone hand-in-hand with resistance to the West's military, political and cultural hegemony over the Muslim world. This process in turn, has challenged Muslim masculinities in relation to global hegemonic Western masculinities. This paper aims to discuss this process and make Muslim masculinities visible in the Middle East, and to elaborate on the future trends of gender and masculinity in this region.

Background

Western notions of Muslim men are informed by stereotypes of Middle Eastern cultures. The region has been under enormous pressures from the West to undertake reforms and adapt Western democracy as the most appropriate model in governing the societies. In the last three decades, we have witnessed the arrival of Islamist masculinity from Islamic and fundamentalist movements. Core issues revolve around the rights and roles of women and their location within Islamic society. During the last two decades a number of publications on women's rights and feminism in Islamic

countries have appeared (Afshar, 1998, Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Kurzman 2002, Peteet 2000, Shedadeh 2003). Meanwhile masculinity has remained invisible and rendered femininity problematic. There would appear therefore, a need for extensive research in this area.

Middle East

The Middle East is a region comprising about 16 countries and strategically located within the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. The region with a population over 400 million, possesses great diversity in religions, cultures, ethnicities, histories and languages.

The Middle East is the most ancient region of human civilisation. At around 10,000 B.C. farming first developed in the area called the Fertile Crescent. The emergence of plow agriculture, requiring physical strength to guide the plow and use large animals, about 3000 B.C. is thought to have initiated a patriarchal social structure throughout the Middle East (Ehrenberg, 1989).

The Middle East also became the birthplace of the three monotheist world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, being the oldest of all, Mithraism was the dominant religion of the region. Mithra, a male god, was worshiped only by men in Mithraic shrines. Later on, Mithraism spread to Europe, and the ancient Romans and Greeks considered Mithra not only as a sun god, but also as the god of kings and warriors and hence the god of war. Mithraism influenced Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and later on Islam in the region (Cumont, 1956). The social structure of patriarchy as its legacy has survived through these religions up to the present time. Documents from Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C. provide considerable detail relating to laws of personal status. The male was the virtual owner of his family. He could sell his wife and children or pawn them as security for debt (Ehrenberg, 1989).

In order to comprehend the religious complexity of the region, we should note the legacy or presence of Zoroastrianism, Monachism, Mazdakism, Sunni and Shiite Islam, Babism, Baha'i faith, and the sects of Khawareji, Wahhabi, Salafi, Ibadi, Ismaili, Zaidi, Sufi, and Yazidi have their origins in this region.

The Middle East becomes even more complex when we consider the ethnicity, cultural background and history of various countries in addition to social class, power structure, life-style and gender. Another aspects of the complexity relates to abundance of oil and natural gas in this region inviting the influences and interventions of Western powers. All of these factors have influenced, albeit with varying degrees, the making of masculinity in this region.

Theoretical Framework

Masculinity and feminism are considered to be two sub fields situated under the umbrella term "gender". In studying masculinity, there are two major approaches namely functionalist and constructivist. Gilmore (1990) takes functionalist approach in

defining the main features of masculinity, in a universal sense. In contrast, Constructionists emphasising power relations and men's dominance over women. Constructionist theories have been further advanced by a number of sociologist including Steve Jackson (1999), Lynne Segal (1999), Jeffery Weeks (2000), and most importantly Bob Connell (2000). These theorists also focus on gender hierarchy and gender injustice.

However, in undertaking the present analysis of gender, *Relational Social Constructionism Theory* of Connell (2000) is adopted here. Connell describes gender as 'a social practice', which refers to bodies (that is sex), but is not reducible to bodily sex or reproduction (Connell, 2000:27). He has shifted the attention from sex roles to the structure indicating, "Gender is a social structure or socially organised set of practices forming relationships between people, rather than a matter of kinds of people" (Ibid: 24).

Connell's analysis of masculinities hinges on four premises. Firstly, he discusses 'masculinity' not 'men', which avoids a strict dichotomy of men versus women. Secondly, Connell emphasises a historical, fluid and non-static character of masculinity by refuting essentialist concepts of gender. Thirdly, masculinity relates to institutions, economics and everyday life and it is part of domestic and public history. Finally Connell considers multiplicities of gender and not fixed identities (Ibid: 24).
It is from these perspectives that masculinity in the Middle East has been analysed.

Despite the Western view that Islam appears to be the determinant factor in shaping the identities of Muslims, factors of social class, economy, labour market relations, ethnicity and culture, sexuality, history and individual experience, and relations with family and peers, are centrally implicated in the formation of male Muslim identities.

Literature concerning Muslim masculinities in the Middle East remains scare. Important exceptions are the works of Ghoussoub, and Sinclair-Webb, Bayat (2003), and Gerami (2005) which will be drawn upon here.

Historical Factors

From 7th century AD, Islam became the dominant religion of the region. Muslim men formed the religious hierarchy and excluded women from attending mosques. The division of labour was predominantly based on gender. The economy in the traditional Islamic cities revolved around the bazaar where all merchants, shopkeepers, traders and service providers were exclusively men. Muslim men not only took control of the domain of politics but also dominated the economy.

In the pre-modern era, the Middle East became part of the Ottoman, then the Safavid empires. Ottoman Empire existed from 1299 to 1923. During 16th and 17th centuries, its territory, in addition to Middle East, included Anatolia, parts of North Africa, and much of South-eastern Europe to the Caucasus. The Safavid Empire lasted from 1501 to 1722. It covered Iran, and parts of Turkey and Georgia. Iran became the only Shiite government in the entire Muslim world during that time. Shiism revitalised *Shahadat* (martyrdom) a concept that has been monopolised by Islamist men to secure a place in Paradise by sacrificing their lives to defend Islam. This concept dates back to the early development of Islam, particularly the short-lived government of Ali and the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E. After the Fourth Caliph Ali was assassinated, Hussein, his second son, tried to regain power from Caliph Yazid but was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680CE. Ali as the 'Warrior' persona and Hussein as martyr, represent two different masculinity types in Shiite Islam (Gerami, 2005). This perspective sees Hussein as a positive role model of courage and resistance against tyranny and is celebrated during

<u>Ashura,</u> a Shiite day of mourning. This custom has been integrated into the construction of Islamist masculinity within Shiite communities globally.

As a response to modernisation process, Islamic modernists developed a new set of ideas in relation to several distinctive ideological targets. One was a discourse of Islamic orthodoxy, which claimed a monopoly of legitimate religious expressions. The others were secular discourses and religious ideologies that, as a result of the European interventions, started to invade the cultural landscape of Islamic countries with powerful force from the late eighteenth century on (Moaddel, 2005:19).

A global Western imagery of masculinity emerged in this era. The invasion of Islamic countries by Western colonial powers intensified the language of 'rape of the motherland' by a penetrating foreign force (Ahmed, 1992). Thus with colonialism, men's protecting women's honour became a symbol of national honour. This created serious challenges to local masculinities as men's honour was threatened and called upon to protect the motherland (Gerami, 2005).

During the early twentieth century, masculinities in Middle Eastern societies progressed from diffused ethnic, tribal, rural, and urban masculinities to a national masculinity of independence movements, and then to the diverse masculinities of contemporary times. National media experimented with a variety of masculinity models including peasant, working-class, and ethnic masculinities. However, the dominant prototype remained shaped by such strong nationalistic figures as Kamal Mostafa Ataturk in Turkey, Rezah Shah in Iran and Gamal Abdul Nassir in Egypt. In Iran, Rezah Shah banned the women's veil and barred men from wearing ethnic, religious, or tribal clothing.

Pan-Arab nationalism by the early fifties became a compelling force of cultural change in virtually all Arab countries. Arab nationalism of the early twentieth century followed the fall of the Ottoman Empire after WWI. By 1916 under the secret Sykes-Picot agreement the French and British divided up the Middle East, with the Balfour declaration of 1917 leading to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Modern-day divisions based on the above agreements became embedded in the collective memories of people in the region, leading to the clash of domestic masculinity with global hegemonic masculinity observable among Palestinians today. The occupation of land previously deemed theirs created a crisis for Palestinian masculinities. The only way, some Islamist men believed, to defend the motherland has been to sacrifice their lives under the banner of <u>Intifada</u> (Palestinian uprising). These measures are one response of Islamist young men, and even boys, to chronic feelings of guilt, shame and humiliation by Israel and the West. This process has become a dominant discourse shaping the masculinity of young Palestinians and Israeli men through military institutions.

However, one response to the growing Western influence in the region and to the process of rapid modernisation was the emergence of fundamentalist movements.
In span of a few decades and in the late 20th century, fundamentalist movements spread across the Middle East led by people such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Mussavi Khomeini from Iran, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyied Qutb from Egypt, Abul Ala Maududi from Pakistan, Mustafa as-Siba'i and Abbasi Madani, Shaikh Nahnah, and Ali Belhaj from Algeria. They denounced the 'non-Islamic' curricula in the universities, and condemned the mixing of the sexes in public places.
These leaders rejected the overall Western model and insisted on unconditional loyalty to Islam. This forced social change led to the emergence of Islamist masculinity.

In Iran, parliamentary politics also ended with a coup in 1953. It marked the rise of a new bureaucratic state that intervened heavily in the economy and culture. From the 1960s onward, with the establishment of the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*),

there was a cultural shift away from secularism and toward radical Islamism. The religious opposition attacked the Shah as an anti-Islamic, foreign pro-Western puppet, and a promoter of decadent Western culture under the guise of freedom for women. A distinctive feature of the opposition was the rise of a clergy-centred Islamic discourse and ideology.

However, Islamist masculinity is embedded within cultural institutions in the Middle East conditioned by a patriarchal society that exercises control over women particularly through the practices associated with honour and shame and circumcision.

Cultural Institutions and Practice

Islamist masculinity is grounded within cultural institutions and has endured through cultural practices. Gender in the Middle East is certainly shaped by, and works within, a **patriarchal society**. Patriarchy is defined as male formal control over women and family, exercised by fathers, husbands and brothers. Kandiyoti (1991:26-7).

Part of this control has been exercised through the practice of **honour** and **shame**. This is closely associated with the (sexual) behaviour of women in Middle Eastern societies. It is estimated by the United Nations Population Fund that as many as 5000 women and girls are murdered by family members each year in so-called "honour killings" around the world. (Yemen Observer). http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd

Another feature of patriarchy is the social desirability of male children to carry the family name. In Middle Eastern societies there is a great social **desire for male children**. There are several reasons for this. Due to lack of welfare state and social security system, there is a great desire for parent to have male children to guarantee their wellbeing in later period of their lives. As a result the desire for male children has affects on man's social status. It is through the sons who have more access to establish contacts with other people a man can expand his influence within the community and not the daughters. Thus there are social, cultural as well as economic reasons for wanting a male heir to carry on the family name, otherwise the lineage dies out creating tragic outcomes in a family-centred society (Shaaban, 1998:114).

Patriarchy is also sustained by male circumcision. **Male circumcision** is a practice where masculinity is most explicitly and usually publicly constructed. Male circumcision is prevalent in Muslim societies and Jewish culture. In fact, it is assumed to be a religious duty to circumcise boys of both faiths. However, evidence indicates that it is more a cultural practice than a religious rite. However, on the basis of the Sunna: "Only male circumcision is Sunna in Islam, a tradition taken from the Prophet Abraham which remained and is still performed in Judaism" (Dorkenoo, & Elworthy, 1992).
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The Jewish practice of circumcision generally takes place much earlier than it does for Muslims, customarily on the eight day in the infant's life. Hoffman (1996:44) suggests, "Circumcision is considered to be a representation of the very basic cultural dichotomy between men and women". Circumcision is also related to patriarchy. It is the duty of the father to circumcise his son and 'this is the extension of the creation of the son by the father' (Ibid: 44). However in Islam, circumcision takes place at an older age, although the actual age varies across the Muslim orbit. Ethnographers' reports indicate that circumcision in Islam is a highly charged, vividly recalled experience (Crapanzano, 1981).

Another institution impacting on masculinity of young Palestinians and Israelis is military institutions. In fact, soldiering rituals of modern armies in the Middle East mark

the transition of the child into manhood. An analysis of army institutions and regional wars offers a view of male hegemonic practices. Peteet (2000) examines Intifada-s (Palestinian uprising) where the masculine identity of Palestinian males is closely linked to resistance against the far greater powers wielded by the Israeli Defence forces.

Kaplan (2000) identifies the extent to which military service in the Israeli Army inculcates versions of exemplary masculinity that are inextricably bound up with Zionism or ideas about Israeli rights to biblical lands, and with the status and recognition of manhood in triumph over Palestinians. In hegemonic Islamist masculinity, however, youth obtain their venerated manhood through acts of sacrifice in the name of country, faith and honor (Sinclair-Web, 2000).

Typology of Masculinities in the Middle East Countries

Islamism, like socialism, is not a uniform entity. It is a colourful socio-political phenomenon with many strategies and discourses. This enormously diverse movement rages from liberal to conservative, modern to traditional, moderate to radical, democratic to theocratic, and from peaceful to violent. What these trends have in common is that they derive their source of legitimacy from Islam.

However, masculinity as a social construct may take a variety of forms in the Middle East. Some are tolerated by the larger society, while others may incur serious consequences. Among the latter is homosexuality. During Islamic history, homosexuality has always been regarded as a 'deviant' sexual practice against 'real' heterosexual masculinity. It is clear that deep intolerance and denial of homosexuality is widespread across the Middle East. This belief operates at many levels, with severe social sanctions sometimes taking violent forms.

Taylor (2005) recently described how Ahmed Khalil a 14-year-old boy was shot by Iraqi police in the doorway of his home for the apparent crime of being gay. http://www.commondreams.org/headlines0505-06.htm

This is in sharp contrast to the practice of sex change in Iran. Although homosexuality is treated as a crime carrying death penalty, yet transsexuals aren't. It is the believe that unlike homosexuals, they suffer from a separation of body and soul where they believe their own body doesn't belong to them. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the unlikely global leader for sex change operations. In contrast to almost everywhere else in the Muslim world, sex change operations are legal in Iran for anyone who can afford the cost and satisfy interviewers that they meet necessary psychological criteria "Guardian Unlimited". The surgery's availability has provided deliverance to a community which was once cowed and confined to a secret underground existence. Bringing it about has required a theological re-think from Iran's Shiite Islamic rules, accustomed to rigidity traditional stances on sexual matters. These two examples indicate deviant masculinity is a fluid concept within the Islamic framework that is subject to different interpretations and sanctions in different times and places.

Physical appearance is used to make masculinity visible in the Middle East. Of course, physical appearance and image of maleness varies across ethnicity, social class and religion in the Middle East. For example full bearded face with a especial type of finger ring represents an Islamist conservative man. A moustache for an ordinary person represents a maleness in its full sense. From the point of view of its symbolism, " a luxurious moustache was a boundless treasure, given that a single hair would suffice as surety for a loan or a promise" (Dauod, 2000). Universally recognised prototypes of Islamists in Iran are summarised as: "bearded, gun-toting, bandana-wearing men, in

long robes or military fatigues of some Islamist (read terrorist) organization or country" (Gerami, 2005: 449). These features are strongly influenced through the media and the political agenda and then as a value become internalised and sustained to promote the kind of prototype is required.

However, Islamist fundamentalist movements generating Islamist masculinity enact a retroactive ideology by establishing what is claimed as an earlier 'pure' Islamic society of Shariah. Islamist masculinity discourse, being the product of fundamentalist resistance, is founded on the principles of *Jihad* and *Shahadat*. Most modern-day Muslims regard jihad as a personal struggle and distinguish it from warfare (Esposito, 2003:38), whereas the West identifies warfare Jihad as the prototype of Islamist masculinity. The concept of *Shahadat* (martyrdom) derived from Shiite Islam implies a personal and a public level of engagement to protect Islam or an Islamic nation (Gerami, 2005).

During the 8-year Iraq-Iran war, Shahadat and Shahid became institutionalized pattern of recruitment for young volunteers (Basiji) in Iran. These young men or boys were innocent Muslims who battle the forces of infidel while taking witness to their faith. These Basiji were cannonballs or child soldiers to outside world. To the Islamist discourse, they were martyrs. This ideal of martyrdom later engulfed the region (Ibid).

In Egypt, various uprisings were attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood (Akhavan al-Muslemin). And all the hijackers of September 11, 2001, have the characteristics of this prototype, and for many in the region they fit the Shahid persona (Ibid). However, during last decade, and facing the reality, the Basiji in Iran or what they are called as "children of revolution" is divided into two groups: those who still loyal to the reformist ideology or marring democracy and Islam; and those who become strong advocator and supporter of the inevitable separation of religion and state with emphasis on secular democracy. The former group by reinterpreting Qura'n, they espouse new constructions of Muslim identity (Soroush, 2000). They later group of men accelerating the growth of secular masculinity compatible with the Western model advocating for secular democracy. Both groups are supporters of environmental and women's movement and gender equality. Whilst they are under constant watch, their impacts on people's life style and gender issues and masculinity are growing significantly. In fact, the growing body of work on Islamic percepts, Jihad, and the hermeneutics of Qur'an further the discourse on Muslim identity and Muslim men (Esposito 2003, Lawrence 1998, and Soroush, 2000).

However the major prototypes of contemporary Middle Eastern Muslim masculinities are based on class locations and economic structures. For example, in Iran the new upper class is made up of top level Shiite religious clergy who by and large are strong supporters of fundamentalism and patriarchy.

In the twenty-first century Middle East, economic and cultural forces of globalization combined with demographics will strongly influence reconstruction of masculinity and gender roles in this region. The median age in the Middle East region is approximately 21 years (Gerami. 2005), while 60% of the 70million population of Iran is aged less than 35 years (Farr, 1999). Of the 3 million unemployed people in Iran, urban lower or middle class families are over-represented and current trends point to increases in unemployment in the future (Salehi-Esfahani and Taheripour, 2002). The identities of young Middle Eastern university-educated males are challenged because of social pressures to conform to Middle Eastern constructs of masculinity associated with providing income as breadwinner.

The new professional middle class are facing their own challenges. Whilst engaged in professional activities with meaningful employment, men in this group strive to secure university places for their children whilst facing blocked or limited political participation.

Their education, professional activities, and connections with the Western world condition them to be potential supporters of cultural liberalism and strong advocates for gender equality (Adibi, 1980).

In the twenty-first Century, more female than male students are entering universities in Muslim countries such as Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Yet university education has failed to deliver them secure lives; as a result, demand grows for migration to Western countries.

Lower-class member, who are called *mostazaafin*, an Arabic word meaning the oppressed, now exist in the poorer areas in all of the Middle Eastern cities. This class has several characteristics: they are unemployed or semi-employed in low-skill jobs. They are largely illiterate and live in a marginal conditions. Many only work seasonally or when labour is found. Their life is difficult and sometimes harsh. They live on margin of society in squalid slums and in poor health and nutrition, and with poor educational opportunities for their children. The oppressed people (*mostazaafin*) in the Middle East are encountering two major and opposing counter-currents: Islamic fundamentalism and cultural liberalism. Middle East governments may provide some assistance for segments of this population but are unable to provide all these men with stable employment around which familiar models of masculinity are organized. It is within this context that Muslim fluid masculinities are re-forming within the social structures of class, patriarchy, culture, economic structure, religion and politics.

Future

Islamic societies are grappling with the cross-currents of globalisation, cultural liberalisation, Islamic fundamentalism, and democracy, in addition to the current nuclear crises of Iran, and the Palestinians' long suffering which has been turned into a chronic feeling of guilt and shame.

However, Islam, like Christianity, is far from monolithic. While there are radical, violent strains of Islam, there are also Islamic voices that advocate egalitarianism, human rights, and democracy. Even in Iran, the stereotypical stronghold of Islamic fundamentalism, reformers have been working for peaceful change. One of those reformers, Shirin Ebadi, was awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize.

Fore the future, the constriction of Muslim identities in the Middle East is likely to be primarily affected by men's social class. While political change may take place rapidly, attitudes towards gender equality are changing more slowly. Social factors leading to intensification of the growing disparity among social classes will hinder the progress towards the gender equality, and may lead to unfortunate consequences.
Furthermore, a study of Muslim masculinities will enhance the understanding of Muslim men of the rapid global social change and their support of gender equality within Muslim societies.

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