

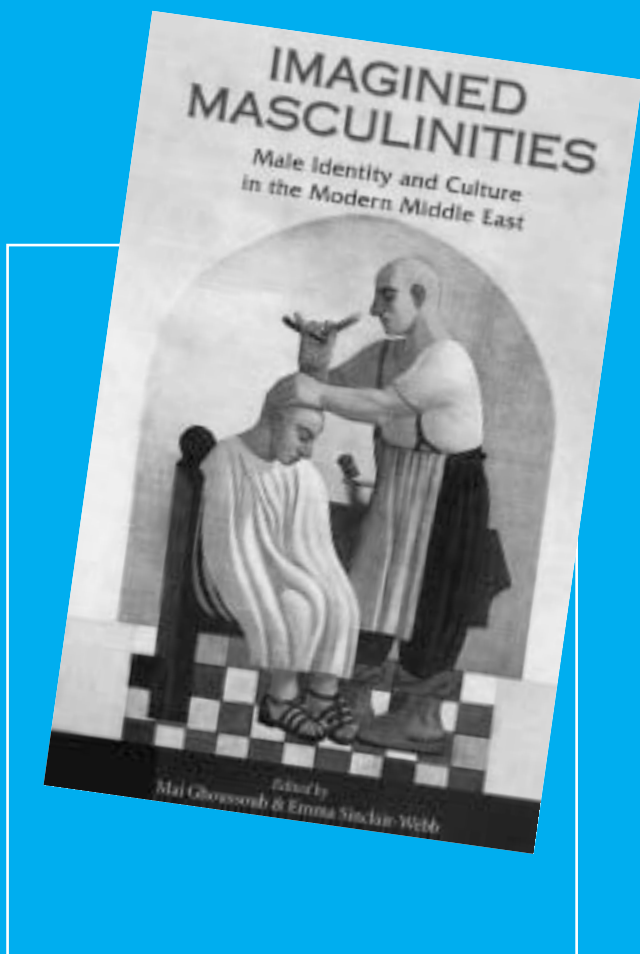
Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East

Edited by Mai Ghoussoub
and Emma Sinclair-Webb
Saqi Books, 2000

Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

As Emma Sinclair-Webb explains in her preface, this collection of essays is premised on the general notion that masculinity is “as socially constructed as femaleness” and that with regards to the study of masculinity in the Middle East, there is a need to revisit the traditional scholar work on the subject, which has been somewhat neglected with the focus on women in the past years. Thus, the editors of *Imagined Masculinities* have attempted – and indeed successfully – to offer a refreshing approach to masculinity in the Middle East, shying away from static preconceptions and generalized claims, by offering a large array of approaches, including anthropological analysis, interviews, literary criticism, fiction, and personal memoir, in various nations such as Turkey, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt.

The essays are grouped in three sections. The first, “Making men: Institutions and Social Practices” is the most ‘academic’ part of the book and addresses rituals and practices, such as circumcision, through which boys enter the socially accepted realm of ‘manhood’. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, in his discussion of circumcision in Tunisia and Morocco, questions the religious and physiological validity of this ritual, concluding



that it mainly reflects “a symbolic valorization of the phallus and an obsessional fear of losing it.” Yoram Bilu addresses the same ritual, but in the Jewish community, as well as two subsequent rituals, which are the first haircut and the school initiation ceremony. All three practices, he explains, are the initiation rites into manhood, which in the ultraorthodox Jewish community, is associated with the initiation to the world of Torah study. Two essays then address the institution of military service, in Israel and Turkey, the latter complemented by a particularly gripping interview with a former conscript. Emma Sinclair-Webb’s article sheds light on the two-dimensional perception of military service in Turkey; on the one hand, a recently refreshed association between military service and manhood has resulted from the conflict with Kurdish groups, while on the other hand, the evasion of military service by those directly involved, namely young men. As the editor remarks, the theme of violence stands out quite forcefully in these essays, and while it had not been anticipated, it is “fitting in relation to a region which is currently one of the most militarized and conflict-ridden areas.”

The second section, “Male Fictions: Narratives, Images and Icons,” is a richly diverse and informative part dealing with perceptions of masculinity in literature, movies and the press. For instance, Frédéric Lagrange in “Male Homosexuality in Modern Arab Literature” explores attitudes to homosexuality in Middle Eastern societies, attitudes marked by “the will not to know” that most probably contributed to the quasi absence of sociological work on this matter. He asserts: “For reasons that have to be analyzed, not only are the margins of the sexual ethic, such as homosexuality, severely underdocumented in sociological essays, hushed or harshly attacked in the press, but literature itself proves much less eager to discuss pleasure in all its manifestations than it did until the first half of the 19th century.” As such, his essay offers a cultural insight on a subject that has practically never been analyzed, let alone discussed.

The final section “Memoir and Male Identity” consists of three personal accounts that illustrate the formation of masculine identity. The last essay closes the loop of the book with an original work on the moustache in Middle Eastern societies: “Pipe, moustache, sun-glasses, and also the overcoat which we used to imagine as the dress of secret policeman, all this combined to make up the complete man who lacked nothing,” he writes, concluding that the moustache is “no more than a remaining trace of the customs of a previous generation.”

As Sinclair-Webb suggests in her introduction, many more fields of interest can be explored in the future to gain a richer understanding of masculinity in the Middle East. *Imagined Masculinities* is by no means an academic work in the strictest sense, and was not intended to be as such; the contributors’ backgrounds are as diverse as the approaches adopted in the book. Read as such, this book can be of great interest to scholars interested in gender studies and those interested in the Middle East, as well as to the general readership. Moreover, by offering translations of original work in Arabic, the book brings the non-Arab audience insights into issues of masculinities by writers from the region. On the whole, its conscientiously eclectic approach brings fascinating and more importantly, groundbreaking material, to a wide audience.