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Masculinities and Displacement in the Middle East: Syrian Refugees in Egypt

Magdalena Suerbaum

London: I.B. Tauris, 2020

224 pages ISBN-10:1838604049 ISBN-13 :978-1838604042

Reviewed by Aminath Nisha Zadhy

With a discussion rooted in masculinities and displacement, Magdalena Suerbaum's book is absorbing, underlining the gender-specific challenges displaced Syrian men face in Egypt. By utilising an intersectional lens, their book asks how men engage with the expectations surrounding masculinities and how their notions of masculinities (and femininity) shape the performance of their gender. With detailed vignettes, she paints an evocative picture of how displacement disrupts Syrian men's aspiration for a middle classed heteropatriarchal family structure and how they cope with the impairments this brings to their masculine sense of self. In successive chapters, she highlights how notions about class in the Syrian context accompany displacement, transmute in the Egyptian context, and are deployed to renegotiate masculinities as a displaced person.

Chapter one introduces a chief feature of everyday life in Syria: the military's omnipresence shaping Syrian boys through childhood and culminating in the mandatory military service obligated for all adult males. Even though the men come from an environment where militarisation is normalised and deployed into mundane civil life, her interlocutors shatter the widespread notion that hooks masculinities to militarisation, triggering Suerbaum's argument on the elasticity of masculinities. In the place of masculinity linked to patriotism, Syrian men approached the civil

unrest and armed conflict by adopting alternative masculinities, expressing passivity and rejection of violence and vehemently embracing fatherhood.

Middle-classed men in Suerbaum's presentation are highlighted as burdened by the interruption that the military service does, leading to the classed masculinities that choose passivity and idealise fatherhood. In chapter two, she homes in on the experiences of refugeehood, which is another interruption for middle-class men who are prevented from attaining their ideals of masculinities in the lived reality of precarity. While the impetus to flee violent conflict is constructed as part of the valour of responsible fatherhood, this image of a stoic protector and provider shatters when they face the realities of displacement. Men then cope through discursive distancing from the category of refugee, which in their minds is ascribed with feminine traits; dependency, vulnerability and helplessness. By vocally rejecting the top-down imposition of the category of refugee superimposed on their statelessness, Syrian men ascribe themselves as hardworking and capable of attaining economic success and independence, rejecting the notions of relying on refugee protection. Part of this rejection is also the rejection of those men who flee to Europe, who are 'othered' and used as a construction against which Syrian men in Egypt measure themselves.

The 'composite masculinities', where men selectively choose acceptable traits based on what is possible for them, is also accompanied by upholding complementary gender roles where masculine identity is not only drawn through a man's economic contributions but also through their ability to maintain their women firmly within the domicile. However, as she demonstrates in chapter three, such complementary gender roles are a classed privilege retained by a few families in displacement. Chapter four draws the reader into a closer discussion of gender relations by discussing the disintegration of old marriage patterns, their reformulation in refugee contexts, and how refugee men experience this. Exerting the heteronormative marriage as a platform to express

successful masculinities in the role of groom and husband, Suerbaum points out how her interlocutors renegotiated their 'groomability' as the conflict cost them symbolic capital due to their dispersed networks as well as economic loss. This, the author argues, leads to a new formulation of masculinity where how "one presented oneself" becomes an alternative to relying on a network that can vouch for them. In the face of frustrated matrimonial ambitions, exacerbated due to the widely-believed but rarely-occurring issue of marriages between Egyptian men and Syrian women, Syrian men pivot to valorising themselves as honest and hardworking while casting Egyptian men as dishonest and lazy.

Chapter five continues the thread of how the construction of masculinities in displacement is shaped by class in the present and the past. Informed by the recollection of her interlocutors, Saubbaum suggests that experiences of sectarian oppression produce a sense of profound powerlessness, which is addressed in displacement by the process of demarcation from those they see as their 'others'. With the war having destabilised their already fraught sense of masculinity and how they located themselves in the power grid under a sectarian state, they turn to the process of creating distance between themselves and Syrians from other sects and as well as Egyptians. The sixth chapter establishes this continuity from the past by highlighting the ubiquity of fear and its insidious ability to migrate with the displaced people. The corruption that was endemic in Syria and premised on the fear of the surveillant state is reproduced due to the suspicion of Syrian 'others' and the Egyptians allowing corrupt behaviour to be justified in the new context of Egypt. This clashes with the Syrian men's notions of their honesty, which they seek to portray to claim masculinity. The strategies that refugee men utilise to deal with the dissonance they feel are not a point of agency for the author but rather a point of desperation as they react to the conditions of oppression and fear.

The highlight of the book is the persuasive argument that specific masculinities produced prior to a conflict are continued after displacement, reformulated for the new context and producing new understandings for the men in their new conditions of uprootedness. Theoretically informing her “urban ethnography by appointment” is Ghannam’s (2013) concept of ‘masculine trajectories’ which allows Suerbaum to explore how Syrian refugee men creatively respond to the challenges to their notion of masculinity as they move from one state of oppression to another. Pushing back against the concept of masculinity in crisis, she emphasises how socio-political conditions are the crises that produce nebulous masculinities, which change as the context changes. In doing so, she firmly places the societal, political and economic conditions under her critical lens and explores how refugee masculinities are burdened under such conditions.

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