

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Postcolonial Masculinities: Emotions, Histories, and Ethics**

by Amal Treacher Kabesh

Surrey: Ashgate, 2013, 196 pp.

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Review by Alicia Izharuddin

There are strong arguments to support the tenacity of (post)colonial narratives surrounding the white European male and his masculine Other; the shadowy, darker-skinned man whose untameable sexual virility, or sometimes, paradoxically, feminised asexuality, become the hallmarks of his inferior status in the hierarchy of privilege. Such narratives continue to play out in anti-immigration rhetoric, inter-racial pornographic discourse, and countless of other instances deeply embedded in racist ideas. In Amal Treacher Kabesh's monograph, *Postcolonial Masculinities: Emotions, Histories, and Ethics* (2013, Ashgate), Egyptian and white British men's masculinities are seen as mysterious hinterlands. As an Egyptian woman, Treacher Kabesh argues, perhaps rather naively and conservatively, she cannot fully understand these two groups of men although her husband, father, stepfather, brothers, and cousins belong to them. Psychosocial approaches are adopted alongside fictional narratives in contemporary Egyptian and British novels to make sense of the emotional hinterlands of men whose collective ancestral memory is intertwined with colonialism, the aftermath of 9/11, and the Arab spring. Rather than reinforcing the apparent oppositions between British and Egyptian masculinities, Treacher Kabesh's book aims to question them, bringing to light instead the commonalities that exist in the inner lives of these men.

Treacher Kabesh's monograph consists of chapters that trace the psychosocial landscapes of emotions experienced, though not exclusively, by men. After an introduction to the methodological orientation of her book in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 ('Landscapes of Masculinities') focuses on the postcolonial masculine subjectivity, told through a psychoanalytic, Fanonian, lens. It relies heavily on the dichotomy of Black and White masculinity to launch a discussion on Otherness but gets sidetracked into a relentless exploration into the idea of the subject and fantasy. Discussions on gender are thin and Treacher Kabesh makes an alarming confession acknowledging why when she says that she never intended to write about gender as 'it is too elusive a topic, [and that] I do not understand it all (especially as lived experience) and, in any case, too many books have already been written on the subject' (Kabesh 2013: 30).

There is little indication in Chapter 3 ('The Necessity of the Other') as to why the subject of love, affection, and intimacy are pertinent to a monograph about emotions, histories, ethics, and contemporary Egyptian and British masculinities. The chapter explores, without much explanation, love and affection established between male members of the family and the importance of such bonds. From love, affection, and intimacy come anxiety in Chapter 4 ('Visceral Anxiety: Inhabiting Fear') and humiliation in Chapter 5 ('Insidious Anxiety: Invidious Shame'). In these two chapters, Treacher Kabesh pulls together both psychoanalytic writings

and vignettes from novels that depict anxiety and humiliation. Anxiety and humiliation are 'negative' emotions that men (and indeed women) experience, but are more devastating when inflicted upon men by women and other, more powerful men.

Treacher Kabesh leaps into the subject of power in Chapter 6 ('Precarious Power'), in particular the power dynamics within the family, between men, and unequal power relations between nations. In this chapter she engages with the go-to thinker of power, Foucault, even though in much of her monograph she is firmly in Fanonian psychoanalysis, incompatible with Foucault. Treacher Kabesh acknowledges that Fanon and Foucault make an 'odd coupling' but she brings the two together nonetheless, like jigsaw pieces that do not quite fit, as both share an interest in the 'interior self' (Kabesh 2013: 69). The theme of humiliation continues in Chapter 7 ('Cutting Tails'), but this time with more cultural and political context that shape the relationship between Egyptian and British identity in the post-9/11 and 7/7 age.

A prospect for a deeper discussion on postcolonial masculinities in Egypt and Britain, emotions, and power relations is neglected in the final chapter ('Silences, Spectres, and Shards') as Treacher Kabesh makes a move towards the ways 'the axis of thinking, willing and judging cuts across and through another triad of terms - silence, spectres, and shards' (Kabesh 2013: 141). Quite what she means by this is not so clear, but Treacher Kabesh makes an oblique statement when she says that 'silences, spectres, and shards are fundamental features of male subjectivity and they work within and through the flesh and blood of men' (Kabesh 2013: 142). This chapter looks at 'shards of the past' that pierces through the present and the spectral nature of collective loss in Egyptian society.

For a wide-ranging monograph that cuts across cultural and political history, psychoanalysis, postcolonial thought, and literature, the reader may expect to find a masterly engagement with not only the subject of postcolonial masculinities but also the diverse methodological and epistemological approaches. However, a tightly-argued and coherent engagement with the subject along with the diverse methodological and epistemological approaches may be a tall order for a monograph 162-pages long. Rather than commanding a synergy between her psychosocial analysis, historical narratives, and excerpts from a selection of contemporary novels to shed light on the messiness of the postcolonial emotional landscapes of men, each of the analytic strands and materials for analysis are presented in isolation from each other. The psychosocial approaches does little to illuminate the representations of masculinity in the novels and history of modern Egypt and vice versa.

Unfortunately, Treacher Kabesh's book is full of disjointed ideas and statements that are not only distracting but also fail to establish many of her arguments. At times, there is no sense of an argument in a chapter at all, as certain chapters close in an anti-climax with new information that lead readers to a cul-de-sac or nowhere at all. There are alarming generalisations and non-sequiturs; such as 'Margaret Thatcher was voted the role model by and for women' (Kabesh 2013: 3) and that single parents, lack of parental discipline, and the lack of boundaries within the family were the 'primary reasons' behind the 2011 riots in England! (Kabesh 2013: 49) Despite the monograph's claims to explore the similarities and differences between the histories, cultural production, and inner landscapes of White British men and Egyptian men, Treacher Kabesh pays significantly more attention to Egyptian men and political history. Any mention of British or white masculinities are given the perfunctory and superficial treatment. As a monograph, 'Postcolonial Masculinities' is an ambitious project that began in the most modest of circumstances, in a train journey with strangers. However, its ambition is also its downfall contributed by its mismanagement of reader expectations and haphazard editing. This book is more suited for graduate students and academics who are more savvy and discerning readers of scholarship of a range of quality and equipped with the critical ability to identify generalisations and questionable academic writing.