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## Arabizing “Masculinity”

By Ebtihal Mahadeen

Gender-sensitive currents in the Arab world, such as feminist and LGBTQ movements, continue to be challenged by questions of language. If these currents are truly organic products of Arab thought, shouldn't this allow seamless coinage of new terms, or indeed a move to appropriate and remodel old ones? Also pressing is how to ensure that concepts remain rooted in and relevant to Arab socio-cultural life.

Arguably one of the most central concepts in feminist thought, “gender” has been variably translated into Arabic as *al-naw`* (kind, species), *al-jins* (sex), and *al-naw` al-ijtima`i* (social kind), reflecting deeper conceptual problems and obscuring its meaning for non-academics (Mehrez 2007, 110-117). Similarly, while Arabic engagements with masculinity have existed since the 1970s (Saadawi 1973; Tarabishi 1997), Arabizing the term “masculinity” continues to pose challenges. Masculinity is traditionally translated as a singular noun *rujula* (manliness) to differentiate it from *dhukura* (maleness). According to the *Dictionary of Contemporary Arabic Language*, *rujula* denotes the maturing of the male individual, or the completion of his *dhukura* (maleness) by reaching a certain biological age. The dictionary definition maintains that *rujula* can also be used to denote non-biological attributes such as bravery, authority, and control of women (Omar et al. 2008, 864-865). I contend that this sign does not convey masculinities in their plural, competing, and situational forms. It does not communicate the historically variable, layered, and contradictory meanings of lived masculinities.

An alternative to *rujula* is *marjala* in Modern Standard Arabic, which I contend is more amenable to the flexibilities and pluralities of gender and sexuality and may be found in the Arabic vernacular (*`ammiyya*) of several countries. As a vernacular Arabic word, it is pronounced differently, for example, as *marjaleh* in the Levant region and *marjala* in the Arabic-speaking Gulf countries. *Marjala*, I contend, incorporates bodily, affective, socially constituted, symbolic, and performative dimensions of masculinity, including within gender relations. It surpasses *rujula* by emphasizing social dynamics and allowing for pluralization, *marajil*, to denote various co-existing masculinities.

If we agree that the authenticity and reach of neologisms depends on their grounding in Arab socio-cultural life, then the potential for *marjala* is vast. The word is commonly used in daily language and Arabic cultural productions from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. A quick search for the term online, for example, yields a large number of results: Saudi poems, the 2012 Saudi comedic web series “The School of Masculinity Sciences” [*Madrasat `ulum al-marjala*]), Jordanian and Syrian TV dramas (including the hit TV series *Bab al-hara* and *Maraya*), songs by the late Lebanese artist Wadi` al-Safi and the young and popular Palestinian singer Mohammad Assaf, and Iraqi chants.

In these examples, *marjala* is used to denote characteristics attached to hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. For instance, The School of Masculinity Sciences series, produced by Telfaz11, a Saudi entertainment production and distribution network, focuses on transforming into “real men” young, educated, urbanized Saudi men who do not conform to prevailing definitions of hegemonic masculinity. Because the 2012 series is comedy, it illustrates through caricature and exaggeration the performative and even drag nature of

masculinities. The men in the series are sent to a desert camp, since the school is in a large tent, to be rehabilitated by two mustachioed and traditionally dressed men who teach them the etiquette of serving Arabic coffee to guests, how to use guns, and how to perform traditional dances. These and other skills are presented as vital to successful and convincing performance of *marjala* in Saudi Arabia. Upon their completion of the program, the students are tougher, more confident and assertive, and better equipped to function as “real men.” *Marjala* in this account is the performance of an “authentic” masculinity in line with dominant social codes and expectations in Saudi Arabia.

In other examples, *Marjala* expresses characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, such as domination, aggression, sexual jealousy, and even violence, while also allowing for non-hegemonic expressions, such as emotional intelligence, communication, and cooperation. In the Jordanian series *Hal al-dunya* (The Way Things Are), which was broadcast on Jordan TV in July 2013, an episode entitled *Marajel* (plural) revolves around the wildly different marital lives of two sisters. One sister is married to a violent and abusive man who typifies hegemonic masculinity while the other is married to a considerate and kind man who enjoys cooking and cleaning. The irony is that the wife of the considerate man, who performs a non-hegemonic version of masculinity, initially complains that he is “not man enough.” That the episode is entitled *Marajel* in the plural points to the term’s flexibility in expressing a variety of masculinities, some of which the episode presents. It also becomes clear that the episode favors the non-hegemonic iteration of *marjala*.

*Marjala* can convey positive characteristics associated with hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities such as bravery, protection of the weak, and generosity. For instance, in an essay for *Al-Riyadh* newspaper, a columnist argues that *marjala* is “a general term denoting noble traits” (Al-Humaidhi 2013, my translation). The writer also emphasizes the social performativity of *marjala*, arguing that it “does not exclusively belong to those of the male sex, but is rather linked to behaviors and characteristics whether they come from a man or a woman” (Al-Humaidhi 2013). This is an unusual stated recognition of the performativity and plural possibilities of masculinities not linked to particular bodies.

It was not my purpose to demonstrate that *marjala* is used to exclusively represent either negative or positive masculine traits, but to argue for its potential as a more suitable term than *rujula* to express diverse masculinities. Certainly, as evidenced by these living examples of its use, the flexibility, authenticity, and wide circulation of this term should allow for its seamless integration into academic Arabic and for a smoother transmission of the concept outside the academy.

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