What Makes a Modern Man? Masculinity, Morality, and Nationhood in Late-Monarchical Egypt

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Abstract: A critical analysis of masculinities is essential for understanding how power is gendered and legitimised through male-coded social norms. While Egyptian nationalism and state-building process have been extensively studied through political and religious lenses, their gendered foundations remain less explored. The primary aim of this research is to analyse how masculinity was constructed, represented, and contested within the Egyptian effendiyya class between 1936 and 1952 – a period that witnessed key shifts in political radicalisation and ideological formation, laying the basis for the post-revolutionary ideal of manhood and nationhood. The effendiyya – students, civil servants, doctors, modern-educated elites – located between traditional aristocracy and popular classes. By the 1930s, a younger and more radical generation of effendiyya had emerged. Their militancy was fuelled by widespread unemployment, political stagnation, and deepening economic crises and directly translated to their image of the ideal citizen. The project draws on Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (Connell 2005) and postcolonial theory (Stoler 2002) approaching masculinity as both a discursive construct and a lived practice. It combines discourse analysis with archival research to examine Arabic-language press, memoirs, and educational manuals – many of them rarely studied – to trace how ideals of manhood circulated across institutional and popular settings. The focus on print media reflects its central role in effendiyya identity formation. As editors, readers, and contributors, members of this class actively used the press to debate moral, national, and gender ideals. The study analyses three interconnected arenas: (1) tarbiya (upbringing) and formal education as spaces where civic and moral expectations for boys were codified; (2) the male body as a site of health, discipline, militarism, and desire; and (3) Islamic models of manhood reinterpreted within nationalist and modernist frameworks. The ongoing research examines how masculinity served both anti-colonial resistance and authoritarian state-building. It expands Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities by analysing hegemonic masculinity in a specific context, beyond the usual focus on masculinity crisis or violence.

Keywords: Masculinity, CSMM, Egypt, Upbringing, Nationalism

1. Introduction

The primary aim of this research is to analyse how masculinity was constructed, represented, and contested within the Egyptian effendiyya class between 1936 and 1952. Understanding how this group imagined and performed masculinity is key to uncovering how gender norms shaped Egypt's path to modernity, nationalism, and authoritarian rule. In this project, masculinity is approached as both a discursive construct, produced and circulated through language, imagery, and ideology, and as a lived practice, shaped by institutional structures, bodily routines, and social expectations.

Research on gender in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) has predominantly focused on the status of women in Muslim societies and feminist movements (Badran 1995; Booth 2001; Baron 2005). In contrast, masculinity studies in the region have remained relatively underdeveloped and fragmented. Works on masculinity in the region often use ethnographic (Inhorn 2012, Naguib 2015) or literary-critical approaches (Massad 2007, Elsadda 2007, Aghacy 2009). This project builds on the existing literature by integrating discourse analysis with archival research and by situating Egyptian masculinities within both local and global frameworks of gender and nationalism.

Beyond its historiographical contribution, this study provides a framework for understanding the historical roots of gender norms that continue to shape political and social life in Egypt and the wider region. By tracing how ideals of masculinity within the *effendiyya* were tied to discipline, nationalism, and authority, it explains the cultural foundations of later state formations, including the persistence of militarised and authoritarian models of governance. This historical perspective enables a more critical engagement with contemporary political and social structures, by showing how seemingly naturalised ideals of citizenship and male authority are produced. This research also offers an alternative perspective on Arab masculinity that moves beyond reductive and stereotypical representations, highlighting its historical complexity and diversity.

The *effendiyya* (singular: *effendi*) was a social class that emerged in the Arab-Muslim world in the 19th century and persisted as a meaningful identity until the mid-20th century, when it gradually lost its distinctiveness in public discourse. Positioned between the traditional aristocratic elites and the broader popular classes (primarily *fellahin* – peasants), the *effendiyya* comprised students, modernising elites, the intelligentsia, and those employed in state administration, education, and the media. Educated mostly in Egypt's new, Western-style

school system, but often rooted in local cultural values, this group played a pivotal role in Egypt's national modernisation and anti-colonial movements.

By the 1930s, a younger and more radical generation of effendiyya had come of age, often originating from lower rural or urban backgrounds. Unlike their predecessors, many advocated physical resistance to British colonisation (while Britain withdrew most of its forces from Egypt in 1936, some troops were still stationing at Sinai and Egypt remained under strong British influence till 1952). The militancy of the new generation was additionally fuelled by widespread unemployment, political stagnation, and deepening economic crises. Existing scholarship on the *effendiyya* largely concludes in the late 1930s (Ryzova 2014; Jacob 2011; Kholoussy 2010). The period from 1936 to 1952 (during the reign of King Farouk) is frequently treated as transitional – merely a prelude to the 1952 revolution, when the Free Officers' coup ended the monarchy and inaugurated an autocratic military regime. This project challenges that view by demonstrating that these years witnessed shifts in political radicalisation, generational identity, and ideological formation, which laid the basis for the post-revolutionary ideal of manhood and nationhood.

This article examines three interconnected areas that were especially important for the process of making a "modern man":

- *Tarbiya* (upbringing) and formal education as spaces where civic and moral expectations for boys were codified
- The male body as a site of health, discipline, militarism, and desire
- Islamic models of manhood reinterpreted within nationalist and modernist frameworks

I follow the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies transliteration system for Arabic words, titles and names of the authors, unless there is a form of accepted English spelling of their name.

2. Theoretical Background

This project draws on Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), particularly Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which explains how dominant forms of manhood are produced within specific historical contexts through the subordination of women and alternative masculinities. Rather than being fixed or universal, hegemonic masculinities are historically contingent, reshaped by political, economic, and ideological transformations. In the Egyptian context, the figure of the *effendi* arguably embodied such a hegemonic type: central to the nationalist discourse, institutionalised, marginalising alternative types of masculinities. The link between masculinity and nation-making has been demonstrated by George L. Mosse (1996), whose work, although based on Western European examples, illuminates how ideals of manhood grew together with the nationalist projects and bourgeois respectability. Certain patterns in the construction of effendi masculinity parallel these processes, particularly in their emphasis on morals, manners, heroism, servitude to the fatherland and the processes through which the ideal of manliness were instilled in the society.

At the same time, the analysis of hegemonic masculinity in Egypt must be situated within its semicolonial political environment. Effendi masculinity emerged both as a response to the orientalist discursive emasculation of "Eastern" man (E. Said 1979) and as an instrument of nation-building. Ann Stoler (2002) demonstrated how colonial rule operated through the intimate regulation of bodies, emotions and moral discipline – domains directly relevant to the sources examined in this project. Eve Troutt Powell's (2003) analysis of Egypt's ambiguous status, as both colonised by Britain and coloniser of Sudan, further highlights in what way nationalist masculinities repurposed colonial hierarchies to assert national strength.

3. Research Methodology

The core of the research involves close reading and qualitative thematic analysis of public discourse on masculinity, particularly in print media. This includes cultural magazines, educational texts, political commentary etc. Attention is given to how masculinity was constructed in the texts and how these constructions intersected with nationalist ideology, class, religion, and colonial legacies. The emphasis on print culture reflects its central role in *effendiyya* identity formation as members of this class were the main contributors, editors and readers of the press.

To identify relevant sources, I first conducted a systematic search in major digital repositories, particularly the Ash-Sharīḥ database (Bibliotheca Alexandrina) and the American University in Cairo Digital Library. Keyword-based searches included terms related to the research questions — such as *tarbiya* (upbringing), *ʿaskarīyya* (militarism), *jundīyya* (soldiery), *rujūla* (masculinity/manhood), *riyāḍa badanīyya* (physical education),

waṭanīyya (patriotism), *qawmīyya* (nationalism), *sharaf* (honour), and *taʿlīm* (education) together with their morphological variants. Articles identified through these searches often led to additional recurring tropes and thematic clusters, allowing for an expansion of the corpus. Although the primary focus of the work is on the period from 1936 to 1952, it occasionally considers significant texts from earlier and later times, as the late monarchical era did not exist in a vacuum and the notion of masculinity at that time was directly linked to the early monarchical and early post-revolutionary eras.

The majority of materials derive from significant cultural periodicals such *as al-Risāla, al-Hilāl, al-Muṣawwar, al-Majalla al-Jadīda,* and *al-Muqtaṭaf*, which typically blend literary criticism, cultural production, historical reflection, moral didacticism, and political analysis. Following the digital survey, I conducted initial archival and library research in Cairo at the National Library of Egypt, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo, the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) and the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies. These collections provided access to lesser-known periodicals (specialised in military training or medicine) that are largely absent from digital archives and contemporary handbooks addressing public health, modernist reforms, education, and broader social challenges.

All relevant materials were scanned or photographed and are currently undergoing systematic textual analysis. Sources are annotated thematically, and recurring themes and motifs are identified inductively. This grounded approach allows analytical categories to emerge from the terminology used within the texts themselves. By tracing these patterns across genres, the study enables a comparative understanding of how ideals of masculinity were articulated within the *effendiyya* milieu.

This study has several limitations. It relies primarily on print media produced by members of the *effendiyya* and therefore reflects elite, normative constructions of masculinity. While these sources provide insight into how the new middle class positioned itself in relation to other social strata (fellahin, working class, aristocracy), they do not capture the voices or lived experiences of those groups themselves. In addition, the qualitative and interpretive nature of analysis introduces a degree of subjectivity, as themes are identified inductively rather than through exhaustive coverage. The keyword-based search strategy may also shape the corpus by privileging texts that explicitly employ particular terminology.

4. Findings and Discussion

In late-monarchical Egypt, secular nationalists and Islamic reformists alike sought to articulate what kind of man the nation required. These were not parallel conversations but intersecting ones: both camps were politically heterogeneous, both engaged in moral and pedagogical debates, and both attempted to discipline male behaviour in the service of national renewal. For this reason, the aim here is not to classify separate "secular" or "Islamic" masculinities, but to trace the logics through which the making of a man was imagined – through education, bodily refinement, moral instruction, and civic duty. Bringing these discourses together reveals how nationalism and Islam became mutually reinforcing frameworks for constructing modern Egyptian manhood.

Writers consistently portrayed Egypt's escalating social issues (endemic diseases, food shortages, limited access to clean water, unemployment, and widespread illiteracy) as conditions that demanded comprehensive national modernisation (Barawi and ʿAli 1947; Kamil 1938). This modernisation was imagined as a multifaceted project: the more productive use of resources, expanding industrialisation, investment in science, health programs, and the arts, and ultimately the creation of a strong national army.

Fundamentally, this process relied on the proper formation of the nation's youth. Throughout the period authors emphasised the unique role of young people as the driving force of reform, attributing to them freedom of thought and dedication to the homeland (Shahata 1937, al-Tanahi 1952). Generational conflict appears subtly in these discussions, underlining the belief that only the youth at this point could engage in politics in a way that is suitable for the modern era: "The country's material and moral forces are dormant from prolonged slumber and neglect. Only youthful sensibility can stir this chronic stagnation among the people through clear advocacy, good guidance, and exemplary conduct" (al-Zayyat 1937).

Although the essentialist perspective on manhood was sometimes noticeable in these sources, the more prevalent notion was that masculinity is not innate but rather cultivated through different phases, each requiring the acquisition of specific skills, virtues, and attitudes. This idea was expressed by Ahmad Amin, a renowned Egyptian scholar and Islamic reformist, when he asked: "Who can provide us with a precise program for manhood like the program for education?" (Amin 1935). His question highlighted the perceived necessity for a structured approach to teaching masculinity. For Amin and other thinkers, the earliest stage began at home, where a child has to learn to keep his word, treat his peers with justice, and engage in play guided by 'the spirit

of manhood'. The school stage was expected to refine these traits by teaching the boy to respect himself, avoid cheating when unsupervised, and show compassion towards the weak. Across different sources when describing the key moral qualities for a school-age boy to learn the ones that appeared the most were courage, boldness, fearlessness, individual effort for the collective good, solidarity, patience and honourable competition in which both victory and loss had to be accepted with dignity. Courage was defined as the moral capacity to make decisions confidently and stand by them, while boldness drove a person to act on his convictions regardless of the outcome (ʿAbd al-Bari 1936).

University was envisioned as the culmination of this process: the moment at which a young man had developed pride in himself, in his institution, and in the nation, preparing him to become a "manly judge," "manly teacher," "manly politician," and ultimately a "manly person" (Amin 1935). While professional contexts might require different forms of expression, the core of "manliness" remained constant: "self-esteem and respect, a deep sense of performing one's duty no matter how hard it is, and the protection of family, nation, and religion – advancing them, defending them, being proud of them, and rejecting injustice" (Amin 1935). The focus on shaping character was linked to a wider national goal: creating citizens who were aware of their rights, carried out their responsibilities, and directed their excess youthful energy into work that benefited society.

The power and the possibilities that Egyptian youth could bring to the country were praised, but across the various sources reviewed, in both secular and Islamic reformist writings, a common anxieties concerning the "unused youth energy" emerged. Secular publications revealed fears that undirected masculine vigour could turn into social disorder or political unrest. Islamist authors viewed youth mainly as morally vulnerable. Young men were seen as prone to recklessness, frivolity, and illicit sexual behaviour, all of which threatened both personal virtue and social order. Marriage was proposed as the main solution for managing lust and controlling sexual impulses. Departures from proper Islamic marriage were considered significant social threats. These issues are connected to the broader "marriage crisis" in the early 20th century, although by the late Farouk era, it had largely vanished from mainstream discussion (for a detailed analysis of the marriage crisis in Egypt, see: Kholoussy 2010).

Patriotic education (*tarbiya al-waṭaniyya*) was seen as a shared duty of the state and the family. Formal institutions, particularly schools, were expected to ingrain patriotic feelings through tales of national heroes, patriotic songs, and the celebration of national holidays – cultural tools that embedded love for the country in children's memories even before they fully understood its significance. Literature, children's books, and public hymns were regarded as means to foster ambition, self-sacrifice, and to promote the motto "the homeland above all" (ʿAbd al-Bari 1936). Simultaneously, commentators frequently criticised school curricula for not addressing children's psychological needs or making educational programs coherent and responsive to modern challenges. Collectively, these discussions reveal a belief that national renewal relied on the careful moral and patriotic development of its youth.

The home was considered the first site of education. Mothers were increasingly encouraged to understand how to raise a "modern" man. As Kholoussy (2010) notes, the growing emphasis on motherhood – over the traditional primacy of fatherhood in Islamic legal thought – was one of the markers of the modernisation project. Mothers were expected to understand new pedagogical values, apply them in daily care, and look after children's health and hygiene. The women's magazine *Bint al-Nil* (published 1945–1957) consistently featured sections on infant health, and medical journals that addressed child welfare routinely directed their guidance toward mothers. Yet this growing emphasis on motherhood did not diminish the authority of fathers, whose domestic power became a subject of critique. The socialist and secularist thinker Salama Musa (1936) argued that a man who believed his masculinity required controlling his wife, dominating his children, and exercising dictatorial authority at home would inevitably become a detrimental member of society, as somebody who is dominating at home, he warned, either sought domination over the nation or accepted domination by others. His critique linked private authoritarianism directly to political authoritarianism, presenting a radical, yet rather isolated, rethinking of patriarchal power in Egypt.

Cultivation of the "soul" (*rūḥ*) and the training of the "body" (*jism*) were imagined as mutually reinforcing processes in the making of modern men. Young men were described as "soldiers in the army of the fatherland", but contemporary thinkers emphasised that physical strength alone could not secure national dignity (al-Hakim 1937). On one hand, they rejected orientalist depictions of Egyptians as weak, effeminate, or undisciplined; on the other, they distanced themselves from the narrowly "muscle-bound" ideal that reduced manhood to brute strength. As Tawfiq al-Hakim (1937) observed: "a military revival by itself does not produce a respected nation, just as muscular power on its own does not make a respected man". Instead, intellectuals promoted an

integrated model of masculinity – one in which the modern Egyptian man could be both strong and intelligent, forward-looking yet respectful and knowledgeable of national traditions and the ability to maintain this balance was something that made members of effendiyya different from both lower classes and Westernised elites. Militarist language similarly bridged secular and Islamic visions of ideal manhood. Writers associated with the Muslim Brotherhood also described the desirable future citizen as a "noble soldier" – both strong and intelligent, dedicated to work, and ready to sacrifice everything for the nation (al-Badawi 1938).

Exercise was treated as crucial not merely for bodily growth but also for psychological well-being. This emphasis echoed an old Arab proverb, *al-ʿaql al-salīm fī al-jism al-salīm* (a sound mind in a sound body) (al-Shati 1941). While access to sports facilities – either as leisure spaces or as pathways to professional athletic careers – still varied according to income and class background, even among the *effendiyya*, simple exercises that could be performed at home were widely promoted. Contemporary periodicals regularly published illustrated guides to simple physical exercise, gymnastics and hygiene routines.

Timothy Mitchell's (2002) analysis of the modern state's formation convincingly shows that to establish its modernity, the state first needed to demonstrate its ancient roots. Asserting a shared past was essential for transforming an ethnically and religiously diverse population into a unified nation. And this insistence on historical continuity with earlier Egyptian and Islamic traditions can also be seen in the writings concerning physical culture. Some authors admired the English system of physical education and youth organizations, but most of them enthusiastically emphasised that bodily cultivation was not foreign to Egypt. Sport, they argued, had been practised since the Pharaonic era and likewise held an esteemed place in early Islamic society. Muslim writers in particular praised horsemanship and swimming, which were regarded as noble pursuits and explicitly endorsed in the Islamic tradition (Abu Su'ud 1938). This particular focus on the mentioned eras shows which elements of history were increasingly articulated as "truly Egyptian". The gradual exclusion of non-Arab and non-Muslim communities from the emerging national sports culture reflected broader tensions in the making of a unified Egyptian masculinity (T. Sorek 2025).

5. Conclusion

The preliminary research shows that a specific model of hegemonic effendi masculinity was shared across different press sources. It was built on discipline, moral responsibility, physical strength, intellectual engagement, and loyalty to the nation. The press discourse on desirable masculine behaviours and character traits was consistent, though it was far from uniform. Examining masculinity through the lenses of upbringing and education, physical culture, and moral responsibility helps clarify what made this form of masculinity a hegemonic one. Masculinity was not fixed or natural. It was produced within specific social, economic, and historical conditions and used to support nationalist and state-building projects in twentieth-century Egypt.

Considerably more work is required to determine the full picture. Future stages of the project will include a closer analysis of consumerist behaviours promoted in advertisements, especially how commodities such as cigarettes, alcohol, and grooming products shaped aspirational middle-class masculinities. The research might also incorporate personal memoirs with particular attention to formative childhood and youth years. Finally, the project will move towards a tighter integration of postcolonial critique and Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities. This will allow for a more systematic examination of how the effendi ideal positioned itself in relation to both marginalised local masculinities and colonial forms of masculinity.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration: AI tools were not used for the creation of the paper.

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