

The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities

By Amanullah de Sondy

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The *Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* is a book focused on Qur'anic masculinities and masculinities suggested by the Indian-Pakistani history to measure the constraints on Muslim manhood. de Sondy emphasizes in the Introduction of the book that there are multiple Islams, and hence shows an awareness of the diverse lifestyles of Islamic cultures in various parts of the world. The book aims to trace what types of masculinities are dominant in Islamic lifestyles, paying attention to the Islamic theory and practice, and also trying to move the focus of interest beyond the Arab territories, which almost always dominated definitions of Islam and Islamic masculinities. In this sense, it is an original work and opens some very important discussions on Islamic masculinities.

In the Introduction, de Sondy underlines that his book will trace but not *enter* a theological debate, and explains the aim of the book as “to explore the way in which Islamic traditions continue to uphold the sex role theories surrounding an Islamic masculinity”. He mentions the tradition of the prophet Muhammad as the trendsetter of Islamic masculinities and develops his discussion by pivotal figures such as the twentieth century political Islamist of post-imperial India Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi, and the eighteenth-nineteenth century Urdu and Persian poet Mirza Ghalib, two contrasting figures both of which were effective in influencing a generation of men not only during their times but also beyond. Mawdudi, connected ancestrally to Mohammed, is a theologian and journalist. Ghalib, is a poet of resistance, who is fond of courtesans and alcohol, and of violating Islamic norms of his day. Moving from one

image to the other, de Sony builds a powerful questioning of Islamic “norm”s of masculinity.

In the first part of the book, he introduces Mawdudi and his political resistance with detail and discusses his view of Islam and his political project of returning back to an Islamic utopia, comparing Mawdudi with his contemporaries such as poet, philosopher and academic Allama Sir Muhammad Iqbal and also lawyer, politician and Pakistan’s first national leader Muhammed Ali Jinnah, who attracted Mawdudi’s anger because of their affinity with the Western culture. In this first part, de Sony shows how the discussion of Islam in India and Pakistan was almost always intertwined with independence movements, cultural frustrations and anxieties regarding modernization.

Before moving on to Ghalib, de Sony elaborates on some very important terms in the Islamic world-view such as honor, marriage, power, hegemony, and egalitarianism in two successive chapters, taking his lead from feminist interpretations of Islam in the former and giving a developed vision of Qur’anic masculinity in the latter, to be able to make the contrast between Mawdudi and Ghalib more visible. The second chapter, therefore, articulates Muslim women’s struggles with patriarchy. Referring to recognized feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, de Sony throws a look at the intersection of the difficult question of “men’s superiority” with theological theories in Islam. Also referring to political figures such as the Pakistani stateswoman Benazir Bhutto, de Sony shows how non-egalitarian gender indoctrination separates boys from girls at a very young age at Islamic societies.

The third chapter moves to a discussion of patriarchy and phallogocentrism in Islam, tracing lives of prophets, all of which were men, as exemplary figures. De Sony elaborates on lives of four prophets, Adam, Joseph, Muhammad and Jesus, as key examples of Qur’anic masculinities. Women’s exclusion from prophecy opens the door of investigation of the functioning of gender in the Qur’an, and de Sony compares and contrasts the prophets in terms of sexual ethics, marriage

having or not having a father figure, female companion in their lives, etc. finally concluding that it is impossible to say that there is a single ideal Islamic masculinity as suggested by the lives of the four prophets. Although there is no “single” ideal masculinity in Islam, says de Sony, “submission (to God) is a strong ideal in all its forms”.

Fourth chapter returns to Mirza Ghalib and de Sony develops a discussion of Islamic “norms” taking Ghalib’s hedonistic challenge as an Islamic poet in Mughal India at the explicit focus. In this chapter, Ghalib’s Turkish descent, life in a polyreligious time, marriage, and passion in poetry reveal a complicated portrait. This chapter also deals with same-sex relationships in Mughal India. De Sony elaborates on the hedonistic life of Ghalib, and shows his deep spiritual relationship to God in his peculiar way, which considers rituals such as prayers, fasting, alms giving and pilgrimage as “worldly”. Ghalib’s ultimate submission to God, with his skepticism of God included, indicates that Islamic masculinities, as a whole, escape narrow definitions.

de Sony argues that Ghalib foreshadows “the Islamic masculinity crisis of today” and moves to the final chapter of the book, which develops a discussion on Sufism, with references to mystical paths to God suggested by important figures such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, Mansur al-Hallaj etc. In this chapter, Sufism is discussed with regard to celibacy, women’s role, oneness ideals, same-sex practices etc. Discussion on Sufism is enriched with introduction of marginalized groups in South Asia such as Malangs/Qalandars who reject all property (even clothing sometimes), wear large pieces of jewelry around their necks, hands and ears, use hashish and dance with frenzy, and live celibate as wanderers. Their drastic challenge to the social order aims the perfect union with God; hence, although they defy the “norm”s, their submission is just another dimension of Islamic masculinities.

The conclusion draws from all chapters to illustrate the richness of diversity regarding Islam in India and Pakistan and shows that contrasting images of men and masculinity indeed form the convoluted whole of Islamic masculinity, what is often regarded as a simple and

singular unity. *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* is valuable as an initial attempt to discuss Islamic masculinities beyond the Arabic experiences, as it displays a multidimensional portrait of Indian-Pakistani masculinities with a brisk style. This is an intriguing book, perhaps one of the very rare, in which you can find a man of anger such as Mawdudi being discussed in contrast to a hedonistic man of letters such as Ghalib, next to feminist Muslims and Sufi mystics.

Although such a *mélange* is very compelling, the argument of “the heterogeneity of Islam” and Islamic masculinities thereof, is not original at all. Since the emergence of masculinity studies as a specific research area in 70s, it is commonsense to say that masculinity is a complex construct that allows diversity. To speak on Islamic masculinities as such can be new, but only for a specific part of Western readership, which has a narrow perspective on non-Western cultures and Islam.

The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities begins by a criticism of “the Arab dominance” on the discussion of Islamic cultures, and de Sony rightfully attempts to enlarge the territory, but the book fails to provide an incorporated discussion of its subject matter despite its territorial look at the Indian-Pakistani masculinities. Each of the successive chapters on Mawdudi, feminist challenges to Islam, Qur’anic masculinities, Ghalib, and Sufism have powerful individual agendas; however, as de Sony does not explain his reasons beneath the selection of Mawdudi/Ghalib as the pair of contrast in the beginning of the book, the overarching argument which weighs these figures and problematizes Islamic masculinities accordingly is not clearly visible.

What forces us to think two figures such as Mawdudi and Ghalib with almost a century apart, is obviously their divergence in their interpretation of Islam. Still, why Mawdudi and Ghalib, but not someone else? The book loses its argumentative strength while setting the two figures as opposite poles of the discussion not only because de Sony leaves the selection in dark but also because the chapters in-between complicate the comparative perspective. The book starts with a chapter on Mawdudi, but before moving on to Ghalib, de Sony traces feminist

responses to Islam and elaborates on the four prophets as portrayed in Qur'an, decelerating argument-wise in his discussion of masculinity. Scarcity in the book of the references to theories of masculinity also adds to the argumentative weakness. De Sondy discusses concepts such as marriage, egalitarianism, hegemony etc. assuming the role of a presenter, transferring knowledge about Muslim cultures with quotes and references from the Qur'an to the Western readership but does not initiate a thorough theoretical discussion on Islamic masculinity.

There is a specific topic of pivotal importance, which needs elaboration theory-wise if Islam is to enter the field of masculinity studies as a research question, but is erratically discussed in the book, which is militarism. While discussing the prophetic images in the Qur'an, de Sondy spends considerable energy on topics such as slavery, marriage, polygamy etc. but gives little space to Quranic interpretations of war and military masculinity, taking prophets at focus. Virtues of prophets are mentioned in several passages of the Qu'ran, and in the deeply patriarchal Arabic society, some of these indeed contradict hyper-masculine norms. War, however, requires hyper-masculinity. De Sondy touches upon the warrior image in Islam only in chapter 4, while discussing Ghalib, who came from a family of soldiers of Turkish descent, and chose to become a dervish, not a soldier. Being part of the "holy war," killing in the name of the God, is a totally different way of submission to God, when compared to Sufi practices, and its gendered dimensions is an essential problem, which a book on the "crisis" of Islamic masculinities should have discussed in detail. If Ghalib foreshadows "the Islamic masculinity crisis of today," his rejection of "military" in the name of "arts" needs further elaboration and a well-developed critique to understand the crises of contemporary Muslim men all around the globe.

The merit of *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* is in its bringing opposite figures of Islamic masculinities under the same roof. As an initial attempt, the discussion provided in the book shows that the writer

is not afraid to challenge perspectives on Islam, despite being a Muslim believer. Overall, the book succeeds in showing “the diversity” of Muslim men but it is hard to say that comparing Mawdudi with Ghalib produces a novel idea on Islamic masculinities. De Sony hardly explains “the crisis” in depth and does not answer why crisis, as such, relates to Muslim men only.

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