

CHAPTER 5

EMERGING FORMS OF MASCULINITY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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This chapter aims to illuminate and reflect on the emerging forms and expressions of Iran's variegated masculine identities through the ownership, sensation, presentation and management of the body.¹ This is occurring both in the private and intimate as well as the public and social spheres. My research findings demonstrate that among the generation of males born after the Iran–Iraq war (1980–8) the idea and the role of the masculine body is neither monolithic nor influenced by the state's messages of 'Islamic' corporeal restraint and modesty. My observations indicate that young men are increasingly taking ownership of their bodies, each adopting it as a tool to relate individual perceptions and lived experience. I define this as the sovereign body, the resource to make meaning and mark differentiation. I will argue that whilst such manifestations are personal and cultural in form, they encompass a chain of ideas that are political in nature. They demonstrate the young men's critique of their sociopolitical location, their resistance and objection to a lack of freedom of expression and persistent forms of censorship, and their demand for autonomy. I argue that seeking differentiation through body presentation is to alter expected male identities in order to reconstruct and project more layered, complex and individual identities. The chapter ultimately posits the question of how changes in masculine identities might indicate a demand for change in the patriarchal and constricting societal structures. I reference the interplay of the elements of a rich masculine discourse of the body, which is evident in classical literature, the rituals of Shi'i Islam, and the performing arts on the one hand, and the development of urban space related to the dynamics of the Iranian higher education system, which I define as Iranian cosmopolitanism, on the other.