

## ***Liberating Masculinities*, by Kopano Ratele**

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### **Reviewed by Sphiwe I. Dube**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9080-6128>

University of the Witwatersrand

[sphiwe.dube@wits.ac.za](mailto:sphiwe.dube@wits.ac.za)

Judging by the spike in the number of publications on the topic of masculinities in southern Africa that we have seen in the past two decades (dating from 1998), it is fair to conclude that there has been marked attention paid to issues of masculinities. Kopano Ratele has been one of a number of scholars in southern Africa who pay great attention to masculinities as working models of being amongst various other gender models. Bringing together previously published essays in a single source, *Liberating Masculinities* provides readers access to the richly varied works of Ratele on masculinities in a single compendium. Admittedly though, for one familiar with Ratele's oeuvre, there is not much new in the book per se. This is not, however, to disparage the book—it is good to see all the assembled essays in one place—but to specify its point of departure.

The book covers a range of topics in eight chapters and I would also venture that the chapters can be read in pairs. Chapters 1 and 2 are about identity and crisis, specifically the idea of a “crisis of masculinity” and how this theme has been dealt with in the South African context. Chapters 3 and 4 are about the relationship between masculinity and vulnerability, and how the South African gender research context is currently dealing with this tenuous and yet possibly productive relationship. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the relationship between masculinities and traditions; specifically, these chapters address how scholars need to expand their repertoire of what notions of tradition, traditional, and traditionalism mean in relation to masculinities. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the role of African and black feminisms in discourses of black masculinities, as well as outlining some aspects of the liberating call announced by the book's title.



The chapters can also be clustered together into two sections. The first, dealing with the everyday grounded experiences of men, comprises the first four chapters. Here, Ratele draws from both personal experience and popular culture to make observations about how he has come to a sense of liberated masculinity and how this journey can be a useful heuristic for critical masculinity studies. The second section, which provides critical reflective analysis of broader themes like feminism, race, and tradition, comprises the last four chapters. In this section, Ratele draws on broader literature on black consciousness, black feminisms, and African critical theories to provide a locally grounded and internationally conscious framework of critical masculinities.

The foremost theme of the book is well captured in the dictum: “Masculinities are profoundly cultural practices, yet ideas about what it means to be a boy or man tend to become naturalised” (Ratele 2016, 9). All the chapters come back to this point and reiterate it in one form or another. For one who is familiar with such arguments, the repetition of this point seems belaboured at times. The other theme of the book, which is also repeated many times, is the concept of hegemonic masculinities, including its critique by Ratele, drawing primarily on the work of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). The point of critiquing hegemonic masculinity as a singular concept is clear enough: namely, we need to expand our models of masculinities if liberating men is to be a meaningful and enticing process for men. However, the fact that the author keeps coming back to it in almost every chapter without really exploring a new significance for engaging the argument, including the related argument of needing to denaturalise masculinities, points to a major limitation of the book. While each chapter can stand on its own, there is no clearly developed argument that can provide a strong and continuous thread through the book, apart from the broad focus on masculinities borne by each chapter individually. This architecture of the book that I have described should not, however, be taken as definitive, even though it does provide a framework through which to approach the book.

Furthermore, I found myself asking many times while reading the book, “how?” or “why?” in relation to many undeveloped arguments put forward. For example, at one point the author notes that: “My personal turn to *kurtas* and *seshoeshoe*, on occasion worn with *teki*, has something to do with certain ideas about cultures and about masculinities having an ever loosening grip on me” (34-35). However, the author never goes on to explain the meaning of this statement, leaving it to the reader to make the connection. In another chapter, the author discusses a study of boys and their responses to a question about what is a man, and writes: “It is worth noting that the boy’s answer conveys the same discourse as that in the letter presented in Chapter 1 in this book” (61). The author does not draw out this similarity or make it explicit in a way that would help address the issue of lack of continuity in the book. A last example involves the author drawing a distinction between constructionist studies of masculinity and critical studies of masculinities (89), but never explaining the significance of this distinction in relation to the discussion at hand or for the broader context of the book.

Despite the above criticism, two further themes that do receive sustained treatment—even if somewhat cagey in the context of the latter—are “tradition” and “sexuality.” The book is committed to a critique of limited conceptualisations of what tradition, the traditional, and traditionalism are as a way of pushing scholars in particular to give up proscriptive arguments in relation to African masculinities. While I appreciate Ratele’s desire to complexify the relationship of gender and sexuality (specifically homosexuality) in the South African context, I think that the book loses the edge at times by too quickly making sexuality “not special.” Given the current debates in the continent around issues related to homosexuality, tradition and liberalism, I think that the book could have delved further into the topic of masculinities and sexualities. The reason I say this is because the discussion is embedded in the book, but is not given the space it supposedly deserves if we take the chapter title “A better (sexual) life for all” as an indication of the author’s seriousness about the topic. On a related theme, the lack of discussion on religion was also surprising given the ubiquity of the relationship between religiousness and masculinities in the South African context. I am not saying that the book should have been about religion, but the dismissive way in which the author treats religion (11) is rather surprising for a book on liberating men. Perhaps this reflects my own concerns that while it might be easy to assume both the positive and negative impacts of religions on masculinities in South Africa, it is important for research to unpack such assumptions and examine the possible generative capacities of religious discourses of masculinities to positively affect the broader public sphere discourses on masculinities. This is even more important in the case of black masculinities in South Africa, where religion plays a very important role in the lives of black boys and men.

While I believe that the book has much to offer to readers who may be unfamiliar with the discourse on masculinities in South Africa, for a book by an esteemed scholar in the subject area, I found it wanting in terms of complexity or offering something fresh. That said, a selling point of the book for someone not familiar with Ratele’s work, or seeking to get a sense of what of some of the current debates central to critical masculinities studies in South Africa are, is that it is easily accessible and does not have to be read sequentially. To that end, the book is a welcome addition to the current scholarship on masculinities in South Africa.