

Apartheid's Patriarchies in Decline: White Masculinities in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

Andy Carolin

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5869-8876>

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

andyc@uj.ac.za

Abstract

The initial popular reception of Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) has overlooked issues of gender in the text, favouring instead the more narrow allegorical readings of race. In response to this, this article emphasises the novel's engagement with the distinctly gendered nature of the transition from apartheid, focusing on the representation of white masculinities in the text. This article raises concerns about *how* these masculinities are depicted. Through close engagement with the text's systematic introduction and disavowal of the constitutive forces of apartheid's patriarchies—including fatherhood, Christianity, and the security state—this article argues that the novel's engagement with white masculinities is one of negation; it offers a narrative mode in which white masculinities are rendered sterile, rewritten in the well-worn register of an anti-apartheid moral certitude that depends on tired tropes. While the novel attempts an important decentring of white masculinities, its outlook is ultimately bleak as white masculinities are shown to lack depth, resulting in their power in the present being curiously absented in an act of textual erasure.

Keywords: whiteness; Damon Galgut; *The Promise*; allegory; masculinity; patriarchy; post-apartheid literature; post-apartheid fiction

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Introduction

Damon Galgut’s ninth novel, *The Promise* (2021), won the highly coveted Booker Prize in 2021, immediately catapulting it to international prominence. While there have been many published reviews of the novel in newspapers, this popular reception has focused largely on the novel’s formal innovation—especially in its reworking of the third-person narrative perspective—and, crucially for this article, the question of race, land and justice three decades after the end of apartheid. In the press release announcing Galgut as the winner, the chair of the selection committee, Maya Jasanoff (quoted in Booker Prize Foundation 2021), emphasises how the novel “explores the capacious metaphorical implications of ‘promise’ in relation to modern South Africa.” However, while the failures of “the larger promise [of] South Africa [...] when everything seemed possible” (France 2021) is a key concern in the novel, this early popular reception has focused almost exclusively on the raciology of the transitional and post-apartheid periods, with its attendant structural inequalities and lack of economic redress, with little to no attention paid to how the novel explores the distinctly *gendered* aspect of this transition. In this article, I argue that it is not only the moral economy of a post-apartheid whiteness that is exposed in the novel, but also the operations of white masculinities in particular. Through a consideration of the various constitutive forces that shaped the integrated machineries of apartheid patriarchy—including the security police, Christian nationalism, and fatherhood—I argue that patriarchy itself is disarticulated in the novel, left unmoored, ineffectual and wholly delegitimised.

On a basic level, *The Promise* centres the experiences of a white family living in Pretoria and tracks South Africa’s transition from late apartheid in the 1980s until the end of Jacob Zuma’s presidency in 2018. The eponymous promise refers to a promise made by the family’s father to his dying wife that he would transfer ownership of a small tract of land and a dilapidated cottage to the family’s black housekeeper, Salome. The failure of the father and two of his three children to honour this promise over more than three decades functions as the central moral question that structures the novel, and which has shaped the reviews of the text. As Jon Day (2021) explains, in his review for *The Guardian*, while the promise is a literal one,

it’s also a metaphorical one. Over the years, as members of the family find reasons to deny or defer Salome’s inheritance, the moral promise—the potential, or expectation—of the next generation of South Africans, and of the nation itself, is shown to be just as compromised as that of their parents.

Rand Richards Cooper (2021), writing for *The New York Times*, similarly argues that “Galgut deploys the unkept vow as a stand-in for white South Africa’s moral bankruptcy.” In turn, writing for *The New Yorker*, James Wood (2021) suggests that the novel depicts “a family at odds [which] reveals a nation in the throes,” adding that “[t]he Swart farm cannot be just a family property but must also come to stand in for debatable land, and perhaps also for an entire contested country.” Evidencing similar ways of approaching the text, as allegories of racial injustice, the novel has been described as

allegorising how the “triumphalism of the mid-‘90s [...] has soured, not least for most black citizens” (Attwell 2021); as “an allegory for the broken promises made to black South Africans at the dawn of the country’s non-racial democracy in 1994” (Conway 2021); and as a record of “the devastating impacts of white privilege and institutional racism” (Kendall 2021). Two of the early popular reviews of the novel have also focused on Amor, the youngest of the three siblings, who is the only character who agitates for the promise to be kept and who, at the end of the novel, ensures that the cottage and a substantial sum of money are given to Salome. Foremost Galgut scholar Sofia Kostelac (2021) writes that “[a]t the heart of the novel—and the unfulfilled promise to Salome—lies the question of what sort of restitution is possible in the context of South Africa’s brutally iniquitous history?” Wood (2021) summarises the novel’s moral question in a similar way when he asks: “Can Amor’s loving, self-sacrificial kenosis offer a feasible political model?” The land promised to Salome functions metonymically in these reviews as both the specific object of redress—not surprising given the centrality of land in historical and contemporary patterns of dispossession (Ngcukaitobi 2018)—and as a placeholder for a broader project of social transformation. While Annika Teppo (2022, 38) correctly observes that “[a]partheid was largely a [racialised] politics of space, comprising the systemic exclusions of people and communities [through] segregationist policies [that] pervaded all relationships and at all levels of society,” Galgut’s novel reminds us that it was also a deeply patriarchal project.

The general lack of attention paid by early reviewers to gender in this novel is curious, however, especially given how the constructedness of masculinities is, in my reading, not only foregrounded but obvious to the point of being maladroit. The novel systematically—and even mechanically and formulaically—depicts and disarticulates the standard-bearers of apartheid’s patriarchy, who function not so much as characters, but as caricatures of patriarchal power and its downfall. The novel introduces and then disavows the various constitutive forces that shaped apartheid patriarchy—including the security police, Christian nationalism, and fatherhood—while failing to recognise the complex ways in which these discourses are layered within the apartheid and post-apartheid imaginaries. I argue that white masculinities in Galgut’s text are rendered sterile, rewritten in the well-worn register of an anti-apartheid moral certitude that does little more than tread tired tropes. In doing so, the novel feeds into a didactic and safe narrative mode in which apartheid’s patriarchies are systematically introduced and discredited.

White Masculinities

In an earlier interview, Galgut (quoted in Kostelac 2014, 22) emphasises the centrality of masculinity in shaping the work of the Nationalist Party, noting that “[i]n my view, apartheid is a very male mythology. Common values tend to cluster together in any ideology, and there are strong, vital links between things such as racism and sexism.” Focusing similarly on the centrality of masculinity in the production and propagation of apartheid, Wamuwi Mbaio (2013, 81) writes that “white South African nationalism was

arranged around a central narrative that defined how men behaved, how they defined themselves, and how they acted in society. The ideal male figure in this society was a willing proponent in the masculinist hegemony.” But, of course, there is no single force that has shaped this masculinist hegemony; rather, it is a system of discourses, narratives, institutions, and brute force that has contributed to the ways in which patriarchy and idealised patterns of masculinity came to circumscribe the apartheid regime. This is complicated further by the fact that quite what constitutes white South African masculinities has a long and contested history that pits white English- and Afrikaans-speakers against each other, which is often characterised by what Theo Sonnekus (2021, 192) has described as “denigrations and admonishments hurled from one ethnic in-group to another.”

Writing in *Stories of Fathers, Stories of the Nation* (2021), Grant Andrews reflects on the power of paternal narratives in shaping South African literary histories. As Andrews (2021, 3) explains:

Paternal narratives do not need to relate directly to a character who is a father himself, but can also be reproduced through reference to the authority of symbolic fathers, such as political leaders, lawmakers, police or the military, and religious symbols.

In this, Andrews identifies the symbolic features of patriarchal power in South Africa that Galgut later centres in his novel, namely fatherhood, religion, and state security power. Noting the intergenerational reproduction of patriarchy—whether from fathers to their sons, or symbolic custodians of patriarchal values to their successors—Andrews (2021, vii) explains:

These transmissions of power through symbols are very similar to how political and social enculturation takes place in the highly patriarchal South African society; sports, the military, guns, religion and other male-dominated domains symbolise how sons take up the mantle of patriarchal roles and values from fathers.

However, while there are disparate histories of patriarchy in South Africa, which themselves are bounded by race and class, what Galgut’s novel does is trace the shifts in conceptualisations of white gendered power from the 1980s until 2018, mapping the moves from apartheid to post-apartheid white masculinities.

The shifting dynamics of masculinities in transition is a recurring theme in the scholarly reception of Galgut’s earlier fiction—even though it has remained unexplored in *The Promise*. Kostelac, for one, tends to read masculinity in Galgut’s work as a mechanism of dominance and control, framing masculinity in Galgut’s *The Imposter* (2008) as “a fantasy of virile domination” (2020, 50), while highlighting the “militaristic white patriarchy which dominates [the protagonist’s] social environment” (2014, 63) in Galgut’s *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991). The often-latent homosocial male desire that pervades and disrupts the heteronormative logic of patriarchy in several of Galgut’s works has also been observed by a number of scholars (Beyer 2015; Crous

2010; Stobie 2011). Michael Titlestad's study of masculinity in Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2004) is particularly salient for my analysis in this article. Responding to some initial criticism of *The Good Doctor* that saw its allegories of masculinity as resting on tired stereotypes and clichés (see Barris 2005), Titlestad argues that

allegory depends on a prior process of representation based in the generalisation of groups of individuals, classes of objects or the distillation of qualities and values, and the extrication (or abstraction) of their “representatives” from the complex contingency and ambiguity of meaning in the more mundane traffic of the ordinary. This prior ordering is necessarily ideological, and the knowledge it generates is contingent upon the history of social and political relations. (2009, 116)

Although Titlestad goes on to complicate the notion of allegory by showing how it can function as a “significant ground for contesting historical meaning through the tactics of appropriation, manipulation and recombination” (2009, 116)—and Titlestad convincingly argues for such a reading of *The Good Doctor*—it is these features of complexity and malleability that, I argue, are almost wholly absent from Galgut's *The Promise*. Instead, *The Promise* offers us an allegory of masculinity that operates within a singularising logic that fixes meaning as being “intrinsically tainted by anterior practices of ordering and abstraction” (Titlestad 2009, 116).

Fatherhood

The most obvious custodian of paternal narrative power in the novel is the father, Manie. He sees himself within what Jeanne Prinsloo (2006, 134) might call the “hegemonic frame [that] tends to constitute a ‘good’ father as the responsible breadwinner/provider and the protector.” But Manie also attaches his sense of masculinity to equally tired tropes of sexual virility and domestic dominance. Observing Manie's sexual prowess, his sister remarks that “ever since he started shaving he turned into a little goat, having fun and causing trouble” (Galgut 2021, 17), with Manie later reflecting that he had long been “[f]ertile, free-ranging, [and] everyone wanted a piece of him” (Galgut 2021, 33). He reveals a stereotypical obsession with patrilineal reproduction when the narrator notes that Manie “takes Amor's face in his hands, turns it up towards him, looking at her features, searching for some sign that could only come from his body” (Galgut 2021, 32). But in the tradition of much post-apartheid fiction, he is also a decidedly “declining patriarch” (Andrews 2021). Andrews (2021, 23) reminds us that the traditional patriarch's power is “tied to his masculinity, and he demonstrates this power through traditional masculine symbols of dominance, through links to patriarchal systems and institutions that support his power.” But in Galgut's novel, Manie is fast losing this power: his wife defies him and reverts to the Judaism of her youth (Galgut 2021, 63); his children defy him—despite his insistence that “[t]hey should all be here, his offspring, lined up in a row [like] birds on a wire” (Galgut 2021, 54–55)—and he is fast seeing the decline of white supremacist Christian nationalism as the country was transitioning to democracy. His desperate attempts to construct a sense of manhood in

changing times is evident in how he built their farmhouse: Focalising through Amor, the narrator observes that when Manie inherited the farm from his father,

he started adding rooms and outbuildings that had no style at all, though he called them vernacular. No logic to his plans, but according to Ma it was because he wanted to cover up the original art deco, which he thought looked too effeminate. [...] A big mishmash of a place, twenty-four doors on the outside that have to be locked at night, one style stuck on another. (Galgut 2021, 18)

The stylisation of the self here, in the image of a misaligned patchwork, to remove any traces of effeminacy, resonates with the powerful masculine tropes of early colonialists trying to impose order on an unwieldy landscape. Except in the case of Manie, it is a failure. His farmhouse is ridiculed by the narrator, who says that the house is “[s]itting out here in the middle of the veld, like a drunk wearing odd bits of clothing” (Galgut 2021, 18). This house can also be read as a powerful commentary on the dissolution of a formerly consistent Afrikaner identity: as apartheid began falling, the constructedness of Afrikanerdom became ever clearer. The clumsy restorations of the house are a failing attempt by the character to restore those known, “true” characteristics of a certain identity, ultimately revealing how loose (and constructed) the boundaries of that masculine identity always were.

The final fall of the patriarch in the novel is comically absurd. He is the owner of a highly lucrative reptile farm and entertainment venue. Manie is killed by a snakebite, after deliberately enclosing himself in glass with a poisonous snake to demonstrate the power of his Christian faith. It is described as “[a] cracked, crazy notion, all of it, a greedy, stupid stunt” (Galgut 2021, 100). His son, Anton, describes the circumstances of his father’s death when he writes to a lover that:

In an effort to challenge the Holy Ghost to a bout of Russian roulette, as well as an ill-fated ambition to break a Guinness world record for living among poisonous serpents, my fool of a father has landed himself in a coma. I rather fear the worst. (Galgut 2021, 84)

That the death of the patriarch is rendered comical and absurd reveals a textual disarticulation of his power, and, on an allegorical level, the decline of white fatherhood itself. Reflecting on dominant representations of fatherhood, Anthony Clare (2000, 166) argues that media depictions of fathers generally produce binaries of being either heroes or villains. In *The Promise*, though, Manie challenges this binary, without really offering anything of substance. He is depicted as neither a hero nor a villain; instead, he is cast as an absurd carrier of an outmoded sense of self-importance, and his comical death leaves him (and the patriarchal values for which he allegorically stands) lacking both power and purpose. But this is itself a rather obvious mode and strongly reminiscent of Jak’s death in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (2006), wherein the patriarch similarly dies in a hyperbolic act of masculine hubris. Antoinette Pretorius (2014, 42), in her reading of this character in Van Niekerk’s novel, warns against too neatly reading

“the increasing ineffectuality of [a character’s] masculine authority and pursuits” as a “decline of male authority in the face of changing political ideologies.” This, according to Pretorius (2014), risks overlooking the complex interiority of a character. My point here though is that Galgut’s Manie is denied meaningful interiority. In this, his comical death (and its axiomatic allegorical systems of meaning) functions as a vacated signifier that fails to move beyond a formulation of allegory as “an anterior public system of meaning” that “preclude[s] interventions, revisions or subversions” (Titlestad 2009, 117).

Perhaps not incidentally, Manie’s funeral takes place on the same day as the Rugby World Cup final in June 1995. The juxtaposition of these events highlights further the male characters’ fumbling attempts to refashion a sense of masculinity during the transitional years. The narrator observes that everyone’s attention is on the match-winning flyhalf; the narrator observes that “nothing will ever, ever be better than this moment, everybody jumping up and hugging each other, strangers celebrating in the streets, cars hooting and flashing their lights” (Galgut 2021, 129). Contributing to what I have elsewhere called the “paradoxically post-race, all white visual register” of much of the transitional imaginary (Carolyn 2021, 105), the novel locates this euphoria in an unproblematised moment of nation-building, not uncommon in historical renderings of the Rugby World Cup (Fu and Murray 2017). Focalising through the white characters, who are watching the match on television, the narrator adds that “[w]hen Mandela appears in the green Springbok rugby jersey to give the cup to [captain] Francois Pienaar, well, that’s something. That’s religious. The beefy Boer and the old terrorist shaking hands” (Galgut 2021, 129). Anne Reef (2010, 75) argues that the central place of rugby in the white nationalist apartheid imaginary has a long history, noting that “the apartheid state came to need fortification, and its defence strategy lay in the hands of its patriarchy,” adding that “[a]n important extension of the connection between rugby and Afrikaner nationalism was the reciprocally promotional relationship between rugby and the South African military.” Kobus Du Pisani (2001, 166) similarly writes:

When the Afrikaners lost their political power in the 1990s sport, and particularly rugby, became even more important in Afrikaner society. It seemed as if Afrikaner men tried to compensate for their loss of political power by focusing their attention on sport. Much of the effort that previously went into political struggle was now focused on support for provincial and national sports teams. The 1995 Rugby World Cup victory of the Springboks was a moment of special pride.

That the rugby match happens during the funeral of the novel’s patriarch reveals a further imbrication of rugby, white nationalism and masculinity, as the famous reconciliatory scene that connects the country’s first black president and the icon of Afrikaner rugby—a custodian of an idealised white masculinity par excellence—offers an instant in which white masculinity attempts a rather trite moment of redemption at the very time that the death of the novel’s patriarch is being ritualistically marked.

Christianity

A fundamentalist Christian nationalism was another of the key structuring ideas on which apartheid logic and its patriarchal distribution of power were based, with all three mainstream Afrikaans churches quickly falling in line as key propagandists for the racist social engineering of the apartheid state (Giliomee 2003, 527–29). While, of course, white Afrikaners were not a homogenous cultural and religious grouping (Teppo 2022), the figure of the dominee has long played the allegorical role as flagbearer of the Christian nationalism that underpinned the ideological work of the apartheid regime. In Galgut’s novel, however, the allegorical trope is refigured and derided. Two Afrikaner male religious figures feature prominently in the text and are the characters through whom the narrative is briefly focalised. Firstly, Dominee Simmers¹ is depicted as being greedy and corrupt. He is actively trying to manipulate Manie into giving him a section of the farm on which to build his church, which is “something he very much wants. Not for himself, no, of course not! For the Church only, and the furtherance of Heaven’s work” (Galgut 2021, 34). Revealing the shallowness of the dominee’s sophistry—for what is later criticised as the “corner of the farm given to Alwyn Simmer’s spiritual/capitalist project” (Galgut 2021, 95)—the narrator much later observes that “[t]he Lord has been good to him [...] and he has a fat flock who regularly pays their tithes. His plumpness sits comfortably on him now” (Galgut 2021, 103). An allegorical figure representing the once all-powerful Dutch Reformed Church, the dominee is undermined, reduced to a man who is not only greedy and corrupt—and “flatulent and disappointed” (Galgut 2021, 60)—but also morally imperilled: readers later learn that “[i]n a brief lapse of probity forty years ago, Alwyn Simmers and his sister committed the sin of fornication, unfortunately with each other” (Galgut 2021, 120). So, it is not only that the dominee lacks credibility, but he comes to embody some sort of extraordinary moral aberration, later being dismissed as being “that Voortrekker shaman” (Galgut 2021, 101) and “[a] fool and a charlatan” (Galgut 2021, 73).

The second religious character who stands as a compromised and diminished figure is the trainee minister who accompanies the dominee. This trainee minister, “who has mislaid his faith” (Galgut 2021, 32), is disillusioned with the church and with Christianity itself. He is described as “the doubting dominee” (Galgut 2021, 22), and his exit from the novel is noted when the narrator explains that “he is done with the Church, and, most especially, he is done with the dominee.” Whereas the older dominee, who speaks for Christianity in the text—and is the historical custodian of both apartheid’s Christian nationalism and its constitutive patriarchy—is portrayed as morally compromised, the younger trainee dominee departs from the structures of the Dutch Reformed Church altogether. In this, the dominee stands in the text as an easily contemptible influence of the fundamentalist Christianity that stood at the heart of Afrikaner nationalism.

¹ *Dominee* is the Afrikaans term for a religious minister or officiant.

Police and the Security State

The police and the military, and the militaristic masculine cultures that they curated, were key mechanisms for the reproduction of particular iterations of white masculinity during apartheid. The South African security police have long featured in South African literature as a source and symbol of domination, racist brutality, and the male power that underpinned the apartheid regime. One thinks, for example, of Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), Athol Fugard and John Kani's *The Island* (1974), Andre Brink's *A Dry White Season* (1979), and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990). The police have an immense place in the *apartheid imaginary* of *apartheid power*. What we see in Galgut's novel, then, can be read as an appropriation of an existing trope that fails to engage in any meaningful "dialogue between individual authors and the history of meaning and difference they inherit," which Titlestad (2009, 117) has identified as an exemplary feature of rich allegory. The most significant militaristic figure in the novel is Anton's father-in-law. When first introducing him, Anton reflects that he is the Minister of Justice, adding that he is a "physically as well as morally repugnant person with the blood of innocents on his hands, and Anton would like to hate him unequivocally but finds himself secretly stirred by the outward trappings of power" (Galgut 2021, 52). Anton observes further the militaristic codes that shaped this man's exercise of power: "The mean-looking guards in a booth at the entrance, the busts and oil paintings of colonial criminals from a highly selective history, the casual mention of well-known, fear-inducing names, all of it terrible and thrilling" (Galgut 2021, 52). Du Pisani (2001, 157) explains in this regard that "[h]egemonic Afrikaner masculinity was intricately bound up with social and political power in Afrikaner society and hence with Afrikaner nationalism." Police and military figures were key to reproducing this nexus of white male power.

Much later in the novel, more than a decade after the end of apartheid, this glowing description of the former minister—glowing in the sense of his militaristic prowess if not his moral fortitude—is replaced by a cynical dismissal by the narrator who focalises the perspectives of the minister's daughter and Anton's wife:

Who could have foreseen that her daddy, who everybody used to respect and trust, would have to go in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and admit to doing those horrible, necessary things? The problem with this country, in her opinion, is that some people just can't let go of the past. (Galgut 2021, 163)

As the only former cabinet minister to apply for amnesty at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the former minister is a thinly veiled Adrian Vlok, the last apartheid-era minister of law and order. While this description may initially seem like just a caricatured utterance intended to satirise white contemporary refusals to grapple with inherited privilege and the brutality of the country's past, it also evidences Ella Fox-Martens's (2022) important insight, in her review of the novel in *Harvard Review*, that Galgut's "ability to eviscerate racist, bourgeois white South Africans is unparalleled." The narrator later notes that the minister has lost his position of power

and influence, and now looks like “just an ordinary-looking old uncle, seems harmless, could pass as a furniture salesman in a provincial town” (Galgut 2021, 186). Much like how the power of the father figure is shown to be diminished through his comical death via a snakebite, and the dominee is discredited through his greed and the spectacular nature of his sexual indiscretions, so too is the former minister, the arch-patriarch of the apartheid police state, not only diminished but rendered in an absolutist mode of disempowerment. The narrator observes that “the adorable old war criminal, is here too, but the dementia has advanced rapidly in the last six months and he blinks benignly around him, not sure where he is” (Galgut 2021, 216). The fact that it is the former police minister who appeared before the TRC who has dementia is also a rather obvious commentary on the nature of memory: as the patriarchal embodiment of apartheid power, his memory loss marks a demonstration of the calcification of political memory among many white people who have decided to “move on” from the past. The apartheid police state, and everything that it represents as a source and symbol of white masculine power, is thereby not only diminished and rendered powerless, but also conveniently set aside.

A Post-Apartheid Masculinity?

While the father, dominee and cabinet minister function in the novel as stale allegories of apartheid’s patriarchal power structures—and their decline following the end of apartheid—Anton, the oldest of the three children, is the most well-rounded of the male characters in the novel. Readers are first introduced to Anton when he is in the army, doing his compulsory military service. He has recently killed a woman during a deployment and is traumatised as a result. Following the death of his own mother, he then decides to abscond from the army base, choosing instead to go hide out in the Transkei. While David Attwell (2021) curiously describes Anton as a “conscientious objector,” this does not quite reflect how Anton’s decision to move to the Transkei is not motivated by an honourable rejection of the military and apartheid, in the literary tradition of the *verligte* (progressive) protagonist who realises the immorality of apartheid. Describing Anton, the narrator instead observes that “[t]hrobbing in his thoughts from the moment he walked away from the camp this morning is an image of a pristine white beach” (Galgut 2021, 77) and “misty cliffs [that] rise out of a thick green carpet of trees” (Galgut 2021, 78). This does not stop him later from reflecting self-indulgently that “what he did by deserting the army, he’s a hero, not a criminal, amazing how fast that changed” (Galgut 2021, 83).

Throughout the novel, Anton appears to actively disavow the systems of apartheid’s patriarchy, dismissing Christianity, the political cultures of both the police and the military, and his father’s expectations for him. Crucially, though, Anton is not presented as some new hope for post-apartheid white masculinities; rather, he is shown to be ineffectual and directionless. He acknowledges this later in the novel when he says to his sister: “Call me a failure on every other count, I won’t disagree. But I’ll leave a book behind, at least” (Galgut 2021, 176). When his novel fails to materialise by the end of

Galgut's text, Anton proves unable to achieve even this milestone. It is this that contributes to his growing realisation that he is "[n]ot going to do much of anything" (Galgut 2021, 205). Later, when he is again drunk and alone, in a startlingly honest moment of self-reflection, he looks in the mirror and says: "Good God, who fucked with my face? Where is the golden boy I used to be, who hid him under this dented metal mask?" (Galgut 2021, 198). Andrews (2021, vii) notes that in recent South African literature, "fathers are spectral, dying and morally bankrupt [and their children] are given centrality in these narratives, and they can distance themselves from the stifling influence of their fathers." But, unlike the texts that Andrews discusses, Anton's rejection of the values and ideals of his father, and his father's desire for domestic control, is not grounded in a post-apartheid ethics of transformation or a principled renegotiation of the terms of white masculinity. Instead, Anton's is a "wasted [...] life" (Galgut 2021, 205), in which his sense of entitlement to material comfort and success—itsself surely inherited from apartheid—is matched only by a misuse of the extraordinary financial resources and opportunities made available to him.

Anton's ultimate demise in the novel comes at his own hands. After yet another evening of getting drunk alone and being cuckolded by his wife's new love interest, Anton wonders into the veld. Through narrative focalisation, the narrator gives insight into his thoughts before he dies by suicide:

Can't bear being a walk-on in the play any longer, can't bear the notion of going back to the house and picking his life up like some worn-out shirt he dropped on the floor. And then what? Putting it on again, just like that, stinking, absolutely reeking of himself? He knows it too well, that smell. Cancel the shirt, cancel the house. Cancel the pylons. Make it all stop. (Galgut 2021, 207)

Anton then proceeds to shoot himself. Guns have a particular place in the imagery of masculinity, something that Anton himself acknowledges earlier in the novel when he says that "[w]hen you've claimed a man's gun, you claim the man too" (Galgut 2021, 124). While he dismisses his grandfather's shotgun as a "[f]amily heirloom, supposedly," it is this very cultural artefact that he uses to take his own life—reinforcing a certain rejection of the codes of patrilineal and intergenerational reproduction of gender. Though Jacklyn Cock (2001, 40) acknowledges that a "gun culture is not a fixed, ahistorical, essentialist entity, but a set of highly heterogenous resources which are used selectively," she also offers a more universalist perspective and insists that

[t]he values, social practices and institutions which together constitute this gun culture involve the normalisation, legitimisation—and even glorification—of war, weaponry, military forces and violence through television, films, books, songs, dances, toys, games, and sports. (Cock 2001, 49)

While Robert Morrell (2001, 12) similarly observes that "[m]asculinity and violence have been yoked together in South African history," Galgut's novel reveals the declining premium on violence as constitutive of an idealised white masculinity. The

novel offers us a framing of white masculinity that is unmoored and delegitimised. As Hannelie Marx Knoetze (2020, 48) puts it, the notion of white victimhood in post-apartheid South Africa “falls on the resurgence of nostalgic appropriations of the construct of the Afrikaner Boer imaginary, and the concomitant utopian farm ideal.” Anton is responsible for his own death. However, it is not depicted as being a carefully planned suicide. Rather, it is presented as being almost incidental, the result of a drunken and spontaneous sense of dissatisfaction with life. The description of the suicide shows something of the dissolution of a particular masculine Afrikaner identity formerly known for its militaristic precision and togetherness, which now appears to be rambling and drunk. Though Graeme Reid and Liz Walker (2005, 1) have argued that the end of apartheid has “confronted and unseated traditional gender hierarchies [and] created the space for construction and expression of new masculinities,” Anton functions as a less hopeful rejoinder to this claim.

It is significant that the supposed last man standing in Galgut’s novel is Moti, a new-age spiritualist, derided in the novel as “Mowgli the man-cub” (Galgut 2021, 191), who cuckolded Anton and later stands at the lectern addressing his funeral. Moti, it is pointed out, was once “some good-looking local boy from Rustenberg [...] who went off to India for a year to find himself and do spiritual stuff” (Galgut 2021, 159). Moti appears at first to offer a glimmer of hope, an allegory of key aspects of the “new man” discourse (Koenig-Visagie and Van Eeden 2013, 5), seemingly enlightened, compassionate and egalitarian. Late in the novel, after a drunken Anton sees Moti with his wife, a growing tension emerges:

You’d better go, sweetheart, she whispers [to Moti]. Before he pulls anything else.

He [Moti] makes a show of concern. Will you be alright...? Are you sure nothing will...?

Because I—

Because you what? Huh, sweetheart? You’ll protect her? Funny! He [Anton] tries to surge to his feet, but staggers in the process and falls again. (Galgut 2021, 204)

The altercation escalates until “Mowgli does leave, but not before delivering himself of a final homily. How he believes matter is spirit in a fall from grace. But matter is at its most material when it uses force. No spirit present in violence” (Galgut 2021, 204). This verbosity along with Moti’s travelling to India to proverbially “find himself” and craft an enlightened sense of selfhood that is grounded in being “a very old soul” (Galgut 2021, 204)—as the only mode of constructing a new post-apartheid white masculinity—is itself a tired cliché. As a character, Moti is the text’s own critique of even a progressive (read: liberal) white masculinity that attempts to fall outside the strictures of those that exist in the shadow of apartheid patriarchy that are exemplified in the figure of the father, apartheid security police and Christian nationalist religious figures. But Moti is ultimately an empty signifier, as he never substantiates into anything more than

a caricature, a mark not of hopeful alternative masculinities but of the vast allegorical emptiness of white masculinities in the post-apartheid moment.

Conclusion

To say that white patriarchy in the novel is in decline is not to say that white men are depicted as being victims or socially excluded; the opposite is true. White men are clearly shown to control all the levers of economic power, marking a continuity of apartheid-era economic hegemony. Instead of suggesting that white men are victims of the post-apartheid order, as some reactionary white men have attempted to claim (Knoetze 2020), Galgut's novel appears to theorise an important and *inevitable* decline characterised by ineffectual masculinities and a *necessary* decentring of white masculinities in South African public discourse. While ubiquitous in Galgut's novel, white masculinities are also ultimately silenced as the novel introduces and systematically disavows the very standard-bearers of hegemonic masculinity in the apartheid imaginary: the dominee is dismissed as greedy and incestuous; the father figure is absurdly killed off by a snake bite; the arch-patriarch of the apartheid police's state security is ridden by dementia; and Anton, the novel's male heir, ingloriously kills himself after years of squandering the unearned privileges that accrued to him by virtue of his race and gender.

The decline of white Afrikaner masculinities in South Africa has so often been read in terms of an anxiety about the place of white men in a transitional and post-transitional South Africa. However, to its credit, Galgut's novel refuses to indulge in the anxiety discourses that suggest that empathy is an appropriate response to the waning of white men's inherited hegemony. But it also fails to offer its readers anything more than an easy and uncontroversial negation of the toxic masculinities of the apartheid past. White male characters function more as stereotypes than characters in a way that is strongly reminiscent of late apartheid literature. We see in Galgut's novel an active disavowal of apartheid's patriarchies that is attributed, to varying degrees, to the hubris of white men. While Amor's act of expiation at the end of the novel has allowed the text to be tentatively read as being optimistic (Wood 2021), the gendered lens that I propose in this article ultimately reveals that the novel offers readers a rather bleak view of the present and future, evoking, perhaps, parallels with J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999).² There appears, in Galgut's estimation, to be no ethical or even morally complicated way of occupying a position of white masculinity in the post-apartheid moment. The novel's depiction of white Afrikaner masculinity is shown to be one of negation. While the novel attempts an important decentring of white masculinities, its outlook is ultimately grim as white masculinities are shown to lack texture, resulting in their power in the present being curiously absented in an act of textual erasure.

² See Crous (2006) for a more detailed discussion of masculinity in Coetzee's novel.

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