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“Why were we crucified into car mechanics?”: Masculine identity in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*

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Critical commentary on Jak de Wet in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* centres on his being a patriarchal stereotype of Afrikaner nationalism. However, while his negative behaviour in the novel is undeniable, the construction of his masculine identity is mediated by the emasculated space in which he enacts it. This article reads his masculinity in relation to the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”, the spatial construction of public and private masculine identities, and masculinity as performative. This highlights the ways in which Jak’s representation reveals transient moments of insight. These moments find expression in the novel’s recurring images of mobility that culminate in his death. **Keywords:** Afrikaner nationalism, *Agaat*, masculinity, Marlene van Niekerk.

Introduction

Critical commentary on the character Jak de Wet in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* centres on his being a patriarchal stereotype of Afrikaner nationalism (Burger, Fourie, Moore-Barnes). J. C. Kannemeyer (635) sees Jak as ‘*n verwonde patriarg* (a wounded patriarch), Bill Krige (5) describes him as a “megaphone for apartheid who ruts and frets prior to his own High Noon,” while Leon Venter (11) laments that he is doomed to represent the old Afrikaner regime in everything he does. However, I would argue that his representation in the novel reveals a sophisticated subjectivity, in which Jak does more than simply mirror the failures of the apartheid regime. Instead, his subjectivity is informed by his negotiation with the discursive structures in which he finds himself. This essay will examine how the tension between his privately and publicly constructed masculine identities causes him to experience a crisis of masculinity. I will investigate how this crisis leads to his attempting to distance himself from Milla and everything she represents. He attempts to do so through enacting abusive and oppressive behaviour, such as his physical abuse of Milla (44) and the farm labourers (136), and his verbal abuse of Agaat (500). He additionally attempts to resolve this crisis through performing his masculinity in a number of ways. These performances centre on his compulsive obsession with fitness and his physical appearance, as well as on external manifestations of what he sees as ideal manhood,

such as his car and his farming implements. Furthermore, I will explore how his car functions as the paradoxical device which signifies both his attempts to conform to an illusory standard of masculinity, and his failure to do so. The performance of his masculinity finds further expression in his relationship with his son, who he hopes will compensate for his own inadequacies. As a result, I will illustrate that Van Niekerk does not present masculinity as given or stable, but rather as in flux and constantly open to negotiation.

Masculinities

To foreground my reading of Jak's role in *Agaat*, I will briefly discuss the ideas of "masculinites" and "hegemonic masculinity." Given the historic economic, political and sociocultural male dominance that characterizes most societies, the category of masculinity has often been rendered invisible or negligently predetermined. Robert Morrell ("Of Boys" 613) explains that until "very recently, men were a taken-for-granted category in South African history. Despite, or maybe because of the fact that men, particularly white men, marched powerfully, dominantly and visibly across the [South African] historical stage, there was little attention given to them as anything other than bearers of oppressive gender, class and racial values." This illusory ideal of dominant manhood is described as "hegemonic masculinity." Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (832) define this concept as "normative" in that it "embodie[s] the currently most honoured way of being a man" and "require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it." This essay will examine the ways in which Jak's compulsive focus on his physical appearance and fitness attests to his desire to achieve a certain ideal masculinity.

Morrell ("Of Boys" 607) argues that there "is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities, [...] each with a characteristic shape and set of features. The contours of these masculinities change over time, being affected by changes elsewhere in society and at the same time, themselves affecting society itself." Because of this, masculinity should not be seen as "a psychological innateness of the social self (the Freudian or Jungian model) or a product of functional and largely static sex roles" (Whitehead 89). Instead, it is a "constantly moving array of discursive practices, languages, [and] behaviours" (Whitehead 93). This implies that masculinity is a process of pursuit in which the male subject actively negotiates his relation to hegemonic masculinity in accordance with cultural and socio-political factors. This essay will investigate how this can be seen in the discrepancy between Jak's identity as a white Afrikaner male under apartheid and his tentative position in the social structure of Grootmoedersdrift.

This pursuit is sustained through performances that reassert the masculine subject's relation to hegemonic masculinity. Stephen Whitehead (211) makes use of Judith

Butler's notion of gender as performance, and explains that it "is only through this non-cognizant pursuit of a coherent, authentic self that the subject achieves the sense of ontological security necessary for continued individualization." He argues that "masculine bodily performance is primarily, and often violently, expressed as occupation, control, objectification and subjugation (of others' bodies), competition (against others' bodies) and the willingness to expose, to risk and danger, one's own body" (Whitehead 190). As such, I explore the ways in which Jak repeatedly attempts to sustain his relation to hegemonic masculinity through his performance of oppressive behaviour.

Emasculated spaces

Kannemeyer's description of Jak as a "wounded patriarch" centres on the way in which the domesticated environment of the farm emasculates him. The social structure of Grootmoedersdrift can be regarded as inherently and historically matriarchal, with even its name translating to "great-grandmother's ford." Milla's mother tells Jak that her "great-great-great-grandmother farmed there alone for thirty years after her husband's death" (*Agaat* 28). She explains that the farm "had been her ancestral land for generations back in her mother's line" and stresses that farming is "in Kamilla's blood" (28). In contrast to patriarchal ideas of land inheritance, Jak thus gains possession of the farm only through his marriage to Milla. She, conversely, has an intrinsic matrilineal connection to the land. Milla's mother even insists that Jak complete an agricultural diploma before the marriage, or "he doesn't set his foot on [her] land" (24). This indicates that he is already regarded as a usurper even before their marriage, and suggests that even though he might be the legal owner of the farm, it remains Milla's legacy. As such, Jak's position of ownership is tentative, suggesting that he could be read as an emasculated patriarch. While Jak might have tenuous authority over the way the farm is run by virtue of his masculinity, the farm house and the yard fall under Milla's feminine domain. For example, when he attempts to build a toy aeroplane in the yard for Jakkie, Milla tells him: "You're in our way here [...]. Go and play over there" (195). In this domesticated environment, his study serves as his only place of retreat. Here, he "kept the maps of Grootmoedersdrift" as well as "his shelves full of trophies and mounted medals with ribbons in display cases, amongst his photos of himself" (118). This suggests that it is the only room in the house in which he feels free to display the physical manifestations of what he sees as his masculine achievements.

However, not even this room is safe from Milla's emasculating force. Upon entering Jak's study, she comments that the "photos in themselves constituted a whole history of one man's vanity" (118). She describes the photographs (118):

Jak on graduation day in his gown, Jak at Elsenburg with the agriculture students' athletics team. Jak with his first sheaf of short-stem wheat, Jak next to the new

combine, with a glass of wine in his hand at the regional caucus of the NP, Jak on his Arab mare, booted and spurred for a horse race, Jak at a farmer's day in his white clothes, leaning against his first red open sports car, Jak in close-up, in a studio portrait, brilliantined hair, smoothed back, charming Jak de Wet, the gentleman farmer. A dead ringer for Gregory Peck, as your mother used to say.

These photographs all highlight the ways in which Jak attempts to constitute his masculine identity. These include his participation in athletic events, his attempts to become a wealthy farmer, and his compulsive obsession with his physical appearance. The "red open sports car" and the "new combine" are external projections of the masculinity he pursues. All of these ideas will be discussed in more detail further on. Jak's displaying his photographs amongst his trophies serves to reaffirm the performance of his masculine achievement. However, Milla subsequently undermines this performance through orchestrating a photo-shoot of her own. She dresses Jak in "an olive-green shirt" (121) and has him pose next to his new red plough in various positions. Todd Reeser (109) explains that "there is a close relation between looking and masculinity." This is because the "male eye penetrates the outside world, and especially the erotic female body" (110). According to Reeser, the "camera serves as an extension of the eyes and to control the way the camera sees is to maintain and recreate the male gaze" (111). However, he argues that to "show a male body is not necessarily to make it into an object of the gaze" because "the extent to which the image is creating or recreating a hard masculinity should be considered" (111). Instead, the camera has to "show, suggest, or acknowledge that body as looked at" (111). As such, Jak's photographs themselves do not render him an object to be looked at, as their purpose is to reaffirm the machismo he pursues. However, when Milla picks up the camera and positions Jak in front of it, she is effectively rendering herself the subject and him the object of the gaze. In relation to erotic male images in the James Bond film *Casino Royale*, Reeser (112) states that "[w]hen the camera's eye is explicitly turned into the eye of the other (in this case, of a heterosexual woman), heterosexual masculinity's position is necessarily destabilized." This relates to the way in which Milla's photographing Jak emasculates him. In response, he abruptly brings an end to the photo-shoot, saying "he felt terribly exhausted, he hoped it wasn't his heart" and then "went to lie down without eating" (121). Milla comments that this was "[c]ertainly the first time that [she had] heard him say that of a photo session" (121). His reaction to being photographed implies that he is aware that her purpose is not to derive pleasure from the act of gazing upon his male body, but rather to emasculate it. Furthermore, this hint of his self-awareness complicates a reductionist reading of his role in the text, as will be elaborated on later.

When Jak traverses from the private to the public realm, the balance of power shifts and he is granted admiration and respect in the eyes of the farming community.

This is in contrast to the dismissive derision he receives from Milla. According to Whitehead (114) “the public domain can be understood to be the historically gendered arena where males engage with and replicate those behaviours and practices which, in their particular context, define manhood and manliness.” Milla describes the dazzling effect he has on both the “flocks of twittering wives and the freshly-scrubbed young farmers” (106). She says that their “eyelids fluttered at the sight of Jak’s new cars and lorries and implements and innovations, his imported stud bulls and rams. They ogled his fine Italian shoes and the cut of his trousers, and blushed at the casual way in which he turned back his shirtsleeves once over his tanned wrists” (106). It is significant that their admiration centres on the physical manifestations of his success at farming, as well as on his personal charisma and sexual appeal. This is because Jak’s car comes to serve as a projection of the hegemonic masculinity he pursues, as will later be discussed.

Jak additionally attempts to reclaim the authority of his masculinity through his commentary on the political events of the country and on the social events that form the political make-up of the farm. Aside from Jakkie’s political tirade that Milla overhears (589), Jak makes the only overt references in the novel to the political situation of South Africa. Furthermore, he recognizes the political implications of Aagaat’s position, whereas Milla for most of the novel does not. While Milla focuses on the domestic details of organising a light for Aagaat’s backroom, Jak says that “it’s the first time he’s heard of a skivvy’s room with electricity is this [her] interpretation of the Light we’re supposed to bring to the Southern Tip of Africa [sic]” (94). When Milla questions whether she has done enough to prepare the room, he points out that the other workers will get jealous of Aagaat’s privileges and says that they “don’t want to prepare a Sharpeville” (72) for themselves in the Overberg. When she wants to give Aagaat a sewing machine to console her for Jakkie’s being away at school, he replies that “a sewing machine won’t solve the problem it’s just like a chamber in parliament before you know it they want to pass laws” (389). Significantly, Milla makes the comment that Aagaat is not “them”, to which Jak replies that she is not “us” either. While she recognises that because of her interference in Aagaat’s life the young woman cannot be associated with coloured people, she does not realise that Aagaat will also never be able to be associated with white people. However, Jak’s comments on Milla’s role in Aagaat’s life indicate that this is something that he does realize. Milla (whose power is centred in the farm itself) focuses only on the domestic. As such, she ostensibly worries about Aagaat’s sleeping arrangements and well-being. Contrary to this, Jak (whose power originates from the distance he places between himself and the farm) recognizes the ways in which the domestic is inherently political. He thus recognises the political implications of Milla’s decision to bring Aagaat into their home.

This appeal to the outward authority of apartheid governance can also be seen in Jak’s attitude towards the farm labourers. When Milla berates him for shooting at the

labourers' children for stealing pumpkins, he refers to them as "creatures" that "breed [...] on [his] yard" and says that he wants "to fire the whole lot" (136). By referring to them as "creatures" he is asserting his political power as a white Afrikaner male, and by threatening to fire them, he is displaying the economic power he wields over them. This signifies an attempt on his part to insert his political power into the patriarchal realm of the domestic. While he realizes that he effectively has no say in the way in which the house is run, the yard, being on the periphery of the house, is the site on which he attempts to assert his influence. He tells Milla that even though she thinks she "know[s] all about farming", she "mustn't come tell [him] about politics" (137). This again relates to the fact that he derives his sense of identity from the political realm, to which he believes Milla does not have access. She tells him that "[s]hooting at children as if they were baboons [...] has nothing to do with politics" (137). He counters by questioning the ostensibly charitable drive behind her actions in teaching the children "the alphabet as if they were parrots" (137). Here he displays an awareness of the ways in which literacy is intrinsically connected to political power. This means that he realises that his privileged position is a direct result of his education and upbringing. As such, he conflates his shooting the children with Milla's teaching the children the alphabet. This relates directly to his reference to their creating a "Sharpeville [...] in the Overberg" (94) and his description of Milla's giving Agaat an electric light as *her version* of "the Light we're supposed to bring to the Southern Tip of Africa" (94). In making these comments, he alludes to the fact that Milla's seemingly humanitarian act of taking in Agaat makes her complicit in the colonial history of violence and its supposedly philanthropic endeavours.

Performing masculinity

Throughout the novel, Jak engages in physical activities that reassert his relation to hegemonic masculinity. These masculine performances centre on his maintaining his physical appearance and fitness, as well as on attaining athletic prestige. Through engaging in these activities, Jak attempts to realign his masculine bodily identity in relation to dominant discourses surrounding hardness, toughness and physical competence. As such, he becomes "fastidious about what he [eats], combinations of certain foods at certain times, power supplements that [stand] around in tins in the kitchen" (117). His reading material consists of "piles of magazines and photobooks full of sports heroes, catalogues of sports cars and expedition diaries of sunglassed adventurers in the Alps and the Sahara and the Amazon and the South Pole" (156). He himself goes for "long runs in the mountains" (117) every day, and participates in "tennis tournaments [and] races" (117). Even on the day of Jakkie's birth he is taking part in an "obstacle race with rowing and swimming and cycling at Witsand" (173). He takes his son on what Milla deems an "ill-considered" hiking trip of "altogether 80

kilometres over mountaintops and kloofs and through rivers" (379). This relates to Whitehead's description of masculinity as performative. As Whitehead (189) explains, "the male/boy/man is *expected* to transcend space, or to place his body in aggressive motion within it, in so doing posturing to self and others the assuredness of his masculinity" (emphasis in original). As such, Jak boastfully tells Milla how "[e]xceedingly tough [...] the inclines on the cycle routes" had been, and that "[h]e'd grazed and bruised himself falling. His knees, his elbows. Look. Raw. He'd had to change a wheel on his own in the gale-force wind. He'd been just about knackered" (193–94). This relates to Whitehead's statement that the "masculine body is not one that is deemed to be rendered passive by its environment but one that seeks to render the environment passive to it, primarily by virtue of the male body's actions within, and transcendence of, its immediate space" (190). By placing his body in aggressive motion to the world around it, Jak attempts to indicate his mastery over Grootmoedersdrift, and to negate the ways in which he feels Milla emasculates him.

Reeser (82) asserts that "it is the necessity of repetition that reveals the hollowness of masculinity underneath." He argues that "a man has no inner core, no essence, no nature underneath his gender, and that he needs to keep repeating gendered acts to show that masculinity does in fact exist in the face of a gender emptiness or a threat of emptiness" (82). As the novel progresses, Jak's diet and exercise regimes intensify, and his masculine performance becomes excessive. This is because he struggles to reconcile the ways in which he feels Milla emasculates him with the ideal of hegemonic masculinity he pursues. Milla describes the hardness of his body, and states: "something about the emaciated appearance of his ankles and wrists disturbed [her], as if his joints were under extreme pressure" (349–50). She spies on him exercising in his study (546):

His face was upside down. At this angle it looked like a mask. He was naked except for a truss of synthetic material around his waist. His chest was heaving, the sinews in his neck thin with straining, the muscles in his upper arms quivering. The weights were clearly too heavy. Between the grunts [she] heard other sounds. Only then could [she] make out the expression on his face. Tears down his cheeks. Bubbles of mucus under his nose.

That his face is a "mask" relates to Reeser's description of the inherent "hollowness of masculinity" and "the threat of emptiness" (82) at the core of masculine identity. That the "weights [are] too heavy" shows that Jak is finding it more difficult to reconcile the contradictions inherent in his position, and that the effort is becoming too much. This is further evidenced by the tears on his cheeks, which signify his growing frustration at realizing that his position on the farm makes his desire to achieve hegemonic masculinity impossible. This description portrays Jak as pathetic and pitiable in his efforts to hold onto the image of machismo he craves, and suggests that

he is undergoing an experience of introspection and self-doubt to which the reader is not privy. This episode functions as one of the unconscious moments in the novel that grant the reader transient access to Jak's consciousness, or rather, that seem to indicate that his inner-life is more complex than Milla portrays it to be.

As Whitehead (190) explains, masculine bodily identity is often "expressed as occupation, control, objectification and subjugation (of others' bodies)." The performance of Jak's masculinity thus additionally involves the abusive and oppressive behaviour he enacts towards Milla, Agaat and the farm labourers. This can be seen in his hitting Milla (44), taunting Agaat (500) and shooting the labourers' children with a pellet gun for stealing pumpkins (136). However, over the course of the novel he comes to believe that Milla wants him to mistreat her. While this belief is extremely problematic, the novel does give credence to the fact that her position is far more complex than that of a helpless victim. Upon their arrival at the farm, Milla seduces Jak while giving him a lesson on soil. She records her reminiscence of the event (69): "And you lay back and for a second time let him have his way. Strike, you thought, strike your sword on the water, you think you possess me, but you don't know me. Penetrate, you thought, invade me. What are you without my surfaces for you to break?"

Here she recognizes that Jak's masculine identity relies on the invasion and subjugation of her body. However, instead of resisting this incursion, she for her own reasons orchestrates the conflation of their intercourse and farming the soil. In doing so, she invites him to perceive her body as that on which he inscribes his violence. Early on in their marriage, she admits that "if he got rough enough with [her], [she] could keep him with [her]. Then at least he was involved" (88). She claims that she "learnt to use his anger, the energy of it" (88). However, she does not recognize that by learning to use his anger she teaches him that masculine performance centres on anger and violence.

Relating to this is the episode in which Milla and her mother watch Jak being abusive towards the dogs after his return from a sports event. Morrell ("Masculinity" 175) describes how in the 1950s "apartheid society was maturing and cementing increasingly prescriptive versions of masculinity." He explains that this "national white masculinity" partly related to the "elevation of rugby and cricket into national sports and marks of patriotism." Christopher Merrett (1) points out that sport "emphasized the otherness of Black South Africans" and was a "powerful signifier of White South African identity and a means of distancing Whites from other communities" (8). As such, Jak's leaving the farm to attend a sporting event associates him with hegemonic masculinity, while his return reminds him of his emasculated position in the farm's social structure. This is concretized in his stepping on dog faeces before entering the house. His reaction to this is to kick the dogs. While kicking the dogs, he specifically targets the male dog, and accuses it of having "sag-balls" and a "powder-

prick" (143). By undermining the dog's virility, Jak simultaneously reveals that the dog reflects his own feelings of ineffectuality and attempts to reassert his masculinity through enacting abusive behaviour. This is because he has moved from the patriarchal space of the sports event to the matriarchal space of Grootmoedersdrift.

Milla in her reminiscence is careful to note that she was "scared on the Saturday afternoon that he would unleash something when he got home" from "the rugby match" (142). It is significant that she describes her foreknowledge of what is to come, but then consciously decides to say "nothing" (142) that could stop the incident from occurring. The implication of this is that Jak's masculinity is not only defined by the negative behaviour he enacts as compensation for his feelings of inadequacy. Instead, Milla's complicity shapes how he comes to understand this cruel behaviour as constituting his manhood. As Whitehead (219) explains, "[t]he identity work of the masculine subject requires them to learn, assimilate and perform that which is fundamentally illusory, but which ultimately rests on the approving-disapproving gaze of the Other." Within the matriarchal space of Grootmoedersdrift, Milla thus controls the manner in which Jak attempts to construct himself in line with what he sees as ideal masculinity. Her complicity in his violence reaffirms his belief in violent behaviour as characterizing masculine identity.

This idea can additionally be seen in the passage in which Jak has a physical altercation with Koos Makkelwyn, a coloured farrier he hires to look after his horses. The confrontation between the two men originates from Makkelwyn's condemnation of Jak's treatment of his horses, as he believes Jak has "no respect for a noble animal" (138). According to Milla, "Jak first shoved Makkelwyn because he gave him lip" (137). Jak's attack on Makkelwyn relates to Morrell's assertion that "hegemonic masculinity silences or subordinates other masculinities, positioning these in relation to itself such that the values expressed by these other masculinities are not those that have currency or legitimacy" ("Of Boys" 608). Makkelwyn's masculine identity (which is informed by kindness towards animals—something that Jak's perception of masculinity lacks) provides Jak with the opportunity to reassert his authority in socio-political terms. This is because their racial and economic differences place him in a position of superiority. Through physically assaulting Makkelwyn, he attempts to negate the ways in which the coloured man's masculine identity is constructed, and tries to force Makkelwyn to confront him on the violent terms of his own masculinity. The farrier does not fight Jak and instead pins him down and restrains him, refusing to meet him on his terms of violence. Jak's attempt to position himself in relation to the violence stereotypically associated with his own perception of hegemonic masculinity is thus ineffectual. Dawid and ouKarel, two of the farm labourers, manipulate their knowledge of the situation into compelling Milla to give them better wages. She is willing to compensate the two men to keep quiet about Jak's violent behaviour (140), and in doing so effectively gives her approval of it.

Significantly, Jak becomes aware of her masochistic need to feel inferior. This can be seen in his questioning “why [...] any self-respecting woman [would] put up with” domestic abuse and concluding that he is her “accomplice” (415). As Whitehead (190) asserts, masculine bodily identity is often “expressed as occupation, control, objectification and subjugation (of others’ bodies).” This relates to the penetrative male role in the heterosexual act of intercourse. As such, Jak’s resistance to Milla’s repeated attempts to seduce him reveal a schism in his performance of hegemonic masculinity. This can be seen most clearly when Milla orchestrates a lavish seduction scene a few years after Jakkie’s birth, with “Romantic German Lieder”, flowers, “crystal glasses” and a “bottle of wine” (345). While Milla notes that “it was clear that [her] advance had an effect on him” (345), he responds neither as she expects nor according to the masculine script of conquest. Instead he tells her that “a bloody scrap of black lace” has no effect “after all the years of [her] breaking [him] down and disparaging [him]” (347). He exclaims that he is not her “toolbox” (347). This implies that he comes to an understanding of the ways in which Milla manipulates his sexuality for her own gain. Her relation to her husband is underpinned by an irreconcilable contradiction. On the one hand, she emasculates him and dismisses his masculine authority, as has previously been discussed. On the other hand, she orchestrates scenarios (such as the soil lesson discussed above) in which she expects him to take on the dominant role of the virile heterosexual invader. Jak’s response in this particular case seems to imply that he realises that she is in fact only allowing him to do so for her own reasons. She simultaneously wants to dominate and to be dominated. As such, this undercuts the authenticity of the masculine domination he seeks to assume. He later explains that he had “been blessed by the good Lord with such a handy monkey-wrench” and sardonically asks “who else could siphon off his oil so expertly” (359). The conflation of these images of masculine sexuality with images of motor mechanics plays into the motif of mobility that characterizes his discourse. This foreshadows how the crisis of his masculinity will ultimately lead to his death in a car crash, as will be discussed further on. Significantly, immediately after their encounter Jak drives away, distancing himself from the site of his emasculation: while pointing out Milla’s neediness, he inadvertently exposes his own, and threatens his relation to the discourses of stoicism that surround hegemonic masculinity.

Flight from the feminine

Jak’s performance of masculinity becomes more excessive when Milla is pregnant. As she explains, the “bigger [she] grew with child the more time Jak spent on his appearance” (117). This is because the performance of his masculinity may be read as doubly significant. These demonstrations of manhood do not only signal his move towards hegemonic masculinity. The performance of his masculinity additionally

signifies an attempt to distance himself from the unbound femininity associated with Milla. Reeser (107) explains that “a key aspect of [the] invention [of the male body] is the creation of corporal borders.” In contrast to this, the “ability to carry another human being inside the body during pregnancy may [...] be perceived as the ultimate border-buster” (107). Consequently, “the male body may fear the female body’s corrupting influence, or fear that her unbound nature will also incorporate his body into hers” (108). This can be seen in Jak’s disgusted attitude towards Milla during her pregnancy. Milla states that “Jak was repelled by [her] pregnant body” and “couldn’t stand being close to” her (173). His compulsive obsession with his physical appearance as well as his rejection of her pregnant body relates to Reeser’s statement that “[r]esistance to those unbordered female bodies, along with the reestablishment of the borders of the male body, has to be performed as a continual process for the male body to retain its assumed delineated status” (108). As such, Jak wants nothing to do with Milla’s body during her pregnancy, and attempts to delimit the boundaries of his own body.

Aside from his rejection of Milla’s pregnant body, Jak attempts throughout the novel to distance himself from her and the domesticated realm of Grootmoedersdrift that she represents. As Whitehead (219) explains, “[f]or many masculine subjects any flight from the feminine is immanent to their existence as men.” Whitehead’s use of the word “flight” is particularly apt in relation to Van Niekerk’s representation of Jak. This is because Jak’s reaction to any situation in which he feels threatened by Milla is to leave the farm. This can be seen by the fact that when he is confronted with her emotional neediness, he “slammed doors and stormed out of the house and drove off” (88). His car becomes that which allows him to escape, but significantly enough, his car also becomes that which causes his death, as will be elaborated on below.

Cars, planes and soldiers

As previously mentioned, Jak comes to project externally the masculinity he seeks to achieve. Reeser points out the relation between masculinity and external manifestations of manliness (99–100):

The psyche can also imagine the body in which it is housed somewhere else, displacing it onto other objects that allow the psyche to represent the body in ways in which it wants to appear. [...] With this kind of projection, the perceived characteristics of that object can reaffirm or create an image of the body that the psyche wants it to have. In the car example, projecting the male body onto the body of the car can affirm an idea or image of the male body as hard, as fast, or as powerful.

As such, Jak’s abattoir with its “shiny steel surfaces, neon lights, completely automated bearing-surfaces” and “industrial refrigeration plates” (591) reflects the prestige associated with modernization and technological progress that he associates with his

convoluted diet and exercise regimes. Furthermore, the genetic perfection of his “new merino stud rams” (592) with their “one hundred per cent prepotency, a lambing rate of a hundred and fifty per cent, early weaning time and the greatest possible uniformity and regularity of build, plus then super-wool qualities” (593) relates to the way in which he wishes to be perceived as a superior and virile ultra-masculine specimen. His reference to the “fat-tailed Hottentot sheep with knock-knees and Cape sheep covered with tatters” that were “in this country when the white man arrived here” (593) indicates that he sees his achievement as not only personal but also political. In addition to this, his car becomes a powerful symbol of his movement towards hegemonic masculinity in the novel. However, his car additionally comes to signify his inability to attain this illusory ideal.

An early passage in the novel clearly demonstrates this idea. While driving in Jak’s car to Grootmoedersdrift for the first time, Milla warns Jak of the possible pitfalls of the farm, while engaging him sexually. Here, the movement of the car towards the farm represents the success he imagines he will achieve, as well as the successful sexual conquest he associates with his impending marriage to Milla. However, while “rubbing his groin” she tells him that her mother’s family think that “Grootmoedersdrift is a nightmare” (32). Her manipulation of his sexuality blinds him to the seriousness of her words. Indeed, all the possibilities that she predicts ultimately come to pass. Instead of easily and quickly becoming a hugely successful farmer as he imagines he will, Jak struggles for many years and suffers many farming catastrophes before achieving some measure of success. Instead of marriage bringing sexual satisfaction, it only brings frustration. Because of his arousal, Jak has to swerve to avoid a watermelon truck, and nearly drives off the road. He only avoids this because Milla tells him not to brake. When he admits that her advice had been correct, Milla detects in “his voice the slightest undertone of a sulk” (34). This alludes to the way in which he feels inferior to Milla throughout their marriage. The “spilling spattering scattering melons” (35) additionally foreshadow the blood spilt by Milla in the Mercedes during Jakkie’s birth in Jak’s absence, as well as Jak’s fatal car crash on the very same pass. In this passage, Jak’s car functions as an ambivalent symbol: it signifies his desire to conform to hegemonic masculinity, as well as the ways in which Milla’s emasculating presence renders him unable to do so. Significantly, the near-accident with the watermelon truck alludes to how the crisis of his masculinity ultimately leads to his death.

While cars, planes and athletic prowess usually relate to seemingly unadulterated stereotypical masculinity, Jak’s attempts to pursue this ideal ultimately prove to be futile. Milla gives birth to their son in Jak’s absence, which makes him feel “angry with embarrassment” (193). He has to sell his Mercedes because he feels that the “upholstery was permeated [...] with blood and stuff” (194). The defined borders of the car, signifying both his masculine self-image and his flight from the feminine, have been corrupted by the permeability of Milla’s uncontrollable female body. This

relates to the way in which he feels even more emasculated as the novel progresses, as will be elaborated on below.

Throughout the novel, Jak comes to hope that his son will embody the superlative masculinity he himself lacks, but ultimately this hope is doomed to fail. To the father, the son is “a body of potentials [...], a model of endurance, of physical discipline, of drilled limbs and sharpened reflexes” (453). After finding out about Milla’s pregnancy, he fantasises that “the child would look just like him”, and praises the “sterling blood [that] flowed in the De Wet veins” (135). He plans “to bring him up to be strong and fit just like his father” (135). Furthermore, he draws “plans of toys that he wanted to build for the child. Kites from which one could hang, aeroplanes, rockets that could really take off” (135). These objects serve as further examples of Jak’s projecting externally his simultaneous desires for masculine hardness and escape from emasculation. When his son is older, he takes “him along to go running or rowing.” He and Jakkie achieve “the best times for father-and-son teams in the holiday races at Witsand” and come “home with glittering trophies and gilt canoes mounted on wooden blocks” (377). However, these excursions become increasingly strenuous, and during the eighty kilometre hike previously mentioned, both father and son nearly fall to their deaths (385). This alludes to the danger inherent in Jak’s excessive performances of masculinity, and as well as to the fact that the crisis of his masculinity leads to his death. Jak builds the infant Jakkie a toy aeroplane (198). This foreshadows the fact that when Jakkie is older, his father convinces him to join the air force where he becomes a pilot. However, the toy aeroplane explodes, nearly injuring the baby (198). This resonates with the fact that the older Jakkie despises the military and absconds from the air force, subsequently leaving the country.

The irony of this is that while the son’s leaving the country in an aeroplane is for him the act of ultimate escape, it is also for the father an act of ultimate betrayal. Jak believes that his son’s joining the military “to defend [...] the borders” (458) is the superlative expression of masculine achievement. As such, Jakkie’s absconding renders his own attempts to achieve hegemonic masculinity through procreation futile. This prompts Jak to appeal for justification to the outside authority of the law. He leaves to hand his son’s damning goodbye letter over to the police, only to change his mind and return home. He takes a turn too quickly, crashes his car, and dies when a branch penetrates his chest. While Shannon-Lee Moore-Barnes (24) describes Jak’s death as a “spectacle”, his death is moreover caused by the tension between the publicly sanctioned hegemonic masculinity he is driving towards and the domesticated emasculation of the matriarchal Grootmoedersdrift he is driving away from. This is evidenced by the fact that his changing his mind and turning around causes his death. Furthermore, the quasi-phallic connotations of his being fatally penetrated by a branch allude to the way in which his impossible desire to achieve hegemonic masculinity causes his undoing.

Conclusion

Jak's abusive cruelty and his compulsive need to dominate make it all too easy to read him as Morrell's description of the male subject being a "bearer [...] of oppressive gender, class and racial values" ("Of Boys" 613). Furthermore, the increasing ineffectuality of his masculine authority and pursuits all too neatly associates him with the decline of male Afrikaner authority in the face of changing political ideologies. His vanity and his compulsive repetition of performances that reassert his relation to white heterosexual masculinity become ludicrous and pitiable. However, his representation in the novel is complicated by the transient moments in which he does not conform to the script of hegemonic masculine domination. These moments include his resistance to Milla's repeated attempts to seduce him and his awareness of the complex power relations that govern his relationship with her. It is more difficult to accept him as a character aware to a significant extent of his own faults and limitations, and more dangerous for the reader to recognize his marginalized role in both the social structure of Grootmoedersdrift and in the text itself. What makes such a reading dangerous is the quagmire caused by his blatantly cruel and oppressive behaviour. Reducing these traits to the realm of the stereotypical absolves him of culpability. Accepting him as a character with a rich (albeit unnarrated) inner-life is to recognize his humanity. This humanity disrupts the binary that governs the relationship between victim and oppressor. For post-apartheid readers this implies a shift in the discourses of culpability demanded by the current political landscape. However, these moments never find full expression, and are undermined by the brute force of his desire to conform to stereotypical masculinity. This points to how the tension that governs his attempts to achieve hegemonic masculinity within an emasculated space leads to the crisis of masculinity which results in his death.

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