

Of Wounded Killers and 'Failed Men': Broadening the Quest for Liberating African Masculinities

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Abstract

In order to broaden the search for liberating African masculinities, I engage with key and recent works on masculinity within the African context. I explore some of the reasons why scholarship on masculinity in Africa – especially scholarship within the context of religion and beyond interventionist and advocacy work – remains sparse and inadequate. In this article I advocate for scholarship on masculinities which is situated at the intersection of culture, religion and politics and argue that while it is important to begin this search through examining conventional sacred texts, it is necessary to interrogate modern 'sacred texts' in order to broaden this quest. To illustrate our main argument and to highlight key aspects of hegemonic masculinities in Africa, I draw on Thando Mgqolozana's novel, *A man who is not a man*.²

Introduction

The first step in broadening the search for liberating masculinities is to expand our notion of the sacred, especially our notions of sacred texts. Our expanded notion of sacred texts is drawn from Chidester's³ definition of the sacred as:

following Emile Durkheim's understanding of the sacred ... that which is set apart from the ordinary, everyday rhythms of life, but set apart in such a way that it stands at the center of community formation. In between the radical transcendence of the sacred and the social dynamics of the sacred, we find ongoing mediations, at the intersections of personal subjectivity and social collectivities, in which anything can be sacralized through the religious work of intensive

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² Thando Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, (2009).

³ David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Kindle Edition), (2012), 5.

interpretation, regular ritualization, and inevitable contestation over ownership of the means, modes, and forces for producing the sacred.

If we understand the sacred according to Chidester's definition, our notion of sacred texts need not be limited to the Bible, the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita. Nor, then, should we confine the concept of the religious to the four walls of religious institutions.

In the 21st Century, there are several texts, other than the conventional, that are 'set apart in such a way that [they] stand at the center of community formation'. These can be found in the genres of literature, fine and dramatic arts, and the media – conventional, digital and social. Hence, in terms of this definition of the sacred, religion is not only to be found everywhere, but is increasingly being mediated through art, literature and the media.^{4,5} If our quest for liberating African masculinities is to bear any fruit, we have to critically review as many sacred texts as is possible. This also calls for a greater inter/multidisciplinary approach to masculinity studies. While interventionist and advocacy-driven scholarship of theologians and religion scholars, understandably address social problems linked to patriarchy and violent masculinities in Africa, this essay calls for a phenomenological and multi-lateral approach to the study of African masculinities. To this end I use fiction to unravel the many layers of compulsive and violent masculinities.

Fiction and Non-Fiction

In his keynote address at the 2017 Sunday Times Literary Awards, Zakes Mda⁶ recalled the story of Lorraine Adams, a Pulitzer prize-winning reporter who gave up journalism in order to become a novelist.⁷ Apparently Adams felt that "it was only with fiction that she could address the truth behind the facts". Mda went on to characterise the differences between fiction and journalism.

Journalism answers the simple question: what happened? It is the same question that is answered by most forms of non-fiction, including history. What happened? Of course, there are attendant questions, such as how and why it happened, but the key story lies in the event.

⁴ Hjarvard Stig, *The mediatization of Culture and Society*. London: Routledge, 2013.

⁵ Stewart M. Hoover & Curtis D. Coats. *Does God Make the Man? Media, Religion, and the Crisis of Masculinity*. New York: NYU Press, 2015.

⁶ "Fiction is essential in a corrupt society". Keynote address at the 2017 Sunday Times Literary Awards. 24 June 2017. Accessed 21 July 2018. <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/06/25/the-jrb-daily-fiction-is-essential-in-a-corrupt-society-read-zakes-mdas-sunday-times-literary-awards-keynote-address/>

⁷ Lorraine Adams, Harbor. New York: Vintage, (2006).

Fiction, on the other hand, goes much further, and answers the question: what was it really like to be in what happened?⁸

Given its ability to transport readers into the state of what it is like to be inside what happened, what is happening and what might happen, fiction can provide a great platform for exploring the tragic masculinities of our times. On a nuanced and vexed subject such as masculinity, fiction may work better than the propositional and didactic style of non-fiction.

Fiction is especially suited for the exploration of truths that are uncomfortable, terrifying, disruptive or painful. Today, in the world, on our continent, and in our country, in particular, few truths are as uncomfortable to tell and as difficult to listen to, as those that relate to the problem of violent masculinities.

Exploring African Masculinities Through Fiction

This is a story about how I came to have an abnormal penis. So there you have it: my genital organ is not the normal type. By that I mean it hasn't got the distinctive lollipop shape knobby head that most men boast of. Let me say that's not because I was born this way. ... Me, I was a real boy from the word go, with both my balls fully descended and the promising look that I would one day own a formidable lion. But it would seem that Satan had other plans.⁹

In this opening paragraph of Mgqolozana's novel, *A man who is not a man*, he offers his readers a glimpse into the heart, soul and mind of someone in whom a particularly tragic form of contemporary masculinity plays itself out. *A man who is not a man*,¹⁰ is a fictional boyhood story of a young man called Lumkile Chris Vumindaba who spectacularly and disastrously fails to complete the rites and rituals of passage that are deemed to turn a boy into a man. In a recent and extended review of the book, I suggest that, in time, Mgqolozana's novel "will be recognised for what it is, namely, one of the most perceptive, if not also one of the most

⁸ Fiction is essential in a corrupt society". Keynote address at the 2017 Sunday Times Literary Awards. 24 June 2017. Accessed 21 July 2018. <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/06/25/the-jrb-daily-fiction-is-essential-in-a-corrupt-society-read-zakes-mdas-sunday-times-literary-awards-keynote-address/>

⁹ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 1.

¹⁰ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*.

eloquent statements on the tragic state of hegemonic notions of masculinity in the world today”.¹¹

The novel traces young Lumkile’s life from a childhood in which his estranged parents are alive but mostly absent, to his experiments with drugs, crime and teenage romance. He looks forward to his admission to circumcision school, perhaps in the hope that this experience would fortify him to deal with the psychological trauma of growing up without the emotional or physical presence of his parents. In a tragic twist Lumkile’s circumcision goes wrong in the hands of his inebriated and erratic grandfather who is responsible for important ritual functions before, during and after the circumcision, leaving Lumkile with a deformed penis. This then brings to light many questions relating to the idea of what it might mean to be a man. *Can a man with a deformed penis still be called a man? Is a circumcision school drop-out worthy of being called a man? How does it feel to be that ‘man’?* Mqgolozana uses fiction to explore these and related questions. Through this story, Mqgolozana also explores the socialisation process, including the impact of absent fathers, errant male father figures and equally absent mothers. He further explores how these realities impact on the lives of children¹² shaping their thinking, impacting their self-confidence¹³ and causing untold childhood trauma.¹⁴

In many cultures within South Africa, male circumcision remains one of the oldest and most resilient coming-of-age rituals, with the objective of converting boys into men. The ritual requires initiates to undertake and pass many difficult tests in a challenging mountain setting.

On the surface, *A man who is not a man* seems to be a book about one more botched circumcision within the context of the resilient but increasingly contentious culture of amaXhosa.¹⁵ If we scratch the surface

¹¹ “Search for true meaning of manhood has place in history”. (2018b) Accessed 21 July 2018. <https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/opinion/2018-07-21-opinion--search-for-true-meaning-of-manhood-has-place-in-history/>

¹² Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, (2016).

¹³ Sylvia Vollenhoven, *The keeper of the Kumm. Ancestral Longing and Belonging of Boesmankind*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, (2016).

¹⁴ McIntosh Polela, *My Father, My Monster. A True Story*. Johannesburg: Jacana, (2011).

¹⁵ “Suspend and criminalise male circumcision”. Accessed 22 July 2018.

Moses Mncwabe. “Suspend and Criminalise Male Traditional Circumcision” (2016). [Accessed 22 July 2018].

<https://www.news24.com/MyNews24/suspend-and-criminalise-male-traditional-circumcision-20160712>

we will find that through the story of Vumindaba, Mgqolozana¹⁶ wishes to go beyond the headlines and the superficial diagnoses of the problem. This becomes apparent if I juxtapose Mgqolozana's novel¹⁷ with Andile Mhlahlo's thesis on male circumcision.¹⁸

While Mhlahlo¹⁹ examines circumcision practices from a scholarly and scientific perspective, Mgqolozana uses fiction to bring to life the personal realities of a victim of, what Mhlahlo²⁰ calls, "initiation tragedies". These tragedies according to Mhlahlo include;

dysfunction of sex organs, amputation of sex organs, hospitalization of initiates, death in bush schools, assault of initiates by traditional guardians, ...infection/injury to circumcision wound (on penis), dehydration (because of water [intake] restrictions), and sometimes lack of proper care from traditional guardians.²¹

In Mgqolozana's novel, readers are offered a view into the world of the initiates who experience some of these initiation tragedies. Unlike Mhlahlo's²² academic, propositional, statistics laden and somewhat distant study of "initiation tragedies", Mgqolozana invites his readers into a journey that seeks to answer to Mda's question, "what was it really like to be in what happened?". While Mhlahlo offers us fact around botched circumcisions, the novel offers its readers a glimpse into the complexities and nuances of the ritual through its characters.

Compulsive Manhood and the Fear of Gentleness

Have you ever wondered what happens to those *bakhwetha* [circumcision initiates] whose circumcision fails at the bush? You have seen their sorrowful white-smearing faces and bulgy bloodshot eyes. You have seen their ugly shaven heads weighed down with shame and disappointment. I am talking about the young Xhosa boys whose misfortune affords them the costly opportunity to grab headlines in every available news source.²³

¹⁶ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*.

¹⁷ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*.

¹⁸ Andile P. Mhlahlo, "What is manhood? The Significance of Circumcision in the Xhosa Initiation Ritual." Unpublished. MA diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2009.

¹⁹ Mhlahlo, "*What is manhood?*, 2009.

²⁰ Mhlahlo, *What is manhood?* 14.

²¹ Mhlahlo, *What is manhood?*, 14.

²² Mhlahlo, "*What is manhood?*, 2009.

²³ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 1.

According to van Gennep²⁴ initiation rites consist of three stages – separation, transition and incorporation. In his work Mhlahlo²⁵ adopts the van Gennep schema as a frame against and within which to discuss the Xhosa initiation rites. The question which Mgqolozana’s narrative raises is, what happens when a circumcision neophyte or an initiate fails to complete all three stages? Within the logic of that world, nothing seems worse than dropping out in the middle of the separation phase, which is the liminal²⁶ and in-between stage, when the initiate is no longer what he used to be but is not yet what he is being trained to become. This is stage at which Mgqolozana’s Vumindaba drops out of the initiation process. What is to become of him?

Therein lies our first challenge, namely, the elevation of dangerous rituals to the pinnacle of how and what it means to become a man. The idea that a man must pass difficult and dangerous challenges in order to prove his manhood is at the heart of this problem. According to Beneke²⁷ these practices are at the root of, what he calls, “compulsive masculinity”, that is, the “compulsion or need to relate to, and at times create, stress or distress as a means of both proving manhood and conferring on boys and men superiority over women and other men”. Beneke²⁸ further disaggregates compulsive masculinity stresses into those which are physically hurtful, psychologically dangerous and manhood threatening. One way these are implemented is through “gruelling manhood rituals”²⁹ intended to “obliterate any vestiges of one’s identification with mother” and in the process, “boys are brutalized into their identities as men”.³⁰

Circumcision school is but one context in which compulsive masculinity plays out. There are many dynamic equivalents in other cultures. War is itself an important ‘test’ for and of manhood. The selling-point of armies and military battalions the world over is their supposed ability to make men out of boys, mainly through setting a series of stressful tests against which boys must prove their value as men. In the absence of actual armies and actual wars, societies have no shortage of other ‘man-made’ stressful and dangerous tests for men.

²⁴ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1960), 74-81

²⁵ Mhlahlo, “*What is manhood?*” 2009.

²⁶ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

²⁷ Timothy Beneke, *Proving Manhood. Reflections on Men and Sexism*. Berkely: University of California, (1997), 35.

²⁸ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*.

²⁹ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 63

³⁰ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 64

Sport is one such a platform. When Muhammad Ali lost a hard and bruising championship fight against Joe Frazier in 1971 in the USA, Norman Mailer, "one of America most famous writers"³¹ at that time, commented as follows: "... Ali had shown America what we all had hoped was secretly true. He was a man. He could endure moral and physical torture and he could stand".³² Hence, a man is supposed not be able to withstand pain, war, fighting and even torture. The ability to handle these stresses is the hallmark of compulsive masculinity.

Compulsive masculinity is even evident in the world of business and pleasure. The idea of 'handling alcohol like a man'³³ seems to be present in most cultures. During a visit to negotiate a university-to-university partnership with a sister university in China in 2013, our delegation was served an enormous amount of alcohol during the welcome dinner. Apparently this is an important ritual in that region, designed to check how 'manly' our delegation was through our ability to handle alcohol.

After his circumcision young Vumindaba is left on his own inside the circumcision school without mentorship or guidance. Yet he is expected to endure and remain standing, despite having struggled with the post-circumcision wound-care procedures. Within a few days and several days short of the required sojourn, young Vumindaba has to be rushed to hospital – a fate regarded as the ultimate shame of every self-respecting circumcision initiate. His penis is 'rotting away' and something drastic has to be done. Thus faced with this test of compulsive masculinity, Vumindaba's exit from the initiation ceremony seen as a failing.

As can be seen from the examples above, the Xhosa initiation school is not the only site of brutal manhood initiation rituals and compulsive masculinity. They are a global phenomenon that cuts through several sectors of society, from the classroom to the boardroom, from sport to the arts and from university fraternities to boys' clubs.

The concept of compulsive masculinity has also been broached in other works of fiction. Chinua Achebe's³⁴ main character in his celebrated novel, *Okonkwo* is also faced with challenges of proving his manhood. Okwonko essentially 'passes' all the manhood tests – village-square

³¹ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 37.

³² Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 37.

³³ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 39.

³⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, (1958).

wrestling matches, acts of valour, violence and cruelty in war – yet harbours homophobic tendencies and a dislike for all that is not ‘manly’.

[H]is whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external, but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken to title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.

Within the logic of the view expressed above, ‘real manhood’ is supposed to refute gentleness and softness. This manhood,

...requires resisting the impulse to “go soft” and empathize with or nurture those who are suffering or weaker – a skill strongly needed to remain cold-blooded when confronting suffering or horror. It would appear that at least some of the evils of the world, e.g. sexism, fascism, homophobia, and racism, are in varying degrees, then, ways that men prove their manhood.³⁵

Beneke makes connections between established and expected ‘manhood traits’ and sexism, fascism, homophobia and racism. But more than driving men into many contemporary evils,

the pains taken to prove manhood ... disable men from nurturing themselves through the refreshment of grief and from nurturing themselves through the refreshment of grief and from nurturing each other; they drive men to expect women to take unreasonable care of men. Men's pain will never be healed without a confrontation with sexism – men cannot be simultaneously fulfilled and sexist.³⁶

Without finding the healing that comes for self-nurture, the ability to grieve and empathise, men miss the opportunity to become, what Henri Nouwen³⁷ called, ‘wounded healers’ and they become wounded killers instead. Ironically, some of the men our societies hail as heroes – from the Biblical characters such as Samson, Jephthah and David – seem to

³⁵ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 41.

³⁶ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*, 172.

³⁷ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Double Day, (1972).

resonate more with the notion of the wounded killer rather than the wounded healer. In an article on the legacy of Winnie Mandela, Afua Hirsch³⁸ traces our notions of heroism to the Graeco-Roman empire.

Heroes are curious things. Ours have roots in the ancient Graeco-Roman sense of the concept, which places a premium on military victory. What's problematic is how many of our heroes embody an inherent level of violence, as is unsurprisingly the case with people whose main accomplishments arise from war. We are tolerant about people who regarded the working classes as an abomination (Wellington), the transatlantic slave trade as a good idea (Nelson) or Indians as repulsive (Churchill), because we think the ends – defeating Napoleon or Hitler – justified the means.

Theorising African Masculinity Studies

According to Ratele,³⁹ there is a dearth of academic studies on masculinity not only in South Africa but in Africa as a whole. Writing from a European and North American context, Mia Lövheim⁴⁰ has argued that since the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of media, religion and culture in the early 1990s, the major blind spot in scholarship is the concept of gender. I would like to add that in this context, the negligible scholarship on gender seems to be most acute in the area of masculinity studies. Only one of thirteen essays in Mia Lövheim's⁴¹ edited collection (by Curtis D. Coats and Stewart M. Hoover) is dedicated to the subject of masculinities.

Ratele⁴² opines that among the possible reasons for the scarcity of masculinity studies we could include,

- a. a societal inability to recognize that "men and boys are as gendered as women and girls",
- b. the inability of scholars to see connections between feminist studies and masculinity studies,

³⁸ Afua Hirsch, "Winnie Mandela was a hero. If she'd been white, there would be no debate". *The Guardian*. 3 April 2018 (accessed 7 August 2018)
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/winnie-mandela-hero-white-protest-apartheid>

³⁹ Kopano Ratele, *Liberating Masculinities*. Pretoria: HSRC, (2016), 70.

⁴⁰ Mia Lövheim, (ed). *Media, religion and gender. Key issues and new challenges*. London: Routledge, (2013).

⁴¹ Lövheim, *Media, Religion and Gender*..

⁴² Ratele, *Liberating Masculinities*, 70.

- c. the cultural illiteracy of researchers in this and related fields, the less than perfect compatibility of masculinity studies from elsewhere with our context as well as
- d. the complications brought about by “the marginality of African countries in juxtaposition to powerful multinational capitalist ideologies”.

Ratele suggests that, owing to the marginality of the African condition and African masculinities, we have to proceed cautiously across the paths that may lead us to liberating masculinities because the terrain is laced and riddled with disorientating “discursive currents” which are both, contradictory and complementary, continuous and discontinuous, agreeable and disagreeable, all at once.⁴³ It is, he suggests, in part due to this daunting reality that an exploration of (South) African masculinities has been hard to initiate, to keep in focus and to sustain. In addition to Ratele’s observations on the scarcity of masculinity studies, current challenges masculinity studies could be paraphrased as exhibiting;

- a. The resistance to, if not complete rejection of feminist scholarship, both in the academy and in public spaces, sometimes overtly and at other times covertly.
- b. The seductive representation of strong and successful males as ‘normal’ consuming subjects who facilitate economic growth in the neoliberal society and in that way promote societal wellbeing right down to the family unit.
- c. A critical appreciation of the reality and the implications of a seemingly resurgent phenomenon of ‘traditional masculinities’
- d. A critical appreciation of the marginalised locatedness of African masculinities as a smaller circle inside of hegemonic global masculinities.

Overall, Ratele’s⁴⁴ main point is the following:

We have to try harder not to ‘other’ ourselves and the men we research and not to want to transform by uncritically applying Western theoretical tools and conceptual lenses. We have to stop treating men who are in reality marginalized by capitalist, white and black heteropatriarchal ideologies as if they have power. We cannot go on approaching and theorizing poor, poorly educated young black men ...

⁴³ Ratele, *Liberating Masculinities*, 71.

⁴⁴ Ratele, *Liberating Masculinities*, 87.

as if they are the same as rich men. We need to look at our subjects in their proper and full context.

Ratele is correct to point us to the theoretical pitfalls and scholarly hazards that constrain African masculinity studies. However, I disagree with his suggestion that poor and marginalised Black men be approached differently to rich men of the west- methodologically and theoretically speaking. Even the most powerless men are devastatingly powerful in relation to the most powerless women. While power is hierarchical in relations between men, so-called powerless men share with the powerful men, the same aspiration to attain or maintain (some form of local) hegemonic male supremacy, even if it is only based in an imagined manhood.

While Ratele is sufficiently conscious of the cultural and ideological content of globalising forms of masculinity, he is silent on masculinity and religion (including popular religion) in Africa. In other words, there are missing discursive currents in his register. Furthermore, Ratele's scholarship does not explore how religion contributes to the gendering of men.⁴⁵ More often than not, religion (especially Christianity and Islam in the African context) is assumed to be only a force for good. However, the real picture is more complex and nuanced than that, as Nadar⁴⁶ and Chidester⁴⁷ have pointed out. Religion can be a complicating factor and not necessarily a force for good. In *Wild Religion*, Chidester demonstrates that there are ways to consider and analyse religion beyond the good-or-bad binary.

The second missing current in Ratele's work is, what I shall heuristically name, 'liberation struggle and war masculinities'.

Liberation Struggle and War Masculinities

An important study into masculinities in Africa is the collection of essays edited by Ouzgane and Morrell.⁴⁸ The book comprises essays under the themes: interpretations of masculinities, representations of masculinities,

⁴⁵ Stewart M. Hoover and Curtis D. Coats. *Does God Make the Man? Media, Religion, and the Crisis of Masculinity*. New York: NYU Press, (2015).

⁴⁶ Sarojini Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence against Women in South Africa. Angus Buchan's Mighty men's Conference as a Case Study of Masculinity". *Scriptura* 102, (2009): 551-61.

⁴⁷ David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Kindle Edition), (2012).

⁴⁸ Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, *African Masculinities. Men in Africa from the late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Pietermaritzburg: KZN, (2005).

constructions of masculinities and contestations of masculinities. However, a notable, if not baffling, absence in this book on masculinity in Africa, is a section on religion and masculinity. In many parts of Africa, there have been increasing incidents of violent masculinities which have been linked to religion. In East Africa originating in Uganda, is a militia army called ‘the Lord’s resistance army’ that has been abducting, maiming, killing and raping for a long time. The notorious Boko Haram of West Africa, originating in Nigeria, as well as al-Shabaab in East Africa are all undergirded by fundamentalist religious notions of masculinity. Of importance for our theme in this book is the tremendous effort made to draw links between and to isolate the influences of masculinity, class and race especially within Black liberation movements.

In his recent book Ian Macqueen⁴⁹ writes about how the ‘new black masculinity’ of the 1970s, whose aim was to oppose both white male supremacy and white racism, and thus restore of the dignity of the ‘black man’, became complicit in, not only, maintaining the same conservative outlook towards women, but also showed similar patterns of violence against women as evident within the realms of white supremacy.⁵⁰

The historian Daniel Magaziner observes that, in the early years, the quest for the reclamation of black manhood was “perhaps the most basic element of Black Consciousness efforts to recast black identity”.⁵¹ Steve Biko referred, almost nostalgically, if not with a hint of deliberate irony, to a time in history when “black men were oppressed but they were still men”.

But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. [yet]...Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents it in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of black people. ... In the privacy of his toilet, his face twists in silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master’s impatient call. ... All in all, the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ian, M. Macqueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements Under Apartheid*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN, (2018), 14.

⁵⁰ Redi Tlhabi, *Khwezi. The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, (2017), 41-65.

⁵¹ Daniel R. Magaziner, “Pieces of a (Wo) Man: Feminism, Gender and Adulthood in Black Consciousness,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no 1 (2011): 45-61.

⁵² Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, Johannesburg: Picador Africa (2004): 30.

Similarly in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*⁵³, Mandela seems to express the belief that the restoration of black manhood was an important objective of the struggle. Following the death of his father, his mother is said to have expressed to Mandela '*uqinisufikotho kwedini*', which Mandela loosely translates as 'brace yourself, my boy'. The phrase could also be translated to mean 'man up' or literally 'toughen up the soft spot between your infant skull bones young man'. Later in the book, Mandela reflects on the last phase of his graduation ceremony, "now I was a man, and I would never again play *thinti*, or steal maize, or drink milk from a cow's udder. I was already in the mourning for my own youth".⁵⁴ The young Mandela is, however, roused by the keynote speech about manhood, delivered by Chief Meligqili, the son of Dalindyebo, in which he says;

There sit our sons ... young, healthy and handsome, the flower of the Xhosa tribe, the pride of our nation. We have just circumcised them in a ritual that promises them manhood, but I am here to tell you that it is an empty, illusory promise that can never be fulfilled for we Xhosas and all black South Africans are conquered people.⁵⁵

Many years later, Mandela still maintained that the ultimate attainment of manhood came not from circumcision school, but it would come from the attainment of political freedom which would create the conditions for the restoration of 'true manhood'. "Looking back, I now know that I was not a man that day and would not truly become one for many years", he wrote in hindsight.⁵⁶ The ambition to "truly become" a man one day, stayed with Mandela. While preparing for his statement at the dock in June 1964, Mandela jotted down five points by hand, the fifth of which read, "if I must die, let me declare for all to know that I will meet my fate like a man."⁵⁷ In conversation with Ahmed Kathrada, Mandela underscores that it was, at that time, important that "we should disappear under a cloud of glory."⁵⁸

The idea of lost manhood, which could only be reclaimed by standing up to the white man and by the attainment of political freedom, became a kind of aspirational masculinity and perhaps the very objective of the struggle. The African man had to regain his manhood again. For this to happen, Biko suggested the following remedy:

⁵³ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*. London: Little Brown Company (1993), 20.

⁵⁴ Mandela, *Long Walk*, 36.

⁵⁵ Mandela, *Long Walk*, 34.

⁵⁶ Mandela, *Long Walk*, 36.

⁵⁷ Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with Myself*. London: Pan Macmillan (2010), 122

⁵⁸ Mandela, *Conversations*, 122-123.

The first step therefore is to make the Black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. ... This is the definition of Black Consciousness.⁵⁹

Clearly therefore, certain notions of African masculinities formed the backbone of struggle mythology, across the liberation movements influencing many struggle icons including Nelson Mandela. However, culled as they were from conservative notions African traditional masculinities and built to match and to combat white male masculinities of *kragdadigheid* (overbearing power),⁶⁰ these aspirational notions of liberating masculinities were themselves conflicted and loaded with seeds of gender insensitivity and violence.

In a chapter titled 'gendering the underground', Raymond Suttner presents a subtler, softer and more sophisticated appraisal of the devastating effects of "liberation struggle ... models of manhood based on a notion of heroism suffused with ambiguities."⁶¹ But Suttner admits, in a seemingly back-handed way, that in the ANC underground camps at home and in exile, "some women report harassment, others never encountered it, [but] there are definitely recorded cases."⁶² To the extent that liberation struggle notions of masculinity tend to be "based on notions of heroism" and to the extent that they 'borrowed' from conservative white and African male cultures, they cannot be seen as either an automatic or a permanent ally to the quest for liberating African masculinities.

Religion and Compulsive Manhood

Over the past two decades there has been an explosion of feminist and womanist publications in Africa which have interrogated patriarchy. These publications have, in part, been inspired by the CIRCLE for Concerned Women in Africa. Under the leadership of Nyambura Njoroge and Ezra Chitando, the WCC programme, the Ecumenical HIV and Aids Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA) has inspired several publications on masculinity. Five categories or areas of publications on masculinity and religion are discernible, namely:

⁵⁹ Steve, Biko. *I Write What I Like*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa 2004, 31.

⁶⁰ Jacklyn Cock, *Women and War in South Africa*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, (1993).

⁶¹ Raymond Suttner, *The ANC Underground in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana (2008), 132.

⁶² Suttner, *ANC Underground*, 129.

- a. Those related to Christianity and African Christian theology
- b. Those related to African Women's (feminist) theology and/or contextual theology
- c. Those related to African cultural practices and beliefs⁶³
- d. Those related to efforts to theorise and prevent violence against women
- e. Those related to efforts to theorise and prevent and combat HIV and AIDS

The CIRCLE dominates the number of publications in the first four categories while EHAIA focuses on HIV and AIDS publications. The focus of these publications within the context of masculinity has largely been on advocacy and the prevention of harm to women and children. Phenomenological studies which have focused on the impact of religion – Christian, African or Islamic – on African masculinity have been few and far between. Rarer still are those publications that focus on masculinity, religion and race or those focusing on masculinity, religion and the political economy. One of the reasons for this lack is simply that (South) Africa carries an enormous burden of disease such as HIV and AIDS as well as violence against women and children. In this context, merely phenomenological, theoretical or purely theological studies of masculinity and religion seem like an unaffordable luxury.

Nevertheless, in the pursuit to delve into masculinity studies with the focussed aim of preventing disease and violence, we are in danger of not fully understanding the nuances and complexities of African masculinities as well as its relation to religion. Alternatively, I focus specifically on those aspects of masculinity that help us either to lament the dire situation of violence and disease or to mount prevention campaigns.

In this way, we will always see masculinities from the corners of our eyes rather than face them head-on. If men are as gendered as women and if boys are as gendered as girls, we ought to devote as much, if not more, attention to masculinity as we have been doing to women and feminist studies. The examination of the role of religion in both the gendering of men and how this gendering endangers women is a task that has been

⁶³ Julio Langa, "Notions of sex, masculinity and manhood in African cultures". (Accessed on 23 July 2018)

<http://www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/notions-sex-masculinity-and-manhood-african-cultures>

started but has hardly been done thoroughly and frequently enough. That is the task that beckons.

All of the above notwithstanding, the body of work produced across the five categories listed above constitutes a veritable foundation upon which we can build. To do this task well, we will need to re-read the sacred texts with a particular view to the various, sometimes contradictory masculinity tropes and types embedded, advocated and repudiated therein.⁶⁴

But, as stated at the beginning of this essay, the traditional sacred texts are no longer the only sacred texts available to human beings today. Literature, art, the media—social and conventional—are sites of contemporary ‘sacred’ text-ing. We neglect these at our own peril. While our disciplinary work will be circumscribed by our disciplinary orientation, the texts we read need not be. It is for this reason that, when it comes to masculinity studies in Africa, I strongly advocate for the use, not only, of fiction but also of art and music. Indeed, I strongly propose that the study of masculinities should be made a compulsory school subject if we are to move from a world which sees mainly, if not only, women as gendered beings.

In our published review of *A man who is not a man*, I briefly contrasted Mgqolozana’s implicit approach to the humanity of men as opposed to the “long-held theory of Western philosophy, in terms of which the penis was considered the marker not only of masculinity, but also of humanity.”⁶⁵ Mgolozana uses the fictional story of Lumkile Chris Vumindaba and his damaged penis to peel back the many layers of masculinity, meticulously and rigorously.

Although the book seems too focussed on the physicality of the penis, for Mgqolozana “the penis has a name, a face, a history and a story – a story told in the most captivating and entertaining, if also tragic ways.”⁶⁶ In other words, more than moving beyond the statistics and the theories, Mgolozana manages to mobilise focus and attention upon one particular

⁶⁴ Ezra Chitando and Nyambura Njoroge (eds), *Contextual Study Manual on Transformative Masculinities*. Geneva: WCC, (2013).

⁶⁵ Tinyiko Maluleke. “Search for true meaning of manhood has place in history.”

<https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/opinion/2018-07-21-opinion--search-for-true-meaning-of-manhood-has-place-in-history/>

⁶⁶ Tinyiko Maluleke. “Search for true meaning of manhood has place in history.”

<https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/opinion/2018-07-21-opinion--search-for-true-meaning-of-manhood-has-place-in-history/>

epicentre of manhood, and in that way, unleash one of the most realistic conversations about the meaning of manhood.

Manhood *a la* Mgqolozana: Constructing Liberating African Masculinities

There are several ways in which Mgqolozana's addresses manhood in his novel. First, he suggests that manhood is not manufactured in what Beneke calls, "gruesome manhood rituals."⁶⁷ After failing at and dropping out of circumcision school, Vumindaba has to dig deep to find sites of his humanity and manhood elsewhere. He finds it in the friendships of love and comradeship with both males and females. Indeed, he even finds 'friendship' in the companionship of his dog, which was with him during the ordeal of restarting the third and last phase of his circumcision school programme.

Second, through the trajectory of Vumindaba, Mgqolozana attempts to illustrate that manhood is not centred on the penis, its looks or its size. For Mgqolozana's Lumkile Chris Vumindaba, there is life before, during and after the 'discovery' of the penis – indeed, there is life even after the injured penis!

Third, for Mgqolozana, manhood is not so much about the endurance of stress and pain of manhood rituals as it is about survival, being hopeful, and self-acceptance. To put it in the words of the character Lumkile Chris Vumindaba:

I would like to think that I am neither stuck in one village called Victimhood, where there are pitiable moans, nor in the neighbouring one called Victimville, where 'what ifs' punctuate every sentence. If you want to reach me, I can be found at Surviveville, down Hope street, at Self-Acceptance City.⁶⁸

Fourth; manhood is not to be found in the indulgence with drugs, crime and material things of the kind that young Vumindaba pursued. Fifth, Vumindaba discovers positive feelings of manhood in unlikely and unexpected places, the very places where compulsive masculinity always told him not to go. One such 'place' come when his mother asks: "Tell me my boy. What would you like? What is it that you need most in

⁶⁷ Beneke, *Proving Manhood*.

⁶⁸ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 3.

your life?"⁶⁹ To his consternation Vumindaba struggled to identify the thing he needed most in life, but he felt it:

Although I could not name the thing I needed most in my life, I was sure I knew what it was. It was there in my forehead. Sometimes not getting that thing made me weep alone at night, made me wish that I was dead... Uh-mm... I attempted to put it into words. But it did not come. What was it, again, that thing I wanted and needed the most? That thing that sent me breaking into white people's houses. Stealing radios from cars. That made me keep my head in a constant state of moisture. Wasn't it the *kasi* [black township] life... style, noise, action?... no maan, it was bigger than that thing.⁷⁰

What Vumindaba needs in order to feel like a man is the feeling of being loved and the presence of his parents in his life.

Sixth, before finding true manhood, Vumindaba has to rediscover his humanity. This happens as he lies in hospital nursing an injured penis and devastated ego, where he breaks down and cries when he is shown love by a female nurse.

She came to stand at the head of the bed and without saying a word, gave me her hand to hold. Her hand was warm and soft. I felt her heart throbbing in the blue veins of her hand. ... I was incredibly grateful for the amazing show of kindness from this nurse who hardly knew me. She continued to stand there, holding my hand and squeezing it wordlessly. Without warning, I found my tears dripping down. Then I was weeping the way I hadn't wept since I was a boy. They were the first tears I had shed since my ordeal on the mountain had begun.⁷¹

Seventh, Vumindaba interrogates his manhood when his heightened sense of shame and failure meet with the possibility of his own violence. The shame of dropping out of circumcision school and being sent to hospital is matched only by the shame of being forced to return to circumcision school in order to take care of unfinished business. In the end, however, Vumindaba feels little joy or sense of triumph for Vumindaba. Instead of graduating into a 'wounded healer'⁷², Vumindaba comes out feeling like a wounded killer – or rather a 'wounded beast' in his words.

⁶⁹ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 32.

⁷⁰ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 32.

⁷¹ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 134.

⁷² Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Double Day, (1972).

Today is meant to be my big day, my triumphant exit into the community as a fully-fledged man. At last I am leaving this place. But I feel no triumph. I don't want to go home. I don't want to face what is waiting for me there. I realize for the first time how immensely scared I am. My deepest fear is that I can't trust myself. There is so much anger and hurt inside me. I have no control over my own feelings, and that makes me dangerous. I'm like a wounded beast that might lash out unpredictably and injure, or even kill.⁷³

Of significance here is Vumindaba's awareness of the potential for becoming violent as a coping mechanism and as a form of overcompensation in light of his stigma and shame as a 'failed man'.

Eighth, why is it that the feeling of 'triumph' and success is missing for Vumindaba? Had he not dropped out; had he not been frog-marched to hospital with his tail between his legs; and had he not been forced back to demolish his circumcision hut, would he have felt differently on his coming out day? To explore these questions, I juxtapose Vumindaba's experience with Nelson Mandela's account of his circumcision coming-out day:

At the end of our seclusion, the lodges and all their contents were burned destroying all links to childhood⁷⁴ and a great ceremony was held to welcome us as men to society. Our families friends and local chiefs, gathered for speeches songs and gift-giving. I was given two heifers and four sheep and felt far richer than I ever had before. I who had never owned anything, suddenly possessed property... I felt strong and proud that day. I remember walking differently on that day, straighter, taller, firmer.⁷⁵

The question which Mgqolozana precipitates is whether the fictional Lumkile Chris Vumindaba is any less of a man than the young Nelson Mandela was on occasion of the coming out day? Vumindaba discovers that his humanity and his sacredness cannot be reduced to a penis, a ritual and a single moment. In his closing statement, the character, Lumkile Chris Vumindaba says:

Given what I know – my penis losing its cosmetic value, me being endlessly gossiped about and vilified, even ostracized from humanity ... would I adopt the same *strategy*? Would I still turn myself in at

⁷³ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 145.

⁷⁴ As Beneke (1997) pointed out earlier, what was being destroyed was not only links to childhood but also connections with mothers – a kind of vaccination against 'going soft' on/like women. Ironically, after circumcision school, the men are considered ready to marry women.

⁷⁵ Mandela, *Long Walk*, 34.

hospital like I did? ... well, I got news for you: me. I'm the fool who would do it all over again. I mean wouldn't you also choose to repeat the unique journey that helped you find your clarity and true manhood? I've come to realize that far from having failed as a man. My experience has allowed me a deeper understanding of what manhood is really about. It has made me more of a human, not less.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Building on some of the existent scholarship on African masculinities and basing our intervention on a few key premises, I have sought to invigorate the search for liberating African masculinities in several ways.

First, I have posited that there is a need for exploring expanded notions of the sacred. Such a premise frees us from the confines of institutionalised religions and opens up other sacred worlds while sensitising us to other platforms, virtual and actual, in which religions are dynamically mutating, impacting and being impacted upon. Expanded notions of the sacred are especially important in the pursuit of the subject of masculinities and religion. In part this is because human beings are religious in various, hybrid and complex ways. Furthermore, it is my contention that the search for liberating African masculinities is greatly illuminated when we cease to privilege organised religions or to consider these in isolation from their intersections with culture, (local and global), other sacred realities and politics.

Second, I suggest that a multi and inter disciplinary approach gives us the best chance of success in the quest for liberating African municipalities. It seems as though scholars have tended to operate within their disciplinary camps and thus conversing mainly with their disciplinary peers. The resultant effect on the scholarship on African masculinities has been two-pronged: religion in 'mainstream' masculinity studies has been neglected; and, on the flipside, theological and religious works on masculinity have neglected scholarship of 'mainstream' masculinity studies.

Third, I suggest that theological masculinity studies will have to go beyond the concerns of advocacy and short term intervention. The search for remedies and corrections is well and good, but it is precarious to launch hasty attempts to interrupt and change social behaviours that we have not understood sufficiently in their own right.

⁷⁶Mgqolozana, *A man who is not a man*, 183.

Fourth, fiction that focuses on key compulsive masculinity rituals, moments or sites – whether these relate to culture in general, sport, war, or manhood rituals – may assist us to understand the spiritualities and the psychologies of African masculinities better than non-fiction. To illustrate this, we engaged in an exegesis of the Mgqolozana's novel *A man who is not a man*.⁷⁷ While this novel is not, by any stretch of imagination, a religious text; can a moment be more sacred than enrolling into a set of rituals designed to convert boys to men? Can a place be more sacred than the site on which manhood is supposedly manufactured?

The lessons we may draw from the fictional life of Vumindaba about liberating African masculinities are significant. Essentially we learn that liberating masculinities will not emerge from the stories of heroic and triumphant men, but may emerge from men who fail spectacularly instead. We also learn that liberating masculinities are negotiated; and this in context of vulnerability involving humane friendships between men and men, men and women and men and animals. At his loneliest moment Vumindaba's only companion is a dog.

It is when Vumindaba's aspirations towards attaining compulsive manhood fall flat that he is able to reclaim his humanity and his liberating masculinity. In him we have a man who discovers his manhood in woundedness - not in valour and not in the avoidance of vulnerability.

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⁷⁷ Mgqolozana, *A man who is not*.

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