



# Violence and the Performance of Masculinity in Dudu Busani Dube's *Hlomu the Wife* and Sue Nyathi's *The Gold Diggers*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to explore the critique of male chauvinism in two important recent novels authored by South African women, *Hlomu the Wife* by Dudu Busani-Dube and *The Gold Diggers* by Sue Nyathi. Using a qualitative analysis of the two novels, the study demonstrated how intimate spaces operate as potential sites of violence. The study also highlighted how the novels grapple with the symbiotic relationship between physical and/or psychological violence and the transformation of masculinities in intimate relationships. The representation of men by these women authors dramatises the extent to which intimate partner violence might be linked with the disjuncture between patriarchal cultural expectations and men's lived experiences. This is especially so regarding the public and private performances of masculinity in ways that tend to glorify violent behaviours. Drawing on Pumla Gqola's exploration of intimate spaces as incubators of fear as well as Robert Morrell's notion of the 'new man,' the article offers valuable insights into some of the psycho-social characteristics of South Africa's endemic crisis of violence against women.

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of the 'new man' in masculinity studies, as conceptualised by South African historian, Robert Morrell in 1998, began to find cultural expression during the country's uneasy transition between 1994 and the early 2000s. According to Nonhlanhla Dlamini the period can be described as an "interregnum ... in the South African social/literary spheres with regard to the performances, expressions and composition of masculine subjectivities".<sup>1</sup> Dlamini recognises the interconnectedness of the transformative effect of the period on "male subjectivities" showing that the stasis of the early transition period facilitated the "disconnection between dominant masculinity's expression of manliness and the gender ideals espoused in the constitution of South Africa" (emphasis ours).<sup>2</sup> In a sense, the emergence of the "new man" was incomplete and therefore, as Morrell warned in 1998, high levels of chauvinism persist leading to the kinds of fatalities associated with stillbirths. These are

<sup>1</sup> Nonhlanhla Dlamini, "The Transformation of Masculinity in Contemporary Black South African Novels" (University of the Witwatersrand, 2015), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Dlamini, "The Transformation of Masculinity in Contemporary Black South African Novels," 8.

dramatised in the fictionalised violent romantic relationships in two important novels authored by South African women, *Hlomu the Wife* by Dudu Busani-Dube and *The Gold Diggers* by Sue Nyathi.<sup>3</sup>

The violence portrayed in both novels may be seen as a reflection of the state of the stillbirth of the 'new man' in the state of interregnum that South Africa has been under since the transitional years. As Clingman observes, "South Africa may still be in that space of interregnum (or another one). That is the space we are in, and it is one we also have to find our way across, to navigate in some form."<sup>4</sup> What Clingman is saying is that South Africa has been through a series of interregnums, or "stillbirths" in Morrell's words, and this appears to facilitate a disconnection between gender (male) ideals and the dominant masculinity's expression of manliness, in other words, there is a crisis in masculinity performances expressed through violent acts in romantic relationships.<sup>5</sup> The different forms of intimate partner violence presented in Nyathi's and Busani-Dube's novels present opportunities to examine the violent nature of the masculinities thematised by the novelists.

Pumla Gqola paints a vivid picture of the gruesome environment nurtured by the state of interregnum where expressions of violent masculinities are revealed in intimate partner relationships in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> She calls this environment, the "female fear factory".<sup>7</sup> In a chapter titled, 'Femicidal Intimacy', Gqola reflects on the fact that the staggering majority (80%) of intimate violence cases are not reported in South Africa. Focusing on two particular cases, she observes how violent men remain "comfortably positioned within highly circulating violent practices by machismo and other violent masculinities (including law enforcement)".<sup>8</sup> The highly publicised cases of Karla Turcios of El Salvador and Karabo Mokoena of South Africa who were both killed by their lovers reveal a grave picture, particularly in environments such as the ones depicted in the novels under discussion. This paper provides vital insights about gender-based violence in intimate partner relationships and contributes to discourses of male violence and the vulnerability of women through in-depth analysis of the novels, *Hlomu the Wife* and *The Gold Diggers*.

The discussion approaches these novels as significant examples of realist fiction, a powerful form of cultural expression whose narratives and themes strongly resonate with the lived experiences of the actual lived experiences of people. The article interrogates the novels' narratives of violent intimate partner relationships and chauvinistic masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa. By so doing, the article reflects on the kinds of masculinities that exist within the praxis of contemporary South Africa. Busani-Dube and Nyathi's novels are instruments that may be used to measure, how far South Africa has come since apartheid, albeit through fiction. In this way, the article contributes to fields such as psychology as it delves into issues that highlight the mindsets and reactions of male characters in the selected novels.

### **Transformations of masculinity in *Hlomu the Wife* and *The Gold Diggers***

Romantic relationships and/or entanglements are sites that one may use to glean important information about formations of masculinities and indeed femininities. Busani-Dube's and Nyathi's narratives present the reader with romantic relationships as sites of interaction between the private and public spheres as well as the physical, psychological and emotional impact of the constructions of masculinity in the taxi operation business. Busani-Dube's *Hlomu The Wife*, henceforth, *The Wife* as it has become popularly known because of its motion picture adaptation, depicts the relationship between taxi boss and owner Mqhele and his wife Mahlomu, known simply as Hlomu. The violence that is captured in the motion picture adaptation of the novel has sparked necessary conversations around gender-based

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<sup>3</sup> Dudu Busani-Dube, *Hlomu the Wife* (Pretoria: Hlomu Publishing, 2015); Susan Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers* (Johannesburg: Macmillan: South Africa, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Clingman, "Writing Spaces: Fiction and Non-Fiction in South Africa," *Safundi* 13, no. 1–2 (2012): 51–58.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Morrell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 605–30.

<sup>6</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Female Fear Factory: Dismantling Patriarchy's Violent Toolkit* (United Kingdom: Cassava Republic Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Gqola, *Female Fear Factory: Dismantling Patriarchy's Violent Toolkit*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Gqola, *Female Fear Factory: Dismantling Patriarchy's Violent Toolkit*, 133.

violence. While the public outcry that the motion picture adaptation of the movie takes away from the “love story” presented in the novel, close critical reading of the novel reflects a similar intensity of the quiet violence captured by Busani-Dube’s presentation of Mqhele the main protagonist and his brothers in the novel. Focusing on the depiction of Mqhele and Mahlomu’s intimate relationship, the paper shows how the violence of the intimate space influences the public performance of masculinity in a way that shows the transformation of Mqhele’s character.

Similarly, Sue Nyathi’s presentation of the romantic relationship between Melusi and Lindani grapples with the complications of the constructions and performances of public masculinity. Nyathi’s representation of Melusi’s character captures the essence of the conditions that influence the transformation of masculinity complicated by constant change of place across the border. Nyathi’s depiction of Melusi as a cross-border taxi operator between Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’s second-largest city, and Johannesburg, highlights the influences that impact the construction and performance of his masculinities. As a dweller of both Bulawayo and Johannesburg, Melusi’s masculinity is brought into sharp focus as his experiences as umalayitsha (transporter) impact his private intimate relationship with Lindani. Essentially, Nyathi’s novel succeeds in highlighting the impact of public performance of masculinity on the private romantic relationship as Melusi’s need for public success leads him to have minimal care for his private relationship with Lindani and anybody else. His satisfaction, the novel shows, lies in his quest for financial gain and outward stability rather than his private relationship(s).

### **The taxi industry, violence and the private performance of masculinity**

*The Wife* captures the transformations of Mqhele’s performance of private masculinities as a by-product of the responses to his traumatic experiences from his childhood in rural Mbuba and Eshowe, teenage years in Denver Hostel and then his young and adulthood at the Bree Taxi Rank. These stages in Mqhele’s life are the foundations from which his violent expression of private masculinities may be derived. Busani-Dube projects the violent nature of the Zulu brothers as an attempt to safeguard and protect their hard-earned power in the taxi industry which is depicted as a notorious space where murder, kidnapping and shooting are major features. Along with the respect earned in the taxi industry, the Zulu brothers inherit their parent’s enemies, the Ngqulunga brothers; whose parents were killed by the Zulu patriarch and father.

While Mahlomu’s introduction of Mqhele into her life is depicted as romantic, as he stalks her between her workplace and her home, his stalking tendencies are a projection of possessiveness which Hlomu facilitates from the onset of the novel. Hlomu’s facilitation of Mqhele’s possessive behaviour leads to the first violent encounter between the two lovers. Mqhele’s overreaction at Hlomu’s absence on her mobile phone results in him mercilessly beating her and the same encounter leads Hlomu to resign herself to abuse throughout the novel. The disconnection between the two in the relationship is shown to be resulting from their different backgrounds therefore complicating their common goal to love each other. This leads to the violent intimate space both create in their relationship that facilitates growth, maturity and love ultimately, surprisingly.

Gqola’s conception of romantic relationships as the “female fear factory”, succinctly captures the toxicity that women live under in some violent relationships.<sup>9</sup> Yet, one may argue that the same fear factory presents fears of different kinds for men too. In the telenovela *The Wife*, while Hlomu is dreamier and illusioned about and by love, Mqhele’s experiences in the taxi industry and years lived in the Denver hostel have created insecurities in him even in the private intimate space, which is his reason for beating Hlomu whenever he feels he is losing control over her. Portrayed in his edginess, avoidance of long hours of sleep and compulsive smoking habits throughout the novel, Mqhele lives in fear of being poor again. Living as an orphan together with his seven brothers propels a hunger in him that is sustained by the fear of losing control over his finances, hence before meeting Hlomu, Mqhele’s savings are kept in a closet. In the relationship, however, the discord between his expectation of what Hlomu should be ‘as an innocent virgin young woman’ and her stubborn nature drives Mqhele

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<sup>9</sup> Gqola, *Female Fear Factory: Dismantling Patriarchy’s Violent Toolkit*.

to beat her. Mqhele expects that since Hlomu is a virgin and by all accounts pure to him, he is caught off guard when she displays insubordination ignoring his calls causing him to beat her up in a blind fit.

Mqhele's background of living in a violent environment from his formative years informs his decision to beat up Hlomu when she does not answer her phone for the whole day. His first beating of Hlomu appears to be a response to his violent past rather than her insubordination. His merciless beating on Hlomu shows that he has unresolved past and/or present traumas that inform his construction of masculinity as a macho man. Hlomu describes her first beating with shock as she cannot believe what has transpired. She says, "He still hasn't said a word but his face says it all...my crying and screaming doesn't stop him from beating me".<sup>10</sup> While she romanticises his stalking tendencies from the onset of the novel, it is at this point that Hlomu is confronted with the full wrath of Mqhele's dark side. It is a side that is uncontrollable, even to Mqhele himself, showing signs of trauma that inform his expression of this brute machismo trait towards Hlomu. In a way, Mqhele's lack of control over his emotions in a romantic setup, partly explains the crisis in which some men attempt to separate their private and public performance in expressing masculinity, thus showing the toxicity of some romantic relationships where women are on the receiving end of the violence.

In the taxi business and public life, Mqhele is depicted as using excessive violence to enforce his domination and power in relation to his competitors, with devastating results in his private romantic life. At one level, his money, his ownership of properties and the domination of the major taxi routes in Johannesburg define his public expression of masculinity which is brute machismo, excessive protectiveness over his family, and constant need to protect them with bodyguards, dominance, on another level, his private expression of masculinity. The fear of losing the public presentation of his success affects his being a husband, father, brother and uncle in the private space. Consequently, he portrays an array of masculinities between their public and private masculinities, shifting and conforming to the private or public space he is in. It is unsurprising therefore that Mqhele is viewed as an upstanding husband in the public domain, yet he exhibits intimate partner violence in response to his fears of losing Hlomu and children in the private space. The conflation between the spaces has devastating outcomes on his attempt to be a loving partner to his wife.

Busani-Dube portrays the taxi industry and the private home space as presenting challenges to Mqhele's efforts in constructing a single balanced form of masculinity that serves either side equally, thus Mqhele's response to outward stimuli is violent if it is not in keeping with his ideals of masculinity. In fact, Mqhele is presented as failing to maintain the two characteristics; that is of brute machismo in public and that being sensitive and loving in private; resulting in him bringing the taxi-oriented violence into the privacy of his home, forcing Hlomu to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of relationship in ways that glorify the violence towards her. Busani-Dube's novel speaks to the complexity of how men battle with managing different forms of masculinities, leading to toxic formations of masculinities. At the same time, it shows how women tend to conform to the type of masculinity that they require in their partner while ignoring and/or discarding the form that is undesirable to them. In this sense, Busani-Dube's novel gives insights into gender-based violence, how the scourge is maintained in relationships and why it appears hard for toxic partners to separate.

Furthermore, Busani-Dube shows that intimate partner violence results from complex formations of toxicity between partners. Men and women provoke each other and trigger unresolved traumas leading to violent eruptions that may lead to femicide and/or androicide. Mqhele and Hlomu are presented as having equal responsibility for the violence that is depicted in their romantic relationship. While Mqhele's masculine identity is linked to the trauma of his past, to a large extent, his relationship with Hlomu enhances some of the traumas he experiences in his journey from boyhood to manhood. For instance, Hlomu's invitation to be violated by Mqhele every time he is under the weather sends mixed signals to Mqhele and results in his violation of her. Hlomu invites Mqhele to sexually violate her, enduring physical violation in the process, to address his unresolved mental and emotional imbalance. In this sense, Hlomu attempts to address mental and emotional trauma using

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<sup>10</sup> Busani-Dube, *Hlomu the Wife*, 47.

the degradation of her body which leads to Mqhele's lack of boundaries in that he is unable to decipher safety from unsafe ground in their relationship. In the same manner, Mahlomu's mindset signals her trauma and responsibility for the abuse displayed by Mqhele toward her.

Nyathi's depiction of the relationships between Melusi and the women he is involved in reflects how his outward experiences affect the construction of his masculinity as a *malayitsha* between Johannesburg and Bulawayo. The *malayitsha* business is a cross-border goods couriership business that gained momentum during Zimbabwe's 2008 economic woes. The absence of basic commodities in Zimbabwe forced many Zimbabweans to rely on the services of the *malayitsha*, who were mostly men, crossing the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe couriership basic goods as well as human beings between the two borders. A kind of 'new man' emerged from the processes of crossing and re-crossing the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa under the pressures faced by Zimbabwe.

Nyathi's depiction of Melusi's character suggests that there are new possible ways of viewing constructions of masculinity emanating from Zimbabwe's 2008 political collapse and economic degeneration. Melusi's character projects the construction and expression of manliness based on the need to fulfil outward aspirations of hegemony rather than inner personal aspirations. The name Melusi itself has an ironic meaning as it refers to shepherding and evokes notions of safety, ushering and caring that are associated with shepherds. Melusi's expression however signals a negative transformation as his quest to accumulate wealth leads him to be a chauvinistic man. His chauvinism interestingly reflects the violent background he comes from. The political violence and genocide of the Ndebele people by their Shona counterparts in 1985 Zimbabwe inform some of the decisions he makes in his romantic relationships, for instance. Melusi refuses to love a Shona woman because of the traumatic experience of losing his father and three uncles during the Gukurahundi genocide in 1986, yet as a *malayitsha* he transports two Shona customers because his need for financial gain is greater than his hatred for the Shona people.<sup>11</sup>

Melusi's bitterness at the Shona government drives him to antagonize the politicians under whom he believes the Ndebele people suffer. The novel captures how Melusi loathes the Shona people, how "to him it [the Gukurahundi] had been a baptism of fire. The memory of which made his blood curdle".<sup>12</sup> It is this unresolved trauma that informs Melusi's anger towards the two Shona-speaking passengers in his Quantum stating "In my car, we *only* speak Ndebele" (emphasis in the original).<sup>13</sup> His need to maintain control of the environment in his car signals his quest to feel powerful, rather than the helplessness he felt as a young boy witnessing the death of his father and the rape of women during the Gukurahundi. His expression of anger directed at the two Shona passengers is a sadistic form of therapy for his unresolved childhood trauma.

Interestingly, Melusi's anger is regulated and dissipated by the presence of his lover, Lindani and so it may be said that his expression shows how positive effect that a lover can have. Engagement with the theory of effect and the construction of masculinity reveals that outward stimuli have a bearing on how men perform their masculinity.<sup>14</sup> Their introduction to the study of the relationship between affect and the constructions of different masculinities shows that while men are susceptible to constructing their masculinities from both psychological and physical stimuli, there are occasions where an experience brings out a possible new way to view a man. In the novel, Melusi's relationship with Lindani aids in his ability to overlook his childhood anger towards the Shona people. It is Lindani's chiding he listens to when he roughly talks to the two Shona passengers in his car. In this way, the depiction of Melusi is conditioned by his romantic feelings for Lindani as he respects her chiding and overcomes the anger that emanates from his childhood trauma.

While Melusi's public performance appears to be regulated by his romantic effect on Lindani as described by, he is shown to ruthlessly and mercilessly carry out quiet violence towards some of his

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<sup>11</sup> Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Todd W Reeser and Lucas Gottzén, "Masculinity and Affect: New Possibilities, New Agendas," *Norma* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), 145.

“cargo” as he refers to his passengers.<sup>15</sup> Melusi instructs Givemore and tells him, “If that mother ever shows up looking for the kid we’ll say she died in the river. That’s our story”.<sup>16</sup> His instruction to Givemore projects the opportunism with which his frequent change of space between Zimbabwe and South Africa has been tied to his views of being a man. Melusi is more concerned with the amount of money he stands to gain after selling Gugulethu into child prostitution than protecting the young girl from harm and safely delivering her to her mother as promised to Gugulethu’s grandmother. Thus, Melusi’s opportunism signals moral degeneration that subverts model views of being a man in both spaces he frequents as he is void of feeling towards his “cargo”, his loyalty is to his need to fulfil his financial gain.

To add, while it can be said that Melusi is depicted as a loving and respectful partner towards Lindani, his interest in her and other partners in different parts of the novel is shown to be governed by his need to fulfil his patriarchal expectation, rather than genuine love connections. Melusi’s action of taking Lindani across the border for free shows his need to satisfy his sexual desire rather than genuine love. While he does provide shelter, finances, food and other benefits that ‘model’ what patriarchal men require, his action of “shoving money into her breast”, or his lusty thoughts about her sexually, project his need to satisfy his role as a ‘man’. Lindani’s reception of this subtle violence towards herself, on the other hand, encourages Melusi’s exploitation of the romantic relationship. Both use the romantic relationship as stepping-stones to other stages of life. It could be deduced that the constant change of space for Melusi, gives his character a broader base of masculinities from which to establish and perform his duties. Melusi is shown to use his access to Johannesburg and Bulawayo as sites that inform his construction of his expectations of being a man. As a result, by the end of the novel, Melusi’s subversive masculinity formation does not fit in any model of masculinity either in the South African space or the Zimbabwean space.

Moreover, another romantic relationship that Melusi has with his South African girlfriend Lungile, sheds light on the subversive nature of Melusi’s constructions of manliness. While fully taking responsibility and his role as a provider and expectant father, he does not appear to desire any commitment to his pregnant girlfriend. In fact, Lungile is referred to as “one of his many girlfriends who had conveniently fallen pregnant.”<sup>17</sup> This description of Melusi’s comprehension of Lungile shows the little regard he takes her. Because Lungile is expectant, compared to his previous girlfriend Lindani, Melusi’s conniving attitude towards her shows his exploitation of his expressions of patriarchal-centred chauvinism between Johannesburg and Bulawayo. In essence, Melusi does not conform to masculine hegemonies in both spaces but rather transforms his masculinity following his selfish views. Melusi is well aware that he will not take Lungile to Zimbabwe to meet his family, yet he impregnates her and provides for her. That way, Melusi refrains from taking full responsibility as expected of him in view of patriarchal views, between the spaces he occupies. In the same vein, he frees himself of any obligation towards Lungile when he crosses over to Zimbabwe. Essentially, Melusi’s transformation between the spaces shows a form of suspended masculinity that does not conform to any hegemony yet is in itself a form of independent hegemonic masculinity type despite its subversive nature.

While the character of Melusi does not conform to the hegemony of either space, his transformation presents new forms and expression and opulence. Melusi accumulates and amasses wealth by exploiting the corrupt system under which his transportation business thrives. This allows him to exploit resources from both spaces for personal gain with devastating consequences romantically. Melusi’s conceited masculinity, as aforementioned, particularly towards his romantic inclinations, violet the femininity of his girlfriends. His unhealthy quest to amass wealth at the expense of real romantic relationships leads to his eventual demise at the border post between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Although Melusi is wealthy, it cannot be said that his masculinity type is ideal showing the subversive nature of masculinities that emerge in a corrupt environment.

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<sup>15</sup> Reeser and Gottzén, “Masculinity and Affect: New Possibilities, New Agendas.”

<sup>16</sup> Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Nyathi, *The Gold Diggers*, 268.

## CONCLUSION

Both Busani-Dube's and Nyathi's novels capture issues that project how adverse spatial conditions inform the constructions of masculinities in a transformative light. While the transformation that is portrayed signals complications that reflect the political conditions of Johannesburg and Bulawayo respectively, the novels' critique brings into sharp relief the chauvinistic constructions of masculinities. In Busani-Dube's novel, these complications complicate the constructions of taxi owner and boss, whose masculinities are portrayed as thriving from the intimate violence in the romantic relationship between Mqhele and Hlomu. On the other hand, Nyathi's portrayal of the cross-border character Melusi captures the adverse impact that constant change of space has on the expression of masculinity. The degeneration of the 2008 Zimbabwean economy cultivates a new form of opportunistic masculinity type that depends on corruptly amassing wealth while disregarding romantic relationships. Melusi's need to generate wealth for himself is a quiet violation of his romantic relations with his lovers, showing an adverse transformation of masculinity.

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