# Men's Functions and Resultant Masculinities in Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and Yvonne Owuor's *Dust*

**Edward Mooka, Ph.D.***

**University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya**

**DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000839**

**Received: 20 October 2026; Accepted: 25 October 2026; Published: 20 November 2026**

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how masculinities are constructed through the functions male characters perform in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* (2014). Both Kenyan novels have been read largely for what they reveal about women, nationhood and memory, leaving their men under-examined. The study therefore aims to identify the roles men play in the two texts, to determine which masculinities those roles produce, and to show how narrative technique shapes the evaluation of those masculinities. It draws on R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic and multiple masculinities, supported by African-centred and Southern African scholarship. A qualitative, interpretivist design was adopted: the novels were close-read for characterisation, dialogue, symbolism, narrative perspective and structure, and the actions of male characters were classified under seven domains, namely relations with women, fatherhood, relations with other men, work, sexuality, sport and violence. Each classification was tested against explicit criteria drawn from Connell's framework. The analysis shows that hegemonic masculinity in both novels is anchored in authority, breadwinning, sexual licence and violence, as embodied by Martin in *Coming to Birth* and Nyipir in *Dust*, yet that this dominance is local and unstable. Labour migration, colonial emasculation, economic insecurity and generational conflict erode it, while absent or irresponsible fathers expose its dependence on the provider role. Marginalised, subordinated and protest masculinities emerge among colonial domestic servants, among men whose status other men deny, and in Odidi, whose rugby success, political awakening and rejection of his father's model link physical prowess to a politicised, oppositional masculinity. The novels treat violence as a socially conditioned resource rather than a male essence. Their narrative methods differ: Macgoye's plain, chronological narration, focalised chiefly through Paulina, yields a domestic and economic critique, while Owuor's fragmented, lyrical and memory-laden narration yields a historical and political one. Both point towards alternative masculinities grounded in responsibility, care and social justice. The article concludes that Macgoye and Owuor present masculinity as plural, relational and historically contingent, and that reading women-authored fiction for its male characters enriches African literary studies and masculinity studies alike.

**Keywords:** masculinity; hegemonic masculinity; Kenyan literature; fatherhood; violence

## INTRODUCTION

Since the late twentieth century, scholars have increasingly treated manhood as a social and historical construction rather than a biological given. Connell (1995) describes masculinities as configurations of practice within gender relations, shaped by institutions, power and culture, and therefore variable across time and place. African literary texts are productive sites for studying these configurations because they dramatise how men negotiate inherited authority, colonial disruption, economic pressure and changing relations with women.

This article examines the functions that male characters perform, and the masculinities that result, in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* (2014). Both Kenyan novels

give prominent attention to women's experience, and both have been read mainly through that lens. Yet men occupy decisive positions in each narrative as husbands, fathers, workers, athletes, lovers, rivals, and perpetrators or victims of violence. *Coming to Birth* follows Paulina through marriage and urban life in Nairobi in colonial and early independence Kenya, while *Dust* revisits colonial and postcolonial violence through the story of the Oganda family.

Scholarship on African masculinities is now substantial (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021; Lindsay & Miescher,

2003; Morrell, 2001), but less attention has been paid to how male characters in novels by women are positioned and what masculinities those positions produce. Existing criticism of *Coming to Birth* has concentrated on women's empowerment, urbanisation and marriage (Bukenya, 1988), and criticism of *Dust* on memory, nationhood, trauma and state violence. In both bodies of work, masculinity remains marginal.

This article addresses that gap by asking three questions. First, what functions do male characters perform in the two novels? Second, which masculinities, in Connell's terms, do these functions produce? Third, how do the novels evaluate those masculinities: do they endorse, contest or transform them? A concern that runs through all three is how narrative technique, including focalisation, dialogue, symbolism and structure, constructs and evaluates these masculinities.

The article argues that *Coming to Birth* and *Dust* portray masculinity as a fluid and contested social construct, shaped by power relations, fatherhood, work, sexuality, violence and historical change, and that they thereby challenge monolithic representations of African manhood. Its contribution is twofold. It brings male characters in women-authored Kenyan fiction into masculinity studies, and it shows, through a comparative reading, how colonial and postcolonial conditions destabilise the provider-protector ideal in both texts.

The article proceeds as follows. It reviews relevant literature, sets out the theoretical framework and methodology, and then discusses the novels under seven headings: men and women, fatherhood, men and other men, work, sexuality, sport and violence. A comparative synthesis, a statement of limitations and a conclusion follow. Throughout, the discussion attends to the narrative techniques through which each novel constructs and evaluates masculinity, and it gives explicit reasons for each classification.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Masculinities as plural and historically produced

Masculinity studies now occupy a central place in gender studies, literary criticism, sociology and cultural studies. Early gender research concentrated on women and femininity. From the late twentieth century, scholars began to treat men as gendered subjects whose identities are formed socially and historically. Connell's (1995) theory of multiple masculinities was decisive in this shift: it rejected essentialist accounts of manhood and showed that masculinities vary with social relations, institutions and power structures.

Research on African masculinities has applied this insight to colonial and postcolonial conditions. Morrell (1998, 2001) argues that masculinities in Southern Africa were shaped by colonialism, labour migration, racial hierarchy and economic change, and are therefore neither stable nor homogeneous. Lindsay and Miescher (2003) similarly show African men fashioning their masculinity through negotiation among colonial domination, cultural tradition, economic pressure and modernity. More recent work cautions against reading African masculinities as uniformly violent, dominant or in crisis. Ammann and Staudacher (2021) call for attention to complexity, fluidity and intersectionality, and warn against treating men as simple beneficiaries of patriarchy. Mfecane (2016, 2018) adds that theories developed in the Global North should be supplemented by African conceptions of personhood, sociality and community. His study of Xhosa masculinity shows, for example, that traditional circumcision confers the status of *indoda*, a "real man", while uncircumcised boys and medically circumcised men are positioned as subordinate and stigmatised (Mfecane, 2016).

### Work, fatherhood, sport and violence

Work, family, sport and violence are the institutions most often used to explain how men acquire and defend masculine status. Morrell (1998) identifies breadwinning as a long-standing marker of masculine identity in many African societies, and notes that unemployment, economic crisis and labour migration strain it. Izugbara's (2015) study of poor men in Nairobi shows the same ideal operating in contemporary Kenya: the men acknowledged poverty as a constraint on their masculinity yet continued to pursue breadwinnerhood as the route to respectability. Langa (2020), writing on a Johannesburg township, shows young men living with poverty and often absent fathers negotiating hegemonic expectations with considerable ambivalence.

Research on fatherhood has moved from portraying African fathers as distant, dominating providers towards a more complex view. Richter and Morrell (2006) stress that fatherhood includes not only economic provision but also emotional care, guidance and involvement. On violence, Connell (1995) treats it as a resource through which authority and dominance can be claimed, and Hearn (1998) and Boonzaier (2008) read men's violence against women as an expression of patriarchal structures that legitimise male power. On sport, Messner (1992) presents it as a key institution in which boys learn competitiveness, discipline and physical toughness, and Connell (1995) treats it as a major site for the construction of hegemonic masculinity. These studies supply the analytic vocabulary used below.

### Masculinity in African women's fiction and in the two novels

In African literary criticism, work on gender has largely addressed female oppression, agency and resistance. Studies of writers such as Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Marjorie Macgoye have concentrated on women's experience under patriarchy. This work is valuable, but it has often treated male characters as instruments of patriarchy rather than as gendered subjects with complex identities.

Criticism of *Coming to Birth* has centred on women's empowerment, urbanisation, marriage and self-realisation. Bukenya (1988), for example, traces the heroine Paulina's development and adaptation to social change. Criticism of *Dust* has focused on memory, nationhood, historical violence, trauma, political exclusion and postcolonial identity, reading the novel as a challenge to official versions of Kenyan history. In both cases the construction of masculinity, and the functions men perform in the narratives, have received little sustained attention. The present study responds by tracing how masculinities are constructed, contested and transformed through men's relations with women, other men, work, sexuality, sport and violence.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in R. W. Connell's theory of masculinities, and in particular the concept of hegemonic masculinity developed in *Masculinities* (1995). For Connell, masculinity is not a biological category but a set of socially and historically produced practices that place men in different positions within gender relations. Rather than a single masculinity, several emerge in particular social, cultural, economic and political settings.

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally exalted ideal that legitimates men's power over women and over subordinated groups of men. In practice it involves authority, control, heterosexuality, physical strength and economic provision (Connell, 1995). Few men embody it fully, but it remains the dominant model against which other masculinities are measured. Connell distinguishes it from subordinated masculinities, which are culturally devalued; marginalised masculinities, which arise when race, ethnicity, class or colonial history bar men from dominant practices; and complicit masculinities, which benefit from what Connell calls the patriarchal dividend without fully embodying the hegemonic ideal. Connell also uses the term protest masculinity for exaggerated or oppositional performances of manhood by men who lack access to socially sanctioned power.

The concept has been refined since 1995. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018) emphasise that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type or a list of personal traits. It is a historically contingent and relational pattern of practice that legitimates gender inequality, and it operates differently at

local, regional and global levels. This refinement matters here because it allows male characters to be read as occupants of positions within particular gender orders rather than as personality types.

Three points govern how the categories are applied below. First, hegemony is relational and operates at several levels. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) distinguish local, regional and global patterns, so a man may be hegemonic within a household or a pastoral community and marginalised within the colonial or national order. Second, hegemony depends on consent as well as force, so a claim that a masculinity is hegemonic requires evidence not only of dominance but of its normalisation by others in the text. Third, protest masculinity is treated as a compensatory performance by men denied conventional power; where a character's opposition is reasoned and political rather than compensatory, as Odidi's is, the category fits only in part and is qualified accordingly.

The study also draws on African scholarship that qualifies Connell's framework. Morrell (1998, 2001) shows that African masculinities are shaped by colonial history, economic transformation, migration and changing gender relations, and are continually renegotiated. Mfecane (2016, 2018) cautions that concepts formed in the Global North may not capture African conceptions of manhood. Connell's categories are therefore used here as heuristic tools, and locally meaningful markers such as circumcision status are read in dialogue with them rather than forced into them.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative and interpretivist, and its method is textual analysis of literary works. Interpretivism suits the inquiry because literary texts are cultural productions that both reflect and shape social reality. The aim is not only to identify masculine traits but also to uncover the ideology behind the construction of masculinity in the chosen texts.

The primary texts are Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986) and Owuor's *Dust* (2014). They were selected purposively. Both are Kenyan novels by women writers, both contain rich male characterisation and detailed gender relations, and together they span colonial, postcolonial and contemporary Kenya. They also differ in setting and emphasis: *Coming to Birth* concentrates on household, marriage and urban work in Nairobi, whereas *Dust* gives greater weight to pastoral life, political violence and the history of the state. This contrast allows the comparison to test whether patterns hold across contexts.

Analysis proceeded in stages. First, close reading attended to narrative events, characterisation, dialogue, symbolism, narrative perspective and structure, and recurring motifs concerning men. Second, passages in which male characters act, speak or are spoken about were classified thematically under seven domains: men and women; fatherhood; men and other men; work; sexuality; sport; and violence. Third, the masculinity enacted in each passage was interpreted using Connell's categories (hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, marginalised and protest) and the African scholarship reviewed above. Fourth, the two novels were compared to identify convergences and differences. Secondary sources, including books, journal articles and dissertations on masculinity studies, gender theory, African literature and postcolonial studies, were used to contextualise and theorise the readings.

To keep classification disciplined, a character was assigned a Connell category only when three conditions were met: a specific episode or recurring pattern of conduct could be identified in the text; that conduct satisfied the criteria set out in the theoretical framework; and counter-evidence had been sought. Where a character met a criterion only in part, the classification was qualified rather than forced.

Interpretive claims are anchored in textual evidence, cited by author, year and, where specific passages are discussed, page number. The analysis remains open to evidence that complicates a theoretical reading: for instance, Martin's role as an engaged father qualifies a purely coercive account of his masculinity. The study acknowledges that literary interpretation is situated and that other readings are possible. As the study analyses published literary works and involves no human participants, formal ethical clearance was not required.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Men and women: authority, violence and double standards

Relations between men and women in the novels are framed primarily by power. In Connell's (1995) terms, masculinity is built within a gender order in which men's authority over women is institutionalised and normalised. The novels show how that authority is exercised, defended and sometimes undermined.

*Coming to Birth* offers the clearest example of a hegemonic masculinity resting on authority and violence. Soon after Paulina arrives in Nairobi, Martin punishes her violently for failing to find his home (Macgoye, 1986, pp. 22–23). His action presupposes the patriarchal notion that a husband may discipline his wife. Violence recurs when Paulina has difficulty conceiving and carrying a pregnancy: Martin treats her infertility as her personal failure and punishes her for it (Macgoye, 1986). He also reacts violently when he discovers

Paulina's unfaithfulness, which shows how closely masculine honour is bound to control over women's sexuality. As Boonzaier (2008) observes, patriarchal cultures tend to punish women's infidelity severely while treating men's as socially tolerable, and the double standard is plain in Martin's own infidelity. In these episodes masculinity is coercive and is sustained by economic as well as physical dominance.

The way Macgoye narrates these episodes is as important as the episodes themselves. The narration stays close to Paulina's consciousness, so that Martin's violence is registered through her bewilderment and her limited knowledge of the city and not through any justification he offers. The prose is plain and unemphatic, and the blows are reported without commentary. This restraint has a double effect. It refuses to sensationalise Martin, and it makes his conduct appear routine, an ordinary part of marriage and not a deviation from it. That normalisation is what Connell's concept requires, since hegemony rests on the acceptance of dominance and not on its force alone. Martin's classification must nevertheless be qualified. As an African wage-earner in a colonial city, he occupies a subordinate place in the wider economy, and his authority is secure only within the household. His domestic dominance can therefore be read as hegemonic at the local level and compensatory at the regional level, a way of securing at home the standing that the colonial order withholds elsewhere.

Polygamy offers a second lens. Historically it signalled wealth, virility and high social status, and it has been linked to agricultural productivity and the extension of a man's lineage (Silberschmidt, as cited in Cousins, 2001). That the community in *Coming to Birth* readily accepts that Rachel's housemaid may become her junior wife shows how normal polygamous masculinity remains in the novel's social world (Macgoye, 1986).

Martin's treatment of Paulina thus fits Connell's (1995) account of hegemonic masculinity as the pattern of practice that guarantees men's dominant position by legitimating patriarchy. His power rests not on physical force alone but also on his positions as husband and breadwinner.

## Fatherhood and masculinity

Fatherhood is one of the central sites in which masculinity is evaluated. The father is conventionally the head of the family, provider, disciplinarian, protector and bearer of cultural values, so that a man's masculinity is judged by how he performs these roles. Fatherhood thus involves not only biological reproduction but also social, economic, emotional and moral responsibility. Richter and Morrell (2006) note that it includes guidance, care, mentoring and involvement in children's lives as well as financial support. Connell (1995) identifies the family as one of the major institutions through which hegemonic masculinity is expressed and reproduced, and the father is often the main agent in the intergenerational transmission of masculine norms.

In *Coming to Birth*, Paulina's father, Okeyo, provides a relatively positive image of masculinity. She recalls him as "straight-shouldered, unbending, laying down the law" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 62), an image that associates fatherhood with strength, firmness and authority. Despite his strictness, he meets his paternal duty of provision through wage labour, even though that labour keeps him far from his family on a sisal plantation. His labour is typical of the conventionally assigned male role of economic provider.

Okeyo's case also reveals the tension in colonial and postcolonial fatherhood. His labour migration reduces his involvement in family affairs and creates room for his wife's leadership: she makes the decisions about cultivation, harvest, money and the household (Macgoye, 1986). This corresponds to Levine's (1966) observation that labour migration transformed family structures in many African societies by reducing paternal presence and increasing women's authority. Okeyo is thus a responsible but authoritarian provider whose authority is quietly eroded by the very work that sustains the family.

The portrait of Okeyo is also a matter of perspective. He is presented through Paulina's recollection, an image fixed by a daughter's memory, while the narrative shows his wife managing the household in his absence. Setting remembered authority beside actual female leadership is the novel's way of qualifying patriarchal authority without denouncing it: the authority survives as an image after it has declined as a practice.

Martin's fatherhood complicates his violent portrayal. He is shown as a disciplined man who provides for his family and takes an active part in bringing up the children (Macgoye, 1986). This dimension of his masculinity contradicts a simple stereotype of domination and violence, and it shows that one character can combine coercive and caring practices.

*Dust* presents a more complex picture through Nyipir Oganda. He cares about his family and about preserving cultural tradition, but his idea of fatherhood is shaped by patriarchy and stresses toughness, courage, aggressiveness and authority. When Odidi is thirteen, Nyipir gives him a gun as a sign of initiation into manhood (Owuor, 2014). For Nyipir, fatherhood means preparing a son for a harsh environment in which manhood is associated with strength, cattle-rustling, war and bravery.

The relationship between Nyipir and Odidi also shows that socialisation does not always succeed. Fathers are often the primary agents who pass expectations about masculinity to their sons, yet Odidi rejects his father's model after confronting political and social ideas at university (Owuor, 2014). By destroying the gun, he repudiates his father's masculine ideal. Masculinity is therefore not inherited automatically but negotiated through resistance, acceptance and reinterpretation.

The novels also expose a crisis of fatherhood where men fail in their responsibilities. In *Coming to Birth*, many children suffer neglect through paternal abandonment or irresponsibility. Che's father abandons his family emotionally and economically for other women and for drinking (Macgoye, 1986), and in doing so fails in the provider role that traditionally justifies a man's authority. Simon likewise rejects responsibility for the child Paulina is carrying and leaves her to face motherhood alone. The consequences, including street life, poverty and insecurity for the children, show that the novel criticises masculinities that prize sexual conquest and freedom without paternal responsibility. This criticism accords with Richter and Morrell's (2006) view that responsible fatherhood engages men with children socially, emotionally and economically, not merely biologically.

More broadly, the novels, and *Coming to Birth* in particular, suggest that paternal authority is increasingly challenged by economic hardship, labour migration, urbanisation and changing gender relations. Women emerge as household leaders, breadwinners and decision-makers. The assumption that paternal authority is natural therefore needs revision in favour of a masculinity built on partnership, care and mutual responsibility.

In sum, fatherhood in the two novels can both sustain and oppose patriarchal power. Okeyo embodies a responsible but authoritarian provider masculinity. Che's father and Simon embody irresponsible masculinities defined by abandonment and neglect. Nyipir combines genuine paternal responsibility with an attempt to impose a rigid model of manhood on his son.

**Men and other men: rivalry, initiation and policing**

Relations among men are frequently marked by rivalry, hierarchy and struggles over status. This is consistent with Connell's (1995) argument that hegemonic masculinity is defined not only against women but also against subordinated and marginalised men.

In *Dust*, Nyipir and Odidi embody competing masculinities. For Nyipir, manhood is bound up with guns, cattle-rustling and courage, and he gives Odidi a gun early as part of the boy's socialisation as a man (Owuor, 2014). Odidi abandons this model after exposure to revolutionary political thought through figures such as Thomas Sankara and Patrice Lumumba (Owuor, 2014). His break can be read through current views that masculinities are multiple and fluid: Ammann and Staudacher (2021) argue that African masculinities are continually adopted, challenged, transformed and recreated amid changing socio-economic conditions. Odidi's action is a challenge to his father's masculinity and the creation of an alternative grounded in political and ethical awareness.

The conflict culminates when Odidi dismantles the gun and throws its parts on the ground before his father (Owuor, 2014). Nyipir's violent reaction shows an attempt to preserve patriarchal power. The episode confirms that masculinities are contested rather than simply inherited.

Owuor stages this confrontation as a symbolic act as much as a family quarrel. The gun is the object through which Nyipir transmits his idea of manhood, and it carries more than one meaning: it is a tool of pastoral defence and raiding, an emblem of courage, and a reminder of the armed violence that surrounds the family in a region exposed to state force. Odidi's decision to take it apart and not to fire it is telling. Dismantling demonstrates that he has mastered the weapon his father gave him, yet it refuses the purpose for which it was given, so that he repudiates the inheritance with the very competence that the inheritance produced. Throwing the parts on the ground before his father turns the refusal into a public statement that cannot be ignored, and Nyipir's violent response, which answers the gesture with force and not with argument, suggests that the old model relies on coercion when it can no longer command assent. The title's governing image of dust can be read in the same light: it evokes a landscape in which the residues of violence settle on each generation, so that masculinity is inherited together with the unresolved history of the guns and killings that sustain it.

The novel also links masculinity with guns, livestock and cattle raiding. In the pastoral world it depicts, owning livestock and raiding for cattle signal bravery and manliness, and Nyipir's gun-running and cattle-rustling bring him power and social prestige (Owuor, 2014). This is offered as a reading of the text's pastoral setting rather than as an ethnographic generalisation.

Circumcision provides a further example of masculinity regulated by men. In *Dust*, Corporal Gakui insults Nyipir as a "Kihee", meaning an uncircumcised man, in an attempt to deny him masculine status (Owuor, 2014). Mfecane (2016) documents a comparable dynamic among Xhosa men, where traditionally circumcised men hold the most honoured status and others are positioned as subordinate and stigmatised. Gakui's insult shows that masculinity is a cultural status policed by other men. It also shows that Nyipir, a powerful figure in his own world, can be subordinated within a hierarchy he does not control.

Gakui's insult works as a speech act. The word does not describe Nyipir; it assigns him a position, and it does so from institutional authority, since Gakui speaks as an officer of the state. The scene thereby qualifies the classification of Nyipir. He is hegemonic at the local level, where gun-running, cattle raiding and courage bring him prestige, but Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) insist that hegemony operates differently at local and wider levels, and at the level of the state his standing can be cancelled by a single insult backed by armed power. Nyipir is thus a locally hegemonic man who is subordinated within a larger hierarchy, a combination that confirms the relational character of the framework.

**Men and work: migration, emasculation and insecurity**

Work is a critical component of male identity formation. Morrell (1998) argues that it remains an important marker of masculinity because it enables men to earn money and secure respectability. Provision of earnings is part of the breadwinner principle that defines hegemonic masculinity, and work confers recognition and social standing.

*Coming to Birth* treats male migration to the city as a search for work. Martin, like other workers, migrates to Nairobi to earn money (Macgoye, 1986), and Paulina's father spends his working life on a sisal plantation far

from home. Labour migration has unintended consequences for family relations. When men are absent, responsibility and decision-making shift to women: Paulina's mother becomes head of the household and takes the decisions on farming and the family's well-being (Macgoye, 1986). Levine (1966) likewise argues that labour migration in Africa increased women's responsibilities and weakened men's authority.

Colonial emasculation is a second theme. In *Dust*, Karanka, Noor Mohamed, Linus and Lazaro work as domestic servants for white settlers (Owuor, 2014). Colonial discourse infantilised African men by calling them "boys", a practice that, as Morrell (1998) argues, reflects racial hierarchy and denies African men full masculine status. These men illustrate Connell's marginalised masculinity: they are excluded from dominant masculine practices by race and colonial history rather than by any personal deficiency. The novel's decision to name these men, where colonial usage reduced them to a single label, works as a small corrective to the discourse that denied them manhood.

Where work cannot provide for a family, or is unavailable, masculine identity is placed under strain, and the resulting anxiety often generates conflict in families and society. Contemporary research confirms the pattern. Izugbara (2015) shows Nairobi's poor men holding to breadwinnerhood as the core of proper manhood despite

its frequent unattainability, and Langa (2020) shows how poverty and absent fathers complicate young South African men's negotiation of hegemonic ideals. The novels anticipate these findings: work validates masculinity, and its loss or distortion unsettles it.

**Masculinity and sexual exploitation**

Sexuality is another critical sphere in which masculinity is produced. Certain male characters claim masculinity by sexually exploiting young women. Martin exemplifies an exploitative masculinity: he pursues a sexual relationship with Fauzia, a young woman financially dependent on him, without ever committing to her. His conduct is made possible by what Connell (1995) calls the patriarchal dividend, the advantages men gain from women's structural subordination.

The novel also exposes a paradox: men's sexual freedom is set against the tight regulation of women's sexuality. Martin enjoys affairs outside marriage, yet he distrusts Paulina and resorts to threats of violence should she prove unfaithful. The double standard links sexuality directly to the control and violence discussed above, and it shows that Martin's masculinity depends on asymmetrical power rather than on mutual commitment.

**Men and sport: prowess, politics and the rejection of the father**

Sport is a crucial context for the creation of masculinity. Connell (1995) treats it as an institution that plays a central part in forming dominant models of manhood, and Messner (1992) shows that boys acquire masculine identities through competitive sport. Sport emphasises endurance, toughness, discipline and success.

In *Dust*, Odidi is a successful rugby player whose physical prowess wins him recognition and acceptance. His success makes him a local hero and brings prestige to his school (Owuor, 2014). Physically strong and competitive, he fits the hegemonic model of masculinity. The novel does not leave him there, however. Odidi later rejects his father's values and is drawn into violent organisations, so the standing that sport conferred does not secure a stable masculine position. This trajectory suggests that sport can open a path to hegemonic status without guaranteeing it, particularly in a society where wider political and economic opportunities are constrained.

Rugby is not a neutral setting for this success. It is a school sport with colonial and missionary associations in Kenya, and the prestige it brings Odidi is conferred by an institution, the school, that belongs to the modern order and not to his father's pastoral one. His sporting body is therefore validated by a second, competing source of hegemonic authority. Nyipir's gift of a gun at thirteen and the school's celebration of its rugby hero are parallel rites that certify the same qualities of strength, courage, discipline and readiness to take risks, but

they do so in different registers and for different ends. Read through Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), this shows that hegemonic masculinity is historically specific: the bodily capacities that Nyipir's world measures in cattle raids and armed defence are measured in Odidi's world on the playing field and in the classroom.

The link between this success and Odidi's later rejection of his father's values lies in what sport does and does not teach. Sport socialises him in discipline, endurance, loyalty to a team and acceptance of physical danger, dispositions that do not belong to any one cause and can be redirected. His exposure at university to revolutionary figures such as Thomas Sankara and Patrice Lumumba supplies the cause. Sport has taught him to direct his strength at an opponent within rules that an institution guarantees; political thought teaches him that the recognition he earned depends on an order that, as the novel's wider history of state violence shows, treats families like his as expendable. The prestige of the playing field thus becomes visible as a partial inclusion, and it cannot hold him to his father's model of manhood or to the institutions that applaud him. What he rejects is therefore not physical prowess, which he keeps, but the purposes to which his father puts it. The gun he dismantles and the sporting body he retains are two halves of one inheritance, and Odidi changes the ends to which both are put.

This trajectory shows why Odidi's later masculinity needs careful classification. Connell's protest masculinity usually describes compensatory, exaggerated performances by men denied access to conventional power.

Odidi had that access: he was celebrated, educated and mobile. His opposition is therefore chosen and reasoned, not merely compensatory, and it is better described as a politicised protest masculinity that fits Connell's category only in part. It also bears out a connection between physical prowess, political consciousness and alternative masculinity. Prowess gives him status, consciousness reveals the limits of that status, and the alternative he fashions draws on both. The novel does not present the outcome as secure. Odidi's death at the hands of the police returns his athletic body, once the object of communal pride, to the state violence from which neither sporting fame nor political conviction protects it. The alternative masculinity he represents is thus offered as a moral direction and not as a stable or survivable position.

**Men and violence**

Violence is a persistent theme in both texts. The World Health Organization (2002) defines it as the intentional use of physical force or power that results in injury, death, psychological harm or deprivation. In interpersonal relations, violence serves to establish dominance and settle conflicts. Martin physically abuses Paulina in *Coming to Birth*, while Nyipir in *Dust* kills his cruel uncle and Hugh Bolton for very different reasons (Macgoye, 1986; Owuor, 2014). In both novels violence appears as a means by which some men seek dominance. Martin can be read as embodying hegemonic masculinity, with dominance secured by both economic and physical power (Connell, 1995).

Structural violence is a second theme. *Dust* presents state-sponsored violence through military action, political persecution and ethnic discrimination, and it refers to the Wagalla Massacre (Owuor, 2014). Structural violence of this kind contributes to what Connell describes as marginalised and protest masculinities. Faced with economic hardship and political persecution, men look for other ways to gain power and control, and criminal activity and armed struggle are among them.

Odidi's participation in violent organisations can be understood as protest masculinity. It is also an act of resistance to his father's values, and it suggests the emergence of an alternative masculinity, albeit one that ends in his death at the hands of the police in the violence of 2007 (Owuor, 2014). The outcome indicates that protest masculinity does not escape the logic of violence it opposes. As the discussion of sport showed, the label fits only in part, because his opposition is reasoned and political and follows a period of recognised success, not exclusion from it.

Although violence is commonly linked with dominance and hegemonic masculinity, Macgoye and Owuor reveal its limits and costs. Violence damages relationships, undermines family stability and oppresses people. The connection between masculinity and violence reflects social norms that expect men to be strong and

fearless. The novels show, however, that violence is not inherent in men but a socially conditioned behaviour produced by social, political and personal factors. The alternative masculinities they suggest are therefore those founded on responsibility, dialogue and social justice.

**Comparative synthesis**

Table 1 summarises the main male characters discussed, the functions they perform and the masculinities that result. Read together, the two novels reveal four patterns.

**Table 1**

*Male Characters, Functions and Masculinities in* Coming to Birth *and* Dust

| Character | Main function(s) | Masculinity (Connell's terms) | Textual basis |
|---|---|---|---|
| Martin (*Coming to Birth*) | Husband, breadwinner and father; migrant worker in Nairobi; abuser of his wife; sexual exploiter | Hegemonic at the household level (authority, provision, violence), compensatory in relation to the colonial order, with a caring-father dimension | Violence towards Paulina; double standard; relationship with Fauzia; engagement with children |
| Okeyo (*Coming to Birth*) | Wage-labour migrant on a sisal plantation; disciplinarian | Patriarchal provider masculinity, eroded by migration | Paulina's recollection of his authority; his absence; his wife's leadership |
| Che's father and Simon (*Coming to Birth*) | Absent or irresponsible fathers | Failed provider masculinity; sexual freedom without responsibility | Abandonment, drinking and rejection of paternity; children left in poverty |
| Nyipir Oganda (*Dust*) | Father; gun-runner and cattle-raider; killer of his enemies | Locally hegemonic warrior-provider masculinity, subordinated by others' insult | Gift of a gun to Odidi; use of violence; labelled "Kihee" |
| Odidi Oganda (*Dust*) | Son; rugby player; participant in violent organisations | Locally hegemonic through sport, then politicised protest (partial fit) | Rugby success and the school's response; the dismantled gun; Sankara and Lumumba; involvement in violent groups; death at the hands of the police |
| Karanka, Noor Mohamed, Linus and Lazaro (*Dust*) | Domestic servants of white settlers | Marginalised (colonial emasculation) | Called "boys" in colonial discourse |
| Corporal Gakui (*Dust*) | Man in authority who polices manhood | Enforcer of a circumcision-based hierarchy | Insult of Nyipir as "Kihee" |

*Note.* Classification is the author's interpretation, based on Connell (1995) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005); qualified classifications are explained in the text.

First, hegemonic masculinity in both novels rests on authority, provision and control, but it is unstable. Martin's dominance depends on his roles as husband and breadwinner, and Nyipir's depends on a pastoral, armed order that his son repudiates and that other men can contest. Second, colonial and economic structures generate marginalised masculinities: migrant labour weakens Okeyo's authority, and settler households reduce African men to "boys". Third, masculinity is transmitted across generations and also broken between them, as the Nyipir-Odidi conflict shows. Fourth, the women authors adopt a critical but not caricatured stance. They

expose the costs of coercive and irresponsible masculinity while granting their male characters care, responsibility and, sometimes, tragedy.

The novels also differ. In the episodes analysed here, *Coming to Birth* locates masculinity chiefly in the household and the urban economy, where authority over women and children is the main stake. *Dust* locates it more in relations among men, in initiation, rivalry and political violence, where the contest is over status within a hierarchy and over the legitimacy of the state itself. Together they show that African masculinities are shaped as much by structural conditions as by personal choice.

The novels' historical settings explain much of this difference. *Coming to Birth* follows Paulina from the late colonial period into early independence, and its men are caught in a transition from a rural patriarchal order to a wage economy in colonial and then independent Nairobi. Masculinity is tested by that transition: men who migrate for work gain income and lose presence, and men who secure urban employment must defend at home an authority that the colonial economy does not grant them elsewhere. *Dust* spans a longer and more violent history, from settler rule through the Wagalla Massacre to the post-election violence of 2007–08. Here masculinity is tested by accumulation, as men inherit guns, wounds and silences from earlier violence, and the state itself becomes an agent that grants and withdraws manhood, as Gakui's insult and Odidi's death show.

Narrative method reinforces these contrasts. Macgoye's narration is largely chronological, plain and close to Paulina's perception, so the men are seen mostly from outside, through their effects on women and children. Their interiority is inferred and not displayed, and the critique of male authority proceeds by understatement and juxtaposition, as when Okeyo's remembered firmness is set beside his wife's actual management of the household. Owuor's narration is fragmentary, non-linear and lyrical, moves between times and consciousnesses, and gives men's memories and silences a place in the telling. Masculinity in *Dust* is accordingly presented as a haunting as much as a practice, something carried in the body and in the landscape and passed between generations. The first method makes masculinity legible as social conduct; the second makes it legible as history and trauma. Neither author offers a caricature, but Macgoye's critique is chiefly domestic and economic and Owuor's is chiefly historical and political.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study analyses two novels by Kenyan women writers, so it does not claim to represent African masculinities as a whole. Masculinity varies by region, culture, period and even genre. The analysis is also purely textual and interpretive: it draws on no empirical evidence of readers' responses or men's lived experience, and it applies a framework developed largely in the Global North, albeit with the African qualifications noted above. Finally, the male characters are mediated by women authors' perspectives, which is part of the study's interest but also limits what the findings can say about how men themselves narrate masculinity. Future research could extend the comparison to novels by male authors, to fiction in other Kenyan languages and to the wider African literary corpus. The classifications offered are also interpretive and rest on selected episodes, so they do not exhaust the many male characters in either novel.

## CONCLUSION

This article set out to establish what functions male characters perform in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and Owuor's *Dust*, which masculinities result, and how the novels evaluate them. Using Connell's theory of masculinities, it has shown that masculinity in both texts is socially constructed in response to cultural practice, economic conditions, family life and politics, and is not monolithic.

Hegemonic masculinity in the novels is defined by power, authority, control, physical strength and the capacity to provide, and Martin and Nyipir are its most prominent bearers. Their dominance is nevertheless challenged by social change, personal failure and resistance from those around them. Alongside it appear marginalised, subordinated and protest masculinities arising from colonialism, economic hardship, absent fatherhood and politically induced violence. Masculinity is therefore best understood not as a fixed category but as a

constantly negotiated performance. Odidi's trajectory from rugby star to political dissident shows how physical prowess and political consciousness can combine in an alternative, though precarious, masculinity.

The authors challenge conventional notions of male power by exposing both its benefits and its costs. Some men appear as caring fathers, providers and protectors; others are neglectful, exploitative, abusive and emotionally detached. The novels thus criticise patriarchy while recognising the social complexity surrounding masculinity, and they point towards models of manhood based on responsibility, dialogue and social justice. Narrative form is central to that judgement: Macgoye's plain narration, focalised chiefly through Paulina, exposes domestic authority through understatement, while Owuor's fragmented, lyrical narration exposes the inherited and political weight of manhood.

By reading women-authored fiction for its male characters, the study contributes to contemporary debates on gender in African literature and shows that masculinity in these novels is continually recreated in accordance with history, society and gender relations.

## DECLARATIONS

**Ethical approval.** This study is a textual analysis of published literary works. It involved no human participants or animals, and ethical approval was therefore not required.

**Conflict of interest**. The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Data availability**. The primary data are the published novels cited in the reference list. The analytical notes supporting the study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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