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The Privilege of Crisis

Narratives of Masculinities in Colonial
and Postcolonial Literature, Photography and Film

campus

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Introduction:
Contained and Exposed Crises

> "'Masculinity' is not a coherent object about which
> a generalizing science can be produced." (Connell 1995, 67)

The bemoaning of an alleged crisis of masculinity seems to be a cyclically recurring event, and given the still widely found adherence to the hegemony of the 'right kind of masculinity', must remain quizzical to all those who have been involved in counter-hegemonic practices for years. Currently, men in most Western societies are purportedly endangered as under-achievers in school, threatened by violence and/or unemployment and generally seen as 'less fit' to cope with the ever-increasing demands of capitalist societies and the changes this entails. While these are, in fact, issues that need to be debated more seriously, it is at least equally important to stress, as feminists such as Lynne Segal have done continually, that "it is men themselves, and their attachment to traditional ideas of 'manhood', which are very much part of the problem" (Segal 1997, xix). The realm of cultural texts has always been one of the prime arenas in which such "traditional ideas of 'manhood'" have been produced and negotiated. By focusing on the narrative patterns of colonial and postcolonial stories of male crises in this book, I want to highlight the discursive construction of crises rather than confirm that masculinity is, in fact, in crisis.

The recurrence of the discourse of masculinity in crisis in colonial and postcolonial narratives is no coincidence, and I deem it necessary to relate this discourse more strongly to questions of the construction of empire and nationality. The photograph on the cover links these colonial and postcolonial narratives. This picture by South African photographer Guy Tillim of the demolished statue of Henry Morton Stanley, which overlooked Kinshasa in colonial times, was shown at the 2004 exhibition *Leopold and Mobutu*. It points to fissures in the construction of masculinity. Stanley's statue is lying on a rusty boat, face to the ground and the lower parts of the legs shattered. A young Congolese is depicted casually urinating at the ruined monument of one of the most famous explorers of Africa and the embodiment of the fantasies of successful colonial masculinity.

Impressively, this picture visually captures a connection between old colonial myths of masculinity and the postcolonial present. The iconic image of the White[1] man as the benevolent 'father' overlooking 'his' land is no longer valid. Nonetheless, this fall of White masculinity continues to have an effect on how gender in general and masculinity in particular can be conceptualised. As the opening quote by Raewyn Connell emphasises, this book does not attempt to provide a meta-theory of masculinity or the concept of crisis. Rather, by providing readings of a selection of sources, it seeks to critically engage with English[2] narratives of male crises that were so prominent at the end of the nineteenth and again at the end of the twentieth century.

For the field of cultural production, the notion of 'crisis' is widely considered to be a driving force of works of fiction as well as an engine for aesthetic innovation. Joseph Conrad is celebrated as one of the many innovators of English literature. In his *Heart of Darkness*, the search for the mysterious Mr Kurtz sparks off an existential crisis for Marlow, the narrator of the tale. Conrad, who has been praised for his ability to delve into the abyss of the psyche of colonialism, conceived an intense and complicated journey that chronicles, in the words of the narrator, "[t]he dreams of

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1 To underscore an understanding of both categories, 'Black' and 'White', as socially constructed rather than based on a conception of races as biological entities, both adjectives are capitalised in this book. However, as Jana Husmann-Kastein explains, it remains important to distinguish that Black, contrary to White, has been employed as a political marker of emancipative self-designation. In contrast, Whiteness is connected to socio-cultural dominance. (cf. Husmann-Kastein 2006, 44) Furthermore, to highlight the social construction of 'race' does not in any way negate or question the material effects of racism.

2 The term 'English' here refers primarily to the language of the texts and in this sense does not denote solely British literature but literatures in English. Nevertheless, the main focus remains on the British cultural context. I am very well aware that including authors, such as Conrad and Coetzee, in a text that focuses mostly on discourses of masculinity in Britain, might not do them justice as authors who were and are involved in a number of national contexts, and in the case of Coetzee it is surely more appropriate to speak of a South African writer or 'world writer'. Accordingly, his situatedness in these contexts will be thematised in the specific readings. In contrast, when the term 'Englishness' is employed in this book, it refers to an exclusive and nationalist assumption of a homogenous cultural identity. The discussion of Englishness will be important in the context of postcolonial writing that seeks to disrupt this clear-cut nationalist understanding of cultural identity. Consequently, the term 'Britishness', as opposed to Englishness, is employed as a more inclusive alternative that makes it possible to speak of Asian Britishness or Afro-Caribbean Britishness (cf. Kumar 2001; Wachinger 2003, 21–35) and will be expounded upon in the chapters on Kureishi and Smith.

men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (HD 105). Despite Conrad's apprehensions concerning the rightfulness of the colonial endeavour, the *novella* also encompasses elements that are akin to a nostalgic yearning for male adventure and an unspoiled ideal of chivalrous masculinity which links this text to earlier colonial fiction.

Almost exactly one hundred years after Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a very different story of White masculinity in post-apartheid South Africa caused exuberant admiration as well as heated debates. J.M. Coetzee's award-winning *Disgrace* features the devastating story of the White male anti-hero David Lurie, a twice divorced academic who first loses his job after allegations of sexual harassment and who is then later confronted with the rape of his own daughter, Lucy, by Black farm workers. Coetzee has been applauded for his brutal honesty and his willingness to create this ambivalent character, Lurie, who provides the novel's point of view.

Despite the important differences in time of production and setting, there is a connection between these two texts. Their value as outstanding pieces of English fiction is often linked directly to the stories' capacity to reflect the plight of the whole of humanity through the failure of a single individual. Time and again, feminists, such as the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, have emphasised that the construction of men as 'universal' and women as 'particular' is at the heart of much of Western philosophy and a foundation of male hegemony.[3] It is this very universalisation of the narratives of failing White masculinity in the context of post/colonialism[4] that I want to concern myself with. But it is not only these failing masculinities that are of interest here, as I will also analyse a range of different crisis narratives – narratives that focus on a celebratory overcoming of crisis or

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3 Grosz explains that this universalisation is based on associating women with the 'body' and men with the 'mind' – a dichotomy that has become highly suspect: "If the mind is necessarily linked to, perhaps even part of, the body and if bodies themselves are always sexually (and racially) distinct, incapable of being incorporated into a singular universal model, then the very forms that subjectivity takes are not generalizable. Bodies are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities." (Grosz 1994, 19)

4 The term 'postcolonial' is by no means unproblematic as McClintock (1995), Shohat (1996) and others have explained. It implies a temporal 'after' colonialism as well as an epistemological 'beyond' colonialism. While I make use of the term 'postcolonial', I agree with the cautionary attitude that critics who employ the term 'neo-colonial' advocate as a means to emphasise that colonial power relations are still in effect and that globalisation continuously produces new structures of dependence.

the ultimate collapse into despair, both from a hegemonic and marginalised perspective in English colonial and postcolonial fiction.

To lament the loss of male privilege in Britain was especially rampant at the turn of the nineteenth century and again at the end of the twentieth century. In the colonial context, the crisis of masculinity is linked to the still largely intact notion of universality, albeit a conception that begins to wane in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These colonial narratives of masculinity are part of a contained conception of crisis and try to reinforce a model of phantasmatic White male heroism or, in Conrad's case, failure, and situate masculinity firmly at the centre. In the selected sources for this period, I will analyse different figurations of masculinity. *Gentlemen* and *hunters* populate Henry Rider Haggard's fiction and photographs in the newly-successful illustrated journals. These figurations of 'heroic masculinity' in general, seem to function as a nostalgic response to the growing crisis tendencies of male hegemony. The *hybrid 'Sahib'* is a figuration that is specific for Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, which stresses ambivalence in the encounter of coloniser and colonised. Finally, Joseph Conrad's tales often feature *failures*, men who, as has been briefly mentioned, threaten to despair over the atrocities of the colonial situation. However, in the texts' emphasis on the hegemonic perspective, they still adhere to what I call re-privileging[5] tendencies and the discursive privilege of masculinity in crisis.

Non-White masculinities in these works are reduced in terms of their role in the narratives. They frequently appear merely as a background effect, a foil for hegemonic masculinities. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison speaks of "Africanism" as a vehicle by which America was able to imagine itself as 'superior' and 'White' at the expense of Black background characters: "black or coloured people and symbolic figurations of blackness are markers of the benevolent and the wicked; the spiritual […] and the voluptuous; of 'sinful' but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint." (Morrison 1993, ix) Following Morrison's reasoning, this background effect is also constitutive of European colonial literature.[6] African characters in colonial fiction often are "mere animal, if

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5 Edgar Forster (1998) employs the term "re-sovereignisation" (*Resouveränisierung*) to connote a similar idea in a different context.

6 Morrison herself writes: "There also exists, of course, a European Africanism with a counterpart in colonial literature." (Morrison 1993, 38)

heroic" (Katz 1987, 141).[7] While the emphasis is on the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the colonial narratives, this also entails an analysis of non-White characters who are either constructed as 'noble savages' or 'animal-like' brutes, as in Haggard's adventure stories, or stand for symbolic Blackness, as will be explained with reference to Conrad's texts.

These figurations lend themselves to different narrative patterns. In colonial texts, in general, Blackness is often associated with the tropes of *superstition*, *polygamy* or *cannibalism*. Conversely, the figurations of hegemonic masculinity are connected to themes and motives such as the *quest into the unknown*, the *establishment of order*, or the *loss of control*, and as a consequence, the plots are shaped by a repeated reference to *loneliness* (as part of the quest), *struggle* (in the effort to establish order) and *hygiene* (as a means to maintain control). Given the different narratives' embeddedness in various genre traditions, some texts, such as Haggard's formulaic writing, are more prone to a repetitive use of these patterns while other writers, such as Kipling and Conrad, construct more ambivalent approaches to these patterns, as will become evident in the subsequent analyses.

In postcolonial narratives, other figurations of masculinity, which will be called *hybrid men*, *fanatics* and *anti-heroes*, render the clear distinction between hegemonic and marginalised masculinities at times more complicated. While Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith portray a new generation of so-called *hybrid men*, marginalised men who are now situated in the metropolitan centre, and who struggle to find their place in multicultural Britain, British films also feature spectacular hybrid characters, often in relation to both their ethnic background and their gender and/or sexual identity, as in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game*. In addition, *The Black Album* and *White Teeth* depict men who could be described as *fanatics*, young Muslim men who, given their complicated position in racial, religious and gendered relations, resort to violence. The third figuration, *anti-heroes*, describes White men who have to come to terms with changed relations in postcolonial societies, as is the case in Coetzee's texts. The characters Fergus, in *The Crying Game* and to a certain extent – although much more optimistic in his outline – Archie Jones, in *White Teeth*, could be labelled anti-heroes as well. As can be seen in postcolonial narratives, the figurations cannot be

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7 Frantz Fanon's writing was a crucial first step to examine the psychological effects of the continuous racist appellation, and he speaks of an "epidermalization of this [ascribed, E.H.Y.] inferiority" (Fanon 1967, 11).

clearly allocated to individual sources as in the colonial texts and the same holds true for the related narrative patterns.

In the selected postcolonial works, the narrative patterns of '*in-between-ness*' and *hybridity* as well as *guilt* relating to the after-effects of colonialism feature prominently. Generational conflicts and questions of assimilation and resistance play a crucial role in the novels of Kureishi and Smith, while Coetzee tries to come to terms with or negotiate White male hegemony. Additionally, films, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Crying Game,* and their makers concern themselves with similar themes, linking these issues with questions of visual representation. In a postcolonial setting, the narratives address the crises of masculinities in a much more self-reflexive way. White masculinity can no longer be regarded as the unchallenged normative reference point in fiction. Nonetheless, the crises of hegemonic men still figure prominently in narratives of this time. Regarding these postcolonial texts, one could speak of exposed and more plural crises – as opposed to the contained colonial crises – given the more radical questioning as to what is 'universal' in literature.

I propose to analyse these figurations and tropes as part of a privileged narrative discourse that (re)produces the conception of masculinity in crisis. Rather than offering a systematic overview that seeks to provide an exhaustive list of 'figurations' and 'patterns', the reference to figurations and patterns functions as a hermeneutic tool that allows me to examine the repeated, yet heterogeneous narrative re-privileging of masculinity in crisis. The analysis of these various narrative strategies, which are entangled in a discursive web that privileges crisis as a distinctly masculine narrative, will be the focus of this book. As has been suggested with reference to the almost analogous reception of *Heart of Darkness* and *Disgrace*, both periods produce re-privileging tendencies which are typical of the discourse of masculinity in crisis.

Crisis as a Privilege

Within recent years, the field of masculinity studies[8] has broadened and one encounters the phrase 'crisis of masculinity' constantly. This discourse

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8 For a good overview, cf. Berger, Wallice and Watson (ed.) (1996); Kimmel, Hearn and Connell (ed.) (2005) and with a strong focus on the German context, Erhart (2005).