Rethinking masculinity: Changing men and the decline of patriarchy in Tim Winton's short stories

RETHINKING MASCULINITY: CHANGING MEN AND THE DECLINE OF PATRIARCHY IN TIM WINTON'S SHORT STORIES

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Tim Winton is considered one of Australia's finest contemporary writers. His prolific work as novelist and short story writer has won him enormous popular and critical acclaim especially in his own country but also in other parts of the world, like the United Kingdom, where his novels *The Riders* (1994) and *Dirt Music* (2001) were short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. He wrote his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982), at age 20 and was awarded the Vogel for it. Some of his novels have been made into feature films and adapted for the theatre. *Dirt Music* (2001), his latest novel, won Winton his third Miles Franklin Award.

The subject of masculinity is a recurrent topic in Winton's fictional work as it informs most of his novels and many of his short stories. "Much of his early work," notes Lekkie Hopkins (46), "is concerned with an exploration of what it is to be a son, a father, a husband, a male friend." Critics have often attributed Winton's interest in offering unorthodox versions of masculinity to his unconventional upbringing and the atypical structure of his family. Winton describes his father, who worked as a policeman, in the following way: "my father was a gentle man who did the ironing, the washing, and was, I guess, not very manly by Australian standards" (Watchel 68). Also, in the documentary *The Edge of the World*, he recalls his father's sensitivity: "I still remember seeing my father weep for the first time […] I was kind of gratified because I realised he was human and I loved him more for it." Similarly, women in his family do not embody conventional role models. Winton reckons the men of his family as being weak and sensitive, while women were ambitious and the driving force:

> it was a matriarchal family. All the women were strong and all the men were feckless at best […] I didn't know about the whole patriarchal model until I went to university. I didn't understand about all that stuff, because in my family you got a flogging from the women, and the weak link would always be the man. (Watchel70)

This way Winton's work reflects his unconventional personal experience. While traditional literary texts often uphold traditional concepts of gender roles, new attitudes towards life, such as Winton's, demand new modes of writing, new narratives redefining gender configurations. Broadly speaking, the main concern of Winton's short stories is to explore social changes in relation to gender roles inscribing new models of masculinity and femininity that deflate traditional gender constructions and foster women's equality towards men. These new representations of masculine and feminine identity have to be examined within the larger context of the profound transformations of gender issues during the last decades of the twentieth century, and specially within the current questioning of Australian identity traits.

Nowadays masculinity is becoming a subject of discussion in very different fields such as sociology, anthropology, literature and film. Influenced by the interrogation of gender questions on the part of feminist critics, the starting point for the ongoing preoccupation with masculinity was the questioning of the universal and unproblematic nature of male identity. The fact that masculinity has become a visible and academic object of study "attests, if nothing else," as Abigail Solomon-Godeau observes, "to a destabilization of the notion of masculinity such that it forfeits its previous transparency, its taken-for-grantedness, its normalcy" (70). Over the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars in the fields of feminist and gender studies have strived to challenge dominant gender roles and debunk traditional norms of masculinity inherent in the ideological structure of patriarchy.

Traditional hegemonic constructions of masculinity have more often than not implied repression, alienation and denial of women and of other forms of being a male. As the Australian sociologist Robert Connell puts it in *Gender and Power* (1987), the hegemonic construction of masculinity is "constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (183). This configuration of the masculine gender conveys a definition of masculinity based on a series of oppositions which favour male over female, activity over passivity, reason over emotion, the public over the private. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir claims that woman in the patriarchal system is constituted as 'other' to the male subject: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (16). This version of masculinity has been problematized and left open to redefinition through discourse. It was this sense of existential crisis that masculinity faces that prompted the inter-

rogation of the nature of masculine identity. As Kobena Mercer (43) observes, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and certainty." Having lost the privilege of invisibility and universality, scholars contend that masculinity should be regarded not as a monolithic entity but as a complex term, which depends on different social and cultural factors such as race, sexuality, age or class. "Since the role norms are social facts," Connell (23) states, "they can be changed by social processes. This will happen whenever the agencies of socialization—family, school, mass media, etc.—transmit new expectations." This argument stresses that gender is articulated through a variety of institutions, apparatuses, discourses and subject positions, while it also questions the biological and 'natural' imperatives as the sole constitutive basis of gender identity construction.

Following this line of thought sociologists suggest replacing the singular constitutive quality of masculinity by the plural, bringing to the fore the existence of multiple masculinities in which rigid boundaries of gender representation are blurred. "[T]he term 'masculinities' is," as David Morgan argues, "a theoretical and political strategy designed to deconstruct conventional stereotypes which may get in the way of understanding the workings of patriarchy" (Horrocks 5). Nowadays, society, cultural practices and the mass media provide us with very different images of feminized masculinities and masculinised femininities so far subordinated to the cultural norm. On her study of the appearance of new unconventional mass-cultural images representing masculinity, Solomon-Godeau explains that "it seems equally clear that these new, 'feminized' iconographies of masculinity in the mass media may presage or reflect tidal shifts in the articulation and, by implication, the lived subjectivity of contemporary men" (70). It is not surprising then that there has been a gradually increasing awareness of gender changes among men and some of them seem to adopt new individual masculine attitudes. As Connell observes: "we should not be surprised to find among the men of the rich countries a widespread awareness of change in gender arrangements" (201).

Critics argue that some men feel at ease with the erosion of traditional constructions of male identity, since they seem to suffer from the obligations placed on them by patriarchy. Horrocks claims "patriarchal masculinity cripples men," since traditional manhood "requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half-human" (25). On the one hand, this new consciousness brought

about several kinds of movements such as gay liberation and the emergence of new discourses on masculinity politics that seek greater balance towards gender equity. On the other hand, some other men feel frustrated and hope for a return to the old gender division system by joining various men's movements such as the mythopoetic or 'masculinity therapy,' led by poet Robert Bly, which addresses the anxiety and uncertainty men suffer about gender relations.

The crisis of masculinity and the reconfiguration of gender roles previously discussed are even more disturbing in a culture such as the Australian, which has built its national identity upon several popular and cultural myths which extol the concept of virility:

> the image of the ideal or typical Australian associated with the new nationalism of the 1890s was a decidedly masculine one, whether conceived as a pioneer, gold-miner, or bushman. The figure of the soldier or digger was added to this list by the coming of World War I, and particularly events at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, subsequently enshrined in the Australian calendar as Anzac Day. (Webby 9)

These national myths of the pioneer, the larrikin, the bushranger, and the soldier embodied and promoted an hegemonic version of masculinity. In her book *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in an Australian Cultural Tradition* (1988), Kay Schaffer points out that "the dominant norms of Australian culture are masculine, White, Anglo-Irish and heterosexual" (12). Russel Ward's study on the typical national character strikingly illustrates the way in which discourses on national identity favour specific concepts of masculinity. In *The Australian Legend*, Russel Ward acknowledges certain features ascribed to the myth of the typical Australian. According to him, this character is

> a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing to "have a go" at anything […]. He is a "hard case," sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally […] above all [he] will stick to his mates through thick and thin […]. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. (Schaffer 19)

Popular notions of Australian identity and the ideal national character are predicated upon the exclusion of women and the supremacy of men, exuding, thus, a masculinist bias. Despite the fact that the myth still has "wide and valued cultural currency" (Schaffer 20), it has notably been affected not only by new social and gender discourses but by the ongoing deconstruction of Australian national identity. Current debates on national identity have led Australia to seek and reinvent a more inclusive, plural and multicultural concept of the nation. Therefore, it must be regarded that the challenge to traditional

assumptions on gender and the consequent crisis of masculinity it implies has deeply affected the Australian culture.

Many of Winton's male characters seem to move away from these stereotypical masculine conventions and display new models of masculine identity. In offering such novel male representations, Winton challenges the dominant patriarchal practices and discourses prevailing in the Australian culture and society.

In his short stories Winton writes about the dissolution of patriarchy and the deconstruction of masculinity bringing to the fore the blurred boundaries of gender constructions and portraying masculinity from an unorthodox, novel position. Winton questions the currency of the dichotomy that constitutes masculinity as opposed to femininity by endowing his male characters with certain features so far regarded as feminine such as vulnerability, sensitivity and human frailty. His male characters are often emotional, sensitive and intuitive. This way Winton exposes the arbitrariness of patriarchal ideologies. What is disturbing, as Lekkie Hopkins states, is that

> these male characters are positioned as odd and different precisely because of their 'feminine' qualities (their abilities to love, to relate emotionally, to be intuitive, to nurture, to cry, to be hurt) and the consequent lessening of their typically masculine qualities (their lack of desire to exploit, or to dominate, or to be separate or to be competitive). (Rossiter and Jacobs 47)

In the story "Nilsam's Friend," from the collection *Minimum of Two* (1987), Nilsam is not a conventional male and has reversed roles with his wife Rachel being full-time parent to his son. When he compares himself with his adventurous and much-travelled friend, he feels "dowdy": "He was a man and he felt dowdy" (45). In several stories Winton foregrounds the feminine in his male characters associating it with an inner space, like a hole. In so doing, Winton is placing his male characters as vulnerable and wounded beings. In "Wake" he describes the main character possessing this hole: "There is a hollowness in him" (38). This is also the case of Jerra in "Forest Winter": "Late in the evening the young man sat in the darkness and drank the coarse volatile claret the locals called Kirup Syrup. The stuff found a big emptiness in him. Relief has consumed everything inside" (159). In "Gravity," as well, Jerra feels like an amputee when his father dies: "There was a hole in him. Something was lost" (174). In "No Memory Comes" the narrator "feels a hole open in him" (166). For Lekkie Hopkins Winton "transfers the conventional psychological reading of the female body as a wound, as violable and penetrable, to the vulnerable male" (48).

In presenting male characters that are in close contact with their

feminine side, Winton challenges and reverses the powerful masculine bias fostered and embedded in the cultural myth of the typical Australian. As he points out in an interview: "I'm writing from an orthodox female point of view" (Guy 129). Winton seeks to undermine and subvert some of the stereotypical conventions endorsed to the masculine gender by giving his males the right to show their emotions and free themselves from the burdens of patriarchy.

In his short stories Winton transcends one of the most deeply entrenched assumptions about masculinity: the total control of emotions. The emotional restraint demanded by patriarchal ideologies leads men to emotional isolation. As Stanley Aronowitz argues: "men have become 'victims of the emotional plague by the imperative of having to be always in control […]. Male power comes at the price of emotional isolation'" (Shamir and Travis 5). In "Wake" a father asks his adult son: "Have you ever wept? Cried, I mean" (41). Winton here is demanding the right to cry for men, to stop restraining themselves and let emotions flow naturally. Winton highlights in his male characters their ability to show emotions and to cry, to show themselves as human beings that can be hurt and are vulnerable too. In the story "My Father's Axe" the narrator recalls his father as a sensitive man: "Another time my father, leaving again for a long trip, began softly to weep on our front step […]. I saw my father ball his handkerchief up and bite on it to muffle his sobs" (29). In "Neighbours," the protagonist, a PhD student of literature, cries when his son is born: "the young man began to weep. The twentieth-century novel had not prepared him for this" (83). Jerra's nostalgia for his dead father marks him as a vulnerable, wounded man, as is stated in "Gravity":

> There was a hole in him. Something was lost. The tall man in loose grey trousers with that stooped, expectant stance. The big hands so often hairy with pollard. Only a memory now. He was dead. Actually, finally, dead. And now there was nothing for Jerra Nilsam to fall against. He thought about the ride home. His heart beating. It was riding down the street, as though he had been balancing a bicycle for the first time. There was no exhilaration in it, only a terrible sense of gravity. (174)

As Arizti has noted in "Fathercare in Tim Winton's Fiction" (forthcoming), several male figures in Winton's short stories are endowed with the capacity of being affected by the suffering of others. These characters show a generous openness to the suffering of others, a special disposition to emotions, feelings and compassion. Significantly enough, his first collection of short stories, *Scission*, opens with a quotation from *The Book of Job*, the most remarkable patient sufferer in the Old Testament. Winton's males are guided by their heart rather than by their intellect, enhancing their sensitivity and

emotional dimension not only as feminine qualities but also as inherent in the masculine identity. According to Bruce Bennett "the central figure in Winton's stories typically rejects intellectual sophistication and turns to 'flesh and blood'" (69). In "Holding," the male narrator, Hart, describes his friend Clive Genders as "the most generous, compassionate man Hart had ever known, someone who wasn't afraid to admit ignorance or weakness" (229) and he adds that "Clive Genders was worth holding on to" (229). In "Damage Goods," a story from *The Turning*, Gail associates Vic's open and dedicated nature with an adolescent fixation: "In any dispute Vic will instinctively seek out a victim to defend. That's his nature and it's become his work as a labour lawyer, but I wonder if this impulse can account for his adolescent attraction to the flawed and imperfect" (58).

The traditional association of masculinity with power and femininity with powerlessness is not allowed to function in Winton's short stories. Some of his male characters are rendered powerless and lost. For instance, in the story "A Blow, A Kiss," "Albie's father looked helpless, did not move" (17) when he saw a man beat his hurt son. In the story "On Her Knees," from *The Turning*, Vic is an adolescent who wants to defend his mother after being accused of having stolen a pair of earrings in the house she works as a cleaner: "I was powerless to defend her. It was the lowest feeling." (111). This sense of powerlessness is also felt in another story from the same collection, "Defender," where Vic suffers from the burden of the past and the recent death of his parents: "He was forty-four years old but he felt just as helpless. […] even at this age, he still didn't know the first thing about saving himself" (309).

Another distinctive feature that contributes to seeing Winton's male characters as embodying unorthodox sorts of masculinity is their constant pursuit of the meaning of life, their search for identity and their ongoing questioning of who they are and where they go. As Winton explains in an interview: "All my books are about people trying to make sense of things, about the search for meaning […] My work is ultimately about people who are possessed by a vision" (Ferrier 3, 4). Portrayed as lost and confused, Winton's male working-class characters have to come to terms with their own inner turmoil, their own identity and their relationships with others, namely, women and family. One of the most relevant characters in his short story collection *Minimum of Two* is Jerra Nilsam, who previously appeared in his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*. An adolescent in the novel, Jerra displays his problematic nature by wandering about the beaches of Western Australia looking for an identity he doesn't have. He lives and works with his family in the city but his inner conflict is to find his own 'place'

within society: "He still looked for hideouts despite his age" (17). Pressured by his family who constantly asks him what he is going to do with himself, he starts a trip to the bush with his friend Sean. In so doing, Winton shows Jerra trying to negotiate his male identity in terms of Australian codes of masculinity. Since the masculine identity has traditionally been located in the bush, Jerra's trip must be seen as an attempt to locate some sense of meaning and find his identity. This is also the case with Bob Lang, Vic's father in *The Turning*, who quits his job as a cop and abandons his family to go bush. There, he embraces a new way of life: he tries to mend his damaged identity by giving up alcohol and calm down his inner conflicts by helping others. In his own words: "[he] woke up one morning, it was winter, and the sun was on this fallen tree, this dead grey tree, and there was steam rising off the dead wood. And I felt … new. Had this feeling that the world was inviting me in … like, luring me towards something. Life, I dunno" (232). Taking the bush as a place of refuge and escape but also of tension, Winton uses Nature and the landscape as the site where characters must confront their internal conflicts and tensions. Some West Australian writers show "an awareness of the tensions between landscape and consciousness of that landscape" (Rossiter and Jacobs 20).[1] The vivid interaction between some specific places of Western Australia and his characters pervades Winton's short stories influencing and shaping his characters' identity.

The achievement of maturity is evoked as a threat and is featured as a self-discovery journey for Winton's males. It seems that male characters in the short stories try to avoid or ignore the passing of time and the consequent responsibilities of growing up and becoming an adult, a husband, a father. The image of men as lost or suffering an identity crisis recurs in many of his short stories. The young men must undergo a rite of initiation into manhood. In *Minimum of Two*, Jerra, married and with a son, is depicted as "[n]ot mature enough" (241) and travelling the difficult road to self-discovery. Much of his quest depends on his ability to take a decision about what he wants to do in life, to free himself from the burdens of the past and to be at ease with his new responsibilities as a husband and as a father. In "The Strong One," his wife Rachel is determined to pursue her career as a social worker and Jerra is confronted with his responsibility as a father when he asks Rachel what he will do if she studies and she answers "Look after Sam" (224). First, he is afraid and doesn't see himself capable of taking care of the child because he's a man: "I'm

[1] See Beth Watzke, "Writing the West: Regionalism and Western Australia," *Westerly*, No. 1, Autumn 1992, pp. 21-29.

scared, that's all. That I won't be able to do it properly" (224). At the beginning he lived with his family in a remote village in the forest as is depicted in "Forest Winter." Living in the mountain far away from society and the city is for Jerra a way of evading the responsibilities of his status as father and husband and perpetuating his desire for adventure and independence. Although he previously rejected society and the city, his new-found identity as father and husband makes him widen his perspective and change the country for the city. In "Gravity," his personal growth leads him to acknowledge "he has come to love the city. It was no capitulation on his part; merely a gradual awareness of new beauties. He was older now, he felt it" (170). His family role seems to have helped Jerra find his place in society.

One of the obstacles in the personal growth of Winton's male figures is the recurrence of the past. Constant references throughout the short story collections reveal that Jerra in *Minimum of Two* and Vic in *The Turning* are to some extent haunted by memories from the past that prevent them from growing up and going on with their lives. The constant remembering of the past in most stories brings about a kind of paralysis. The past functions as an obstacle for Winton's male characters, something that prevents them from developing their identities. As Jerra's wife observes: "Jerra seemed to bear weights from the past as though they were treasures he had to take with him […] he enjoyed bearing it all, as though the past, as well as being his source of pain, might also be his only source of comfort" (222). Every time he clings to the past he does it "like an old man who can't handle the present" (226). In the story "No Memory Comes," the young boy is similarly stuck in the past, when his parents weren't divorced and everything seemed to be all right. He recalls the last New Year's Eve he spent with both of his parents:

> That night he climbs into bed between his parents. His father muffles a weedy fart. His mother sleeps with a glick in her throat. The boy worms in and gets ready to dream that the new year will never come. Everything is fine right now. He has no need of it. (162)

Similarly, Vic in *The Turning* is presented as a man unable to come to terms with his past. Vic's wife seems to be overwhelmed with "the way his past seemed to assail him" (307). As she explains, her own distorted personal experience helps her to understand and love him: "If it wasn't for my sister's own fixation I'd be less forgiving about Vic and the weight of his past. I wouldn't understand at all. I'd be long gone" (56). Vic's constant drawing on his memories in most of the short stories where he appears gives the collection that sense of coherence and unity previously mentioned. In "Damaged Goods," Gail talks about her husband's adolescent fixation with a girl that has a

birthmark on her face. Vic has told the story so many times that Gail says: "I feel like I was there, that I lived it with him" (55). One day Gail realised that the adolescent memories about this girl still take hold of Vic: "last week I found him in the workshop, weeping over an old photograph and a poem and it gave me a chill" (54). Once Gail told Vic: "You're like someone under siege" (302), a sentence that describes him perfectly. Winton's males reveal to what extent individuals are shaped by past experiences and how at times they can be trapped by them: "[Vic] was preoccupied with memories. After three weeks in a darkened room, they were a swarm he could neither evade nor disperse" (299).

Winton constantly plays with the symbol of water in his stories to associate it with renewal and liberation from the weight of the past. In Winton's stories, rivers or the sea become the site where male characters can regenerate themselves and forge their new identities. As Jerra says in "Bay of Angels": "We always come back to water. When things happen" (219). The sea features prominently in the lives of these characters as is stated in "The Strong One": "It wasn't hot enough for a swim, but even when it was cool these days they walked down to the rivermouth to sit and watch the sea move and sigh and disguise itself in the glitter of sunlight; it gave shape to the day" (225). Jerra constantly resorts to the sea when he is confused or angry, such as after having argued with Rachel in "More": "He lay back in the water, shifting on the tide-ribbed bottom, until only his mouth and nose were above the surface, and with his eyes open he saw the sky through a shifting filter of river water. He stayed there" (241). Likewise, in "Family," Frank "knew a surf would do him good" (173). He needed the contact with water to calm down all the confusion and tension that had settled inside his mind after having quit football: "Leaper sat up in the channel to watch the rider come on in short, brutal signature turns until he slewed off the wave to settle in the quiet water beside him" (176). Once again, metaphors of swimming or being in the water recur to signify a sort of liberation for Winton's male characters, the possibilities of freeing themselves from the constraints in their lives. The symbolic connections and a sequential progression arising from the common themes of the search for identity and the recurrence of the past as an obstacle are prominent in Winton's short story cycles *Minimum of Two* and *The Turning*.

Not all of Winton's representations of masculinity are depicted in a positive way. It is my contention that by portraying negative images of masculine identity, Winton seeks to debunk and subvert the deplorable and reduced sort of masculinity enshrined and privileged by patriarchal discourse on gender. In his short stories, there are nu-

merous examples of men abandoning their families ("Secrets," "The Water Was Dark And It Went Forever Down," "Cockleshell," "Long, Clear View"), alcoholic and violent men ("The Turning," "Damaged Goods," "Commission," "Cockleshell," "Sand," "Family"), misogynist men ("Family," "Sand," "The Turning") and even murderers ("A Minimum of Two").

In *The Turning* Winton offers a wide range of traditional normative constructions of masculinity. The short stories "Sand," "Family" and "The Turning" deal with the lives of two very different brothers, Max and Frank. In these stories Winton attempts to highlight his unorthodox male figures by putting them together with some more hegemonic images of masculinity in the same narrative frame. Max, a fisherman, is drawn in opposition to his brother Frank, a football player star. When they were children their mother abandoned them with their father, and since then Frank has shown an emotional need that Max completely lacks: "Now and then Max darted ahead to walk amongst their father's mates. He said things that made them laugh. He was ten already and could make men laugh. He didn't miss their mother. Frank knew he should shut up about her" (164). Frank always tried to follow his brother but he also feared him: "He had side teeth like a dog and a way of looking at you that you could feel in the dark" (165). Frank was "without doubt, naïve" (178) instead and "blind to the fact that Max was contemptuous of him and had been from the moment he was born" (178). Later on, despite being a football star, Max constantly calls his brother "a fairy, a retard, a waste of skin" (138). While Max, embodying a traditional sort of hegemonic masculinity, is tough, cold, and rude and spends his spare time drinking in the pub, Frank is vulnerable, human and sensitive. Although he was considered a "prodigy" (181), Frank quits his career due to an identity crisis. When Max finds out about it he despises his brother even more than before, and tells him that "[s]ome things are best left to the men" (180). Overcome with anger he also adds: "You were soft […] you were a fuckin coward" (180). Thus, here Frank is positioned as the fragile, vulnerable male character offering an alternative, previously marginalized, masculine identity.

Similarly, in the story that gives the title to the collection, "The Turning," Max is also characterised in opposition to another male figure, Dan. The story, set in the small fishing village of White Point, tackles the different lives of two families: Max and Raelene, who live with their two little daughters in a trailer park, and a middle-class couple new to the town, Sherry and Dan. Dan is presented as a kind, polite man recovering from his alcoholism, a human being who tries to reconstruct his identity as a male by embracing the Christian faith

together with his wife rather than repressing his emotions and hiding his weaknesses. As Raelene says, Dan is "attentive without staring at your tits the whole time […] comfortable with himself" (136). In contrast, she admits that Max was a "slob" who "often came bloody and sore, especially after a live game on the big screen" (137). Max's depiction is based on a construction of masculinity that remains dominant in Australian culture, a version that synthesises the long-established premise that men are not allowed to express their emotions and weaknesses, they should be rough and behave like men. It is precisely the way Max is emotionally repressed that leads him to engage in violent behaviour and attitudes. There is evidence of this when Raelene gets home after having helped Sherry move in her new house: "the caravan was a mess and so was Max. He'd kicked the mirror out and there was blood all over the floor. […] he clouted her in front of the kids" (139). He beats his wife so many times she does not feel the bruises any more. Once, he slammed "her head against the metal so hard she saw sparks rise between them, sparks and winged spots that floated and fell" (155, 156) and then he "grabbed her hair and jabbed her back harder, once, twice, and the pain brought a sudden rage upon her" (156). Sometimes he comes home drunk and forces her sexually:

> She woke with him on top of her. He had her sore arms pinned and his pants were off. She struggled but the bruises made it hard. He grabbed her in the dark and slapped her. He shoved himself in her face, half smothered her until she got loose a moment and was halfway off the bed, her elbow snagged in the curtain, before he caught her and shoved her face down and hit the back of her head so hard she felt the gash open up. (160)

This type of masculinity embodied by Max enhances women's subordination to men and male violence against women. However, Max's image of macho man is reinforced and applauded by his wife, who later on will realise the nightmare her life has become. Instead of rejecting and condemning her husband's misogynist attitudes, Raelene supports his hegemonic masculine traits by favouring him over novel sorts of masculine identities: "She was a bit suss about tv men who talked about their feelings all the time and men who cried gave her the screaming creeps" (137). Moreover, she acknowledges that Max "[had] always been [her] kind of bloke, the sort of man her sisters always had, the kind their mother flirted with, […] Rae didn't go men who dressed fancy or slapped on aftershave" (136). In portraying Max as an aggressive beast, Winton underscores the negative, oppressive and destructive connotations underlying patriarchal ideologies and deep-seated cultural myths embedded in previously accepted gender discourses.

The transgression of fixed gender boundaries, as the analysis has shown, is a pervasive trait in Winton's short stories. By revising and deconstructing traditional long-established premises on gender issues, Winton devises new forms of representation of masculinity. In his short story collections Winton intends to enhance his male figures as unorthodox, sensitive men in order to accommodate current discourses on gender. Winton finds ways of reconfiguring traditional social and ideological definitions of gender by inscribing challenging male figures in his narratives. The emphasis lies most conspicuously on the portrayal of male figures that subvert stereotyped conceptions of masculinity and once this subversion takes place they enjoy a newly acquired sense of identity, feeling liberated from previous fears and burdens. Winton uses deconstruction to criticise the dominant patriarchal structure and contests fixed gender patterns by foregrounding feminine qualities in his male figures.

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