Unravelling Masculinity: Affect, Vulnerability and Melancholy in Nthikeng Mohlele's *Rusty Bell* (2014)

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Abstract

This article offers a close reading of Nthikeng Mohlele's *Rusty Bell* (2014) from the perspective of masculinity studies and affect theory. Concentrating on the life of an upper-middle-class lawyer, Michael, Mohlele's novel describes the psychological and moral crisis he faces as he tries to negotiate a place for himself within the existing social structures, specifically the family. Confronted with this task, Michael struggles with a sense of vulnerability that manifests itself most acutely in his interactions with others, particularly his wife, Rusty Bell, and his close friend, Christopher "Columbus" Wentzel. This article explores the close connection between emotional closeness and vulnerability, and indicates that intimacy can undermine rather than consolidate the self, including one's gender identity. In Mohlele's novel, intimacy, understood as physical closeness, is associated with emotional entrapment, which has its origins in Michael's traumatic experience of sexual abuse. Equally importantly, intimacy is also bound with a profound feeling of sadness after the premature death of Michael's friend. Following Judith Butler, I discuss this sadness as regards gender melancholy, which Michael experiences as he mourns the loss of his homosocial relationship with Columbus. The analysis of Mohlele's novel is based on Lauren Berlant's insights into intimacy, focusing on its failure to stabilise socially sanctioned forms of closeness. I also draw upon Todd Reeser's approach to affect as a force capable of both composing and decomposing masculinity. By offering the first sustained critical discussion of *Rusty Bell*, this article aims to contribute to a wider debate on Black masculinities in post-apartheid literature.

Keywords: Nthikeng Mohlele; *Rusty Bell*, masculinity studies, affect theory, vulnerability

UNISA LASA
Journal of Literary Studies
Volume 41 | 2025 | #20099 | 15 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/20099
ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

Introduction: On Masculinity, Intimacy and Vulnerability

South African writer Nthikeng Mohlele is the author of seven novels and two collections of short stories. Mohlele's literary career began in 2008, with the publication of the novel *The Scent of Bliss*, which was followed by *Small Things* (2013), *Rusty Bell* (2014), *Pleasure* (2016), *Michael K* (2018), *Illumination* (2019), *Breasts, etc*. (2023), and *Revolutionaries' House* (2024). The two short story collections, *The Discovery of Love* and *A Little Light*, came out in 2021 and 2023, respectively. Mohlele's works have met with critical acclaim: *Pleasure* was awarded the 2017 University of Johannesburg Main Prize for South African Writing in English and the K. Sello Duiker Memorial Literary Award, while *A Little Light* and *Breasts, etc.* were shortlisted for both the University of Johannesburg and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences Awards 2024. Mohlele's rich and varied oeuvre has been the subject of research articles, including those by Ronit Frenkel, J. U. Jacobs and Timothy Wright, who have focused on the novels *Small Things*, *Pleasure* and *Michael K*. The most recent contribution to the discussion of Mohlele's works is an interview conducted by Danyela Demir and Olivier Moreillon, published in 2023.

Despite growing interest in Mohlele's oeuvre, *Rusty Bell* (2014) has not yet received sustained scholarly attention. This article seeks to address this gap by contributing to the critical debate on Mohlele's work through a close examination of this novel. *Rusty Bell* is narrated by a 48-year-old corporate lawyer who, having achieved professional success and material prosperity, finds himself in a personal crisis. This crisis is triggered by a growing estrangement from his wife, the eponymous Rusty Bell, and his son, Michael Jr. Living in a state of emotional detachment, Michael resorts to visiting an exclusive strip club, which aggravates the conflict with his wife, and ultimately forces Rusty to present him with divorce papers. As Michael turns to alcohol, he loses his job and – faced with an acute feeling of loneliness and isolation – contemplates suicide. It is in this state of despondency that he begins a retrospective account of his life, which focuses on his years as a student.

This confessional narrative, in which Michael writes openly about his fears and desires, gives us insight into two relationships that shaped his life: his romantic relationship with Rusty and, equally importantly, his close friendship with Christopher "Columbus" Wentzel. Columbus's sudden death disrupts Michael's life, and locks him into a cycle of self-destructive behaviour, as he ravages his body with long periods of fasting. His mourning for Columbus does not end with his marriage to Rusty; on the contrary, it transforms into melancholy, leading him to view his friendship with Christopher in contrast to his forced and unfulfilling marriage. With the assistance of his therapist, Dr West, Michael ultimately confronts his demons and resumes his responsibilities as a husband and father. Although this decision can, to some extent, be seen as a positive resolution to his problems, it is also problematic insofar as it is not accompanied by a feeling of relief and happiness. *Rusty Bell* is permeated by sadness and melancholy,

which suggest that its protagonist achieves only limited success in his attempt to find fulfilment within the social structures offered by the state, specifically the family.

Considered in the context of South African literature, Mohlele's novel can be viewed as a contribution to the wider debate on Black masculinities in the post-apartheid era. Among the writers who have explored this topic are K. Sello Duiker, Niq Mhlongo and Phaswane Mpe, whose works investigate the various vulnerabilities of masculine subjectivities in urban settings. An especially pertinent reference is to Mpe's novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2014), which describes the lingering effect of hegemonic masculinities on heterosexual relationships. Mpe gives insight into the functioning of violent and abusive masculinities whose main goal is to subjugate and often humiliate women, but he also exposes the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of reformed masculinities, as embodied by the novel's protagonist, Refentše. As Marious Crous (2007, 26) argues, Refentše's behaviour is characterised by duality insofar as he often voices his criticism of Black men who abuse women, but, at the same time, he mistreats his friend's girlfriend. This ironic critique of duality can also be found in Mohlele's novel, whose protagonist, in many respects, embodies the "new African man" [1] (Crous 2007, 26), yet some of his actions are shaped by the attitude of sexual privilege and male entitlement. Equally importantly, Mohlele, like Mpe, directs his readers' attention to the underlying vulnerabilities of his Black male protagonists, who live in the tension between the new ideals of gender equality and older models of hegemonic masculinity, some of which reach back to the country's colonial past.

Mohlele's exploration of the tensions and contradictions of Black masculinities is psychologically focused, with its main emphasis on its protagonist's dynamic motivations. However, it is important to note that this nuanced analysis is also interested in the interaction between the individual and the country's sociopolitical structures. Mohlele has commented on the sociopolitical dimension of his writing in an interview conducted by Danyela Demir and Olivier Moreillon, in which he was asked, among other things, about how themes such as love, sex and desire are linked to the political issues in his country. Replying to this question, Mohlele first highlights the existential dimension of his works and then goes on to comment on the kinds of relation between the citizen and the state: "In trying to unpack that relationship between society, private citizens and the powerful institutions that govern or affect their lives, which impact on their lives, you get very interesting tensions and linkages from there" (Demir and Moreillon 2023, 114).

Mohlele's general reflection can serve as a point of entry into this discussion, which will look into the ways in which "the tensions and linkages" between the individual and the social structures that he inhabits destabilise them, creating a sense of weakness and

1 Explaining the notion of the new African man, Crous refers to Dorothy Driver's description of the new African community, which she characterises as "gentle, loving, responsible men, with the standard gender role divisions otherwise unchanged" (quoted in Crous 2007, 26).

vulnerability. A pertinent general comment on this sense of emotional vulnerability can be found in the mentioned interview, in which Demir and Moreillon rightly point out that the characters of Mohlele's novels are characterised by "mental instability" (2023, 117), to which he replies that he is particularly interested in how mental instability "interfaces with the moral context of what happens when characters interrelate" (2023, 117). Mohlele's interest in the moral dimension of people's actions is visible in the candour and openness with which his first-person narrator records his own transgressions, while at the same time reflecting on how he was hurt by the actions of other people.

The analysis of mental instability and emotional vulnerability in *Rusty Bell* will concentrate on the intimate dimension of the characters' relations. It will show that intimacy, understood as physical and/or emotional closeness, is a force that is capable of unravelling rather than consolidating the self, leading to a sense of emotional and even physical vulnerability. There are two ways in which intimacy, as described in Mohlele's novel, is capable of undermining the stability and consistency of individual identity. The first way is closely connected with loss, which becomes so protracted and persistent that it takes on the characteristics of melancholy. This physically and emotionally depleting form of sadness, which assists Michael's reflections on his prematurely departed friend, Columbus, will be analysed with regard to gender melancholy, as defined by Judith Butler. The second way in which intimacy can be shown to unravel the self is through the intensely dysphoric emotion of fear. As I will show, Michael's relationships with others, especially with women, are shaped by his fear of physical and emotional entrapment, which has its origins in his trauma.

In making the claim that intimacy can subvert Michael's sense of self, I will draw on critical theories at the intersection of gender and affect studies. The central argument will be supported by Todd Reeser's observation that affect is part of "a process that temporarily composes or decomposes masculinity," "break[ing] the hold of masculinity on a discretely defined male body" (2017, 111). The article will make a connection between Reeser's observation on the deconstructive potential of affect and Butler's reflections on gender melancholy. Although Reeser's and Butler's work constitute the core of this article's critical approach, I will situate my discussion within the broader context of masculinity studies, drawing on scholars such as Lucas Gottzén, Lauren Berlant, Kopano Ratele and Robert Morrell. The discussion that follows will provide more insight into the work of those researchers, consequently laying the groundwork for the analysis of *Rusty Bell*.

Critical Insights into Masculinity, Affect and Melancholy

Before delving deeper into the subject of masculinity studies, I would like to briefly return to Mohlele's important comment on the "tensions and linkages" between "private citizens" and "powerful institutions" (Demir and Moreillon 2023, 114). Significantly, Mohlele does not draw a strict boundary between the private and the political, between

the personal and the ideological, emphasising the intricate connection between these realms. Adopting this approach, I refer to Lauren Berlant's comments on the cultural and political dimensions of intimacy. For Berlant, intimacy has a subversive dimension insofar as it refuses to be contained in socially and culturally sanctioned forms of closeness: "Its [Intimacy's] potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability" (1998, 282). Berlant goes on to comment upon the subversive power of desire, which "destabilizes the very thing that institutions of intimacy are created to stabilize" (1998, 286). This comment can be considered in the context of social institutions such as the family, whose stability is eroded through the subversive power of desire, destabilising proscribed gender roles. This process questions any stable boundaries between the private and the public, and between the intimate and the institutional, as it demonstrates the power of the former to destabilise the latter, often in indirect and nuanced ways.

One reason the intimate sphere is potentially unpredictable and disruptive is that it is bound with a plethora of emotions and affects, not all of which are experienced in a conscious and controlled manner. To shed light on this mechanism, I begin by defining the notion of affect, which will be central in the discussion of Mohlele's novel. Especially helpful in this regard is the contribution of Todd Reeser and Lucas Gottzén, who propose an approach that adopts both the notions of affect and emotion. In their understanding, "emotion is largely culturally coded because a male subject learns how to be emotional, how to express emotion, or how to avoid emotion" (Reeser and Gottzén 2018, 149). Affect, by contrast, is "a non-discursive corporeal response [of the male subject] to something outside himself" (2018, 149). "Ineffable and visceral" (2018, 149), affect can be made intelligible in the verbal act of giving it a name, but this does not mean that language captures affect.

As Reeser and Gottzén (2018, 149) argue, referring to a bodily reaction as sadness or joy is "retroactive coding," in other words, the "stabilising of a difficult-to-define, non-discursive intensity". Naming an affect may create the impression that it is "knowable and definable" (2018, 149), whereas in truth, affect is never completely reflected in language, and it does not allow itself to be wholly controlled by it. Following Brian Massumi's well-known observation, affect is characterised by its autonomy. Reeser and Gottzén refer to Massumi, who argues that "the insertion of an emotion means that something has escaped and that affect cannot be contained in any single body and that affect's escape from emotion can be perceived" (quoted in Reeser and Gottzén 2018, 150). In this formulation, affect is autonomous because, rather than being mastered by language, it escapes retroactive coding, shaping human interactions in unanticipated ways.

In the critical theories of Reeser and Gottzén, affect is both constructive – in the sense that, when retroactively coded into an emotion, it builds a gendered identity – and subversive, because, by eluding fixed categories, it is capable of undermining one's sense of self. This dual, constructive and subversive nature of affect is captured by Reeser (2017, 111), who argues that affect is part of "a process that temporarily composes or decomposes masculinity". As Reeser (2017, 111) argues, "Autonomous affect may break the hold of masculinity on a discretely defined male body, or it may disintegrate a body, rendering it vulnerable or connected to other bodies." By undermining one's sense of self, often in subtle ways, affect is capable of interrupting or even destroying the sense of unity and integration (or, using Reeser's term, "dis-integrate a body"), and, in this way, exposing one's physical and psychological vulnerability. The connection between affect and vulnerability will be central to this article. Referring to Reeser's observation that affect has the potential to both compose and decompose masculinity, I will argue that, by undermining stable gender identities, affect leads to the emergence of vulnerability.

As it was mentioned, there are two major ways in which the vulnerability of Mohlele's protagonist emerges in interactions with other characters. First, it is connected with the fear of entrapment into a relation of physical and emotional intimacy from which he will be unable to escape. This fear specifically pertains to his relationship with his fiancée and later wife, Rusty Bell, and is linked to Michael's critical attitude towards the impact of social institutions, particularly marriage, on human relationships. Michael's fear of entrapment is directly connected with the second manifestation of his emotional vulnerability, namely his melancholy. This melancholy can be attributed to the premature death of his close friend, Columbus, and what Michael sees as the irremediable loss of a profound and meaningful relationship.

While Michael's melancholy will be analysed in more detail below, it is important to situate it within the article's critical framework by referring to Judith Butler's insights into the nature of melancholy and, more specifically, gender melancholy. In her essay "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification", Butler refers to Freud's definition of melancholia as "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings" (Freud 2009, 244). Seen as the refusal to sever connection with the lost object (be it a person, a place or an idea), melancholia is characterised by "an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (Freud 2009, 249; emphasis in the original). In Butler's essay, melancholy stems from "the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, *pre-empting* the possibility of homosexual attachment" (Butler 1997, 135; emphasis in the original).

According to Butler, the loss of socially sanctioned abandonment of homosexual love has led to what she calls "a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love" (1997, 140). While Butler writes specifically about homosexual love, I will consider it in the context

of homosocial desire, as discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In her classic study *Between Men*, Sedgwick argues that "[t]o draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic [. . .] is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1985, 2). Mohlele explores this continuum in his novel in the relationship between Michael and Columbus.

Loss, Melancholy and Fragile Masculinity in *Rusty Bell*

The first-person narrative of *Rusty Bell* follows the common pattern of crisis, recovery and (as I will show) a partial and problematic resolution. The short and blunt statement with which the novel opens – "I wrestled with life and lost" (Mohlele 2014, 1) – testifies to Michael's acute sense of failure, which stems from a deep crisis both in his professional and private life. Michael presents himself as a typical man, more specifically a typical male lawyer: "I am no different from any 48-year-old in any corporate law firm anywhere in the world" (2014, 1). Economically and socially, this places him in the middle class, which, after the post-1994 democratic transformations in South Africa, has expanded to include the educated and more affluent part of the country's Black population.

Living in the times of the new dispensation, Michael is, to some extent, a beneficiary of the new democratic and capitalist socio-economic order. The son of a lorry driver, he is living a life of high achievement, but, importantly, this is not reflected in his narrative; on the contrary, he writes with disillusionment, which results not from the sense of having failed to achieve his goals, but rather from having achieved them but not finding satisfaction in them. He recalls that, in his twenties, he was determined to achieve success in his life: "I, until my fingers bled, clawed my way up treacherous mountains of this thing called life" (Mohlele 2014, 11–12). As he was trying to attain this desired goal, he had the presentiment that it would end in nothing short of a catastrophe, or what he calls "an otherwise unforgiving fall, a fall that would render me deformed and lifeless" (2014, 12).

Michael's acute moral and emotional crisis stems from three separate events, each of which had a traumatic impact on him. The first event is witnessing the violent murder-suicide of his father's friend, Pete Wentzel, who first murders his partner and then kills himself (it is after this event that Michael seeks the professional help of Dr West). The second and more important event is the premature death of his close friend Christopher "Columbus" Wentzel, a brilliant and charming man, who is plagued by various illnesses and ultimately dies of heart failure when he is still a university student. For Michael, the sudden loss of his friend turns out to be a life-changing experience from which he takes months to recover. Soon after Columbus's death, he begins the self-destructive practice of fasting, which depletes him physically, almost leading to his death. It is during one of those periods of fasting that Michael is visited by Rusty Bell, who, if we are to believe his narrative, takes sexual advantage of him, becomes pregnant with their son and, subsequently, pressures Michael into marriage. The third event, which has a lasting and

traumatic impact on him, predates the other two: at the age of 14, he was sexually abused by his neighbour, known as Auntie Pauline. This event, mentioned only in passing at the end of the novel's penultimate chapter, is significant insofar as it throws light on Michael's deeply rooted fear of physical intimacy, which he subconsciously associates with entrapment and abuse.

Those three traumatic events – the suicide of Pete Wentzel, the death of Columbus Wentzel, and the sexual abuse that he experienced as an adolescent – shape Michael's identity, creating a sense of emotional and even physical vulnerability that he occasionally expresses in his narrative, for example in a passage in which, addressing Rusty Bell, he compares himself to a leaf trying to make sense of life: "Think of me as a leaf, a healthy leaf, glistening in the afternoon sun, brimming with pride, but at once defenceless against leaf-eating worms, against hailstones, windstorms" (Mohlele 2014, 138–9). This evocative image, perhaps inspired by Pascal's notion of man as a "thinking reed", suggests that Michael experiences his physical and emotional vulnerability in both the context of his gender and, more broadly, his existence as a human being.

The sense of vulnerability is often linked to the love and devotion Michael feels for others. This is by no means a rare combination: Kopano Ratele has explored it in his psychological and sociological study of African masculinities. As he argues, "Delve into men's love and you will discern intense personal vulnerability in many" (Ratele 2022, 32). In Michael's case, vulnerability is inextricably connected to his profound sense of loss after the death of his close friend, Columbus. This loss is emphasised in his narrative even before Michael gives a fuller account of their relationship; as he writes, "Not a single day passed when I did not think of Columbus" (Mohlele 2014, 47). Reflecting on his reaction to his friend's death, Michael notes: "It was not grief, but a sense of mild depression; a sudden loss of interest in campus thrills known and confirmed to engender purpose in boys" (2014, 47). That Michael's grief reaches beyond "mild depression" becomes evident when he begins his period of fasting. Those fasting sessions, which immediately follow Columbus's premature death, are described by Michael as attempts to acquire a deeper, philosophical insight into life, but they are also self-destructive practices that deplete his physical and emotional strength.

Michael's reaction to his friend's death can be analysed with regard to melancholy, more specifically, gender melancholy. As defined by Butler, gender melancholy is an attitude stemming from "the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, *pre-empting* the possibility of homosexual attachment" (Butler 1997, 135; emphasis in the original). Following Sedgwick's critical insight, it is possible to write about Michael's lingering attachment to Columbus in the context of the homosocial desire that he feels towards him. The claim I am making here is that melancholy stems from Michael's unexpressed realisation that, with Columbus's death, he has lost the opportunity to participate in homosocial intimacy, which he views as the only safe one, capable of providing him with emotional and intellectual fulfilment without entrapment. Viewed with regard to the theories mentioned earlier, melancholia has the property of

affect, as defined by Reeser (2017, 111): it composes Michael's masculinity by creating a sense of kinship with his departed friend, doing so often in contrast to the more distant relationship with his wife; at the same time, melancholia decomposes his masculinity because it signals the prospect of a different kind of relationship than that with Rusty, pointing obliquely to the prospect of a deeper emotional and intellectual bond.

To shed more light on Michael's melancholic attitude, it is important to discuss in more detail the nature of his attachment to Columbus. That Michael feels close to Columbus even after his death is clear when, recalling his friend's funeral, he writes: "Only Columbus could manage such a twisted view of existence, only he could, even in death, pour onto life bucketfuls of pranks. That is why I loved him: for his madness" (Mohlele 2014, 70). In contrast to the ambiguous way in which he describes his relationship with Rusty Bell, Michael refers to his relationship with Columbus unequivocally as one of love. One reason Michael feels so strongly about Columbus is that he deeply appreciates and admires his friend's ironic, detached, yet committed and inspiring attitude to life, which accepts life's tragedies, absurdities and inconsistencies without bitterness or confusion. It can be argued that this outlook, which he associates with Columbus, gives Michael a promise of a coherent attitude to what he sees as the inherent contradictions and paradoxes of life.

Michael's desire to embrace Columbus's detached, ironic and, at the same time, serious attitude towards life can be viewed as an attempt to create a coherent and meaningful world view capable of accommodating the tensions and contradictions of existence, including those that pertain directly to his masculinity.[2] In strong contrast to his love for Columbus is his ambivalent and inconsistent attitude towards Rusty, in which his physical desire remains unintegrated with his deep need for emotional fulfilment through a mutually satisfying relationship. Michael's complex and ambiguous attitude to Rusty begins to manifest itself in the aftermath of Columbus's death, when he turns to her and the consolation that her presence seems to offer: "There were times when I held her tight, so tight that I feared I would crush her, but then there were moments when I wanted nothing but absolute silence, solitude" (Mohlele 2014, 47). The passage presents Rusty chiefly with regard to Michael's intermittent need for her physical presence. The forceful nature of the physical contact just described conveys Michael's hope that this form of contact may alleviate his sense of loss after Columbus's shattering death. The misguided nature of this hope is illustrated by the fact that those spells of physical closeness are punctuated by periods of solitude that Michael insists upon despite Rusty's protests, creating an atmosphere of frustration and bitterness between them.

2 According to Carole Ammann and Sandra Staudacher, masculinities are "not fixed male identities but multiple, complex, and intersectional social practices and experiences that are fluid and sometimes contradictory" (2021, 760).

Despite the contradictory nature of his attitude towards Rusty, Michael tends to present it in reductive, physical terms. This becomes evident in one of the conversations with his therapist, Dr West, in which he makes it painstakingly clear that the physical contact with Rusty can only be a poor substitute for his relationship with Columbus: "Not even resting my head on Rusty's supremely sculptured breasts, her honey-brown buttons massaging my ear lobes, compared to the calm I felt talking to Columbus" (Mohlele 2014, 78). This erotically charged but also somewhat clichéd image, as if it were taken out of a cheap romance novel, conveys Michael's reductive perception of sexual relations with Rusty. The end-oriented and superficial contact with her starkly contrasts with his relationship with Columbus, which is presented as one of profound understanding, bringing about a sense of calm and peacefulness. It seems that Michael drives a wedge between the mind and the body, contrasting a sense of intellectual and spiritual understanding with short-lasting, end-oriented physical contact, which can only serve as a poor substitute for the former.

Although the contrast between physical intimacy and a deeper intellectual and emotional understanding is clear and consistent throughout his narrative, the reasons behind this perception are decidedly more ambiguous. To some extent, this contrast may be attributed to what seems to be an immature and reductive perception of sex as one of "campus thrills" (Mohlele 2014, 47), to be enjoyed with as few consequences as possible. This view would situate Michael in the patriarchal tradition of hegemonic masculinity, which construes sex with regard to pursuit and conquest – a desirable but also necessary manifestation of male prowess. It is one of the finest and most profound nuances of Mohlele's novel that this reductive and instrumental view of physical intimacy hides a plethora of contrasting affects and emotions, capable of subverting, even deconstructing, Michael's gender identity. Arguably, the most powerful illustration of this mechanism can be found in an episode in which Rusty has non-consensual sex with Michael. This event comes at a moment when Michael is weakened by long periods of fasting, which he begins after the death of his friend.

Owing to the fact that those protracted fasts deplete his energy to such an extent that Michael begins to hallucinate, the description of the non-consensual sex between Rusty and Michael makes his narrative come across as unreliable. Was he indeed sexually abused by her, or perhaps was the rape a product of his hallucinations that he experienced as a result of his fasting sessions? Although there are no clear answers to those questions, what remains beyond doubt is how Michael experiences this encounter. He views this event as an attack, a "siege," and an "assault" (Mohlele 2014, 90). The scene of this forced sex is remembered with regard to complete powerlessness and desperation (he mentions "tears rolling down my temples" (Mohlele 2014, 90)).

Michael's experience of non-consensual sexual relations is so powerful and overwhelming because it evokes the traumatic memory connected with his early youth. To make this point, it is important to make a connection between this episode and an earlier one in which Michael was, as a young person, sexually assaulted by his

neighbour, Auntie Pauline. This event, which is described with regard to entrapment (Mohlele 2014, 159), had a profound influence on him insofar as it shaped his later, ambivalent and emotionally fraught attitude to physical intimacy. It is possible to view it with regard to trauma, understood, after Patricia Clough, as "body memory, or cellular memory" (2007, 7). Inscribed in his bodily memory, Michael's fear of intimacy is intricately connected with his physical desire, creating a sense of entrapment with which he struggles throughout his mature life. This fraught connection makes itself painfully known when Rusty has non-consensual sex with Michael, consequently evoking the feelings of humiliation and utter powerlessness associated with his sexual assault.

Although Michael's ambivalent attitude to intimacy can be discussed from the viewpoint of trauma theory, I believe that a more productive approach is that offered by affect studies, specifically Reeser's reflections on affect as "a process that temporarily composes or decomposes masculinity" (2017, 111). Affect, as Reeser argues, is inscribed in the body and cannot be entirely controlled by the one who experiences it. In Mohlele's novel, affect is closely tied to the body and its desires. Owing to the fact that Michael's need for physical intimacy is connected with the trauma of youth, desire is often associated with the fear of entrapment. This fear recurs – "in new mutated forms" – in Michael's relationship with Rusty, and it is likely for this reason that Michael reacts so strongly to the sexual encounter with her. This fraught affective connection both composes and decomposes his masculinity: desire gives his identity as a sexual being, a man in control of the situation, but it also decomposes his masculinity insofar as it undermines his sense of security and the feeling of being in control.

Michael's acute sense of diminished agency is closely connected with his feeling of entrapment, which is, in turn, conditioned by his negative views on marriage and the family as a social unit. This critical stance is especially visible in his description of the relationship between Rusty's parents: "I concluded that marriage could be purgatorial, a cage crawling with ingrown toenails and foot rubs, festering with silent judgments that made life almost unbearable" (Mohlele 2014, 71). The recurrent image of entrapment, used here to criticise the institution of marriage, also conveys Michael's disgust regarding the close union between the husband and the wife. Michael's disgust, combined with repressed anger towards Rusty, is transferred to his attitude towards his newborn son. It is significant that when he sees Michael Jr. for the first time he reacts not with joy or pride but with what appears to be intense, if suppressed, anger: "Michael Junior was born three months premature, where I saw him battle to stay alive. I had a strange urge for violence" (2014, 145–6). As his prematurely born son struggles to survive, Michael observes him with a combination of pity and disgust (as he observes, "He looked like an electrocuted rat" (2014, 146)).

Michael's feelings for his son are both intense and ambiguous: on the one hand, he reports feeling "traumatised" (Mohlele 2014, 149) by his visits to the hospital; on the other, he experiences guilt when he does not visit him. It is apparent that Michael struggles with fatherhood.[3] He is caught between a sense of obligation and a profound unwillingness to embrace this role: "As hard as I tried, fasts and meditations included, I could not accept that I had the slightest inclination to be, or the remotest idea of how to be, a father" (2014, 156). Michael's puzzling idea of adapting to the role of father through fasting and meditation reveals the extent of his alienation from this new role. It also conveys his paradoxical, perhaps also self-destructive, desire to distance himself from the "pleasures" that he feels he has been "ambushed into" (2014, 157) by Rusty. He writes: "At the age of 24, I refused to be, over and above blatant violations, further enslaved – be mined for a love I neither possessed nor understood" (2014, 157). This points to Michael's profound inability to translate affection for his son and Rusty into love. Faced with this inability, he distances himself from his son to the point that, for a short time, he considers raising Michael Jr. not as his son but as his brother.

Mohlele's novel ends with what appears to be a resolution of Michael's problems: his marriage crisis over, he resumes a normal life with his wife and son. Having resigned from his job, which he clearly despised, he is now mostly focused on the upbringing of his son, trying to ensure that Michael Jr. is raised with the same concern and affection that Michael associates with his late father, Frank. While Frank's ambition was to ensure that his son was given the opportunity to rise above his working-class background and join the ranks of the middle class, Michael's goal is to encourage his son to realise his musical ambitions and, in this way, reject what he sees as the humdrum of middle-class life. Despite those differences, by the end of the novel, Michael sees a fundamental similarity between his own life choices and the path his father had taken earlier. He asks: "Was Frank's advice sound simply because he had walked the same path, or was it genius from another source?" (Mohlele 2014, 150) Frank's advice about seeking a calm and stable life "in the shadows" (2014, 143), rather than "chasing lights" (2014, 143), seems to help Michael in the process of his moral development (it certainly leads him to take on his duties as a father).

Nonetheless, the ending of *Rusty Bell* can also be viewed as problematic, as it leaves the reader with what appears to be an unresolved emotional conflict regarding Michael's attitude towards Rusty Bell. On the surface, their relationship appears to have weathered the crisis, as both parents find a sense of purpose in raising their son. Recalling his visit to the maternity ward, Michael notes a significant change of attitude towards his wife: "Something shifted inside me, something important. It seemed a permanent shift, a movement both sudden and profound. Was it forgiveness, love maybe? It could have been defeat, surrender, but one never knows with these things" (Mohlele 2014, 151).

3 I adopt Robert Morrell's understanding of fatherhood as a social role. Morrell (2006, 14) argues that "fatherhood stresses the importance of social relationships and choice." In this sense, fatherhood can be described as "a role that is understood and exercised in different ways".

Michael's reflection is ambiguous insofar as it does not answer conclusively whether or not he has successfully confronted his anger at Rusty Bell. It is equally possible that Michael has suppressed his anger and "surrendered" – to use his word – his grievances. In the situation just described, the suppression of affect – specifically, anger – contributes to the shaping of Michael's masculinity, insofar as it leads him to take on his responsibilities as a husband and father. If Michael has successfully subdued his anger at his wife, it comes at the cost of other emotions; consequently, his relationship with Rusty has reached a state of stasis. There is the sense that his narrative ends with a flattening out of almost all emotions, which have become tamed and domesticated. This is not necessarily a positive sign, as it may indicate Michael's sense of resignation masquerading as a positive development.

Conclusion: Affect and the Pressure of Social Expectations

For the conclusion of this article, I would like to return to Lauren Berlant's comment on the nature of intimacy. Berlant writes about "[i]ts potential failure to stabilize closeness", which, as she claims, "always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability" (1998, 282). This destabilising dimension of intimacy is evident in *Rusty Bell*, in which the various affects associated with intimacy constantly threaten to undermine the stability of human relationships, including those that are socially sanctioned, such as marriage. The subversive potential of affect, discussed in relation to Todd Reeser's theories, is inextricably connected with trauma and emotional vulnerability. In Mohlele's novel, trauma is described as an experience of utter powerlessness, starkly in contrast with the sense of agency with which masculinity is often associated. *Rusty Bell* not only shows the lingering effects of trauma, but it also directs attention to how it is suppressed by the male protagonist. It is noteworthy that Michael never discusses this subject with anyone, including his therapist, but only mentions it in the privacy of his confessional narrative.

The second way in which the subversive nature of intimacy manifests itself is through the gender melancholy that Michael experiences after the death of his close friend, Columbus. Deeply attached to his memories of intellectual closeness and emotional intimacy, Michael views his relationship with Columbus as a source of safety, largely because he feels understood and accepted. Although his melancholia is a profoundly personal experience, it also has a social dimension insofar as it can be viewed as a manifestation of indirect refusal to accept the gender roles imposed upon him by society, specifically the roles of the husband and father. If this is indeed an expression of refusal, then it is a short-lived one, since, as we saw, the novel ends with Michael embracing his responsibilities. In this sense, *Rusty Bell* can be viewed as a Bildungsroman whose conclusion is nevertheless ambiguous: Michael seems to have found his place within the existing social structures, but he does not feel any profound sense of satisfaction stemming from this realisation. It can be argued then that, while Mohlele's novel

explores the subversive dimension of affect, it also shows how this force can be subjugated in alignment with internalised social expectations.

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