



## ***Vrou is Gif*: The representation of violence against women in Margie Orford's Clare Hart novels**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article takes as its starting point that crime fiction is a public and political response to gender-based violence. Using the methods of both discourse analysis and literary analysis of the crime fiction genre, the novels of Margie Orford, internationally acclaimed crime author and patron of Rape Crisis, are examined for their representations of violence against women, and the role played by these representations in Orford's overall feminist project in the Clare Hart series. The article also considers theories about gender-based violence which link male violence to a purported crisis in the established gender order of South Africa. An attempt is made to understand the relationship between fictionalised representations of violence and the 'banality' of real-life violence. Finally, Hart, Orford's hard-boiled female detective figure, is assessed to determine whether this character constitutes a significant feminist achievement that contributes to discourses which counter gender-based violence.*

**Keywords:** *South Africa; crime fiction; gender-based violence; representation; feminist detective*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A wide body of research shows that public knowledge of, and attitudes towards, crime are heavily shaped by media consumption (see for instance Dowler, 2003; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 1998). In this article we are interested in a particular form of crime, namely gender-based violence and its portrayal in one specific genre of media: crime fiction. Gone are the days when crime fiction was regarded as 'lowbrow', cheap and escapist

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2 Woman is poison. Tattooed on gangster Graveyard de Wet's chest in Daddy's girl

entertainment. In South Africa today crime fiction is one of the most widely read and accessible forms of literature. Moreover, the post-apartheid crime fiction novel has been touted by some critics as the new 'political novel' which engages with the most pressing socio-political challenges facing contemporary South Africa (see Naidu 2013, p. 727). In Margie Orford's crime novels the national challenge which informs the content and the form of the narratives is gender-based violence. A 2012 Interpol report named South Africa the world's rape capital and said that a woman in South Africa is more likely to be raped than to be able to read. More than three-quarters of South African men have perpetrated violence against women in their lifetime and more than half of women in South Africa have experienced gender-based violence (Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance, 2011). From plot lines, setting and characterisation to graphic descriptions of violated and brutalised bodies, Orford's quest to address this theme head-on is overt and relentless. However, it is necessary to examine *how* Orford represents gender-based violence in her novels (and she is not alone in this focus – South African novelist Lauren Beukes deals with similar themes as do many others including, and with very different effects with regard to the portrayal of women, and of mothers in particular, Scottish author Karen Campbell). Our interest is in how these representations differ from or are similar to the instances of real-life violence from which they draw their inspiration. We ask in this article whether Orford's fictionalised accounts constitute a disruption or confirmation of prevailing gender orthodoxies. Orford's engagement with hegemonic masculinities and femininities, particularly in the characterisation of her protagonist/detective/heroine Clare Hart, is questioned. Of significance too is the portrayal in these novels of the greater social context of violence. Sally Munt (1994, p. 149), writing about feminism and the crime novel, has observed that:

[t]hese novels perform a double operation – a primary, political gesture of making visible abuse in a non-sensationalist way, and a secondary one of reassuring readers and victims of abuse that resolution and recovery is possible.

This "double operation", of making a political statement whilst offering hope and consolation, is possible only if the fictionalised representations are steeped in a realist mode which convinces the reader that the narrative has its basis in real-life crimes. In some instances the world depicted by crime fiction is far removed from the real-life locales in which the violent crime unfolds, and often, due to the conventions of the genre, descriptions of violence are sensationalised. Contrary to Munt's view of the value of crime fiction, some critics have commented on how crime fiction inures readers to the horrors of violent crime. Eva Erdmann (2009, p.17) has written of how the proliferation of crime writing has made "the unusual occurrence of murder the norm", providing us with "an uninterrupted daily supply of corpses" (p. 17). For Erdmann this has led to stereotypical plots: "crossword puzzles in which the same combinations of letters repeat themselves" (2009, p.18). She decries

both the hysterical reaction to crime in real life and murder turned into banality by the serial production of detective fiction (Erdmann, 2009). Orford's novels can never be accused of having this effect – of normalising gender-based violence. In the Clare Hart series representation of gender-based violence is a deliberate “political gesture” to highlight the high levels of crime against women and children with which South Africans are all too familiar. Far from provoking overblown responses, in real life often it is the case that South Africans are so desensitised to violent crime that they do not react at all to graphic daily media descriptions of violent crime. A BBC feature has described South Africans as “unable to muster much more than a collective shrug in the face of almost unbelievably grim statistics” (Harding, 2013). Representing, critiquing and offsetting this shocking scenario in her crime novels has become Orford's mission, and it is through crime fiction which she claims, for her, has its origins in “particular, real crimes” (Orford, 2013, p. 226) that she hopes to inscribe “a different language, an empathetic language, a language that speaks of resilience and survival” (Orford, 2013, p. 229). Being fictional representations these accounts are obviously aestheticised and to some extent sensationalised, but occurring within a fictional narrative also make possible the means whereby gender-based violence is countered through “resolution and recovery”.

## THE ‘QUEEN’ OF SOUTH AFRICAN CRIME FICTION

Born in London, Orford grew up in Namibia and South Africa. She was at university in Cape Town in the 1980s and was detained in 1985 during the State of Emergency that was declared by the apartheid government as it struggled to maintain control over a country that was being made ungovernable by the mass uprising for democracy. The Clare Hart series was born out of Orford's work in investigative journalism. In 2003 she was a Mondi Prize finalist for her story on the trafficking of women for South Africa's sex industry. This story inspired her first crime fiction novel, *Like clockwork* (2006), featuring the investigative journalist, documentary film-maker, police profiler, Clare Hart. Clare also has a PhD in femicide and sex crimes. Her thesis is entitled ‘Crimes Against Women in Post-Apartheid South Africa’ in which she argues that South Africans averted a civil war but the “unspent violence was sublimated into a war against women” (*Like clockwork*, 2006, pp. 27–8).

Clare is one half of a detecting duo. The male detective in the Clare Hart novels is Captain Riedwaan Faizal of the South African Police Service – the sometimes lover of Clare. Orford is on record as saying of Clare Hart that Hart is her vision of how she, Orford would be, “if I was thinner, cleverer and had had fewer children” (Lord, n.d., para.6). Chillingly, perhaps, given this identification of the author with the central character, Orford says of Clare's lover Riedwaan Faizal that he is based on the policeman who detained Orford – whom she describes as “a good man in an impossible situation” (Lord, n.d., para.6). This idea that

South Africa once again finds itself in impossible times when good people must do bad things to save themselves and others echoes through her fiction.

There are five novels to date in the Clare Hart series: *Like clockwork* (2006), *Blood rose* (2007), *Daddy's girl* (2009), *Gallows hill* (2011) and *Water music* (2013). The novels are crime thrillers in the realist mode: they draw on the American hard-boiled and police procedural genres of crime fiction, including the requisite generic elements such as a troubled, lone, often renegade detective figure, required for a 'thrilling' read. However, these novels offer more than a thrill. Their aim is clearly to play a role in social analysis and critique. Specifically, the novels examine and expose the various ways in which women are violated, abused, exploited and annihilated in contemporary South Africa. In every one of these novels violence against women is central to the plot and themes, or is graphically represented. Orford (2013, p. 220) reveals that for her the central focus of the novels is "the intimate effect – emotional as well as physical – of pain that is individual as well as social, a consequence of moral failure and violence". Chronologically, the narratives of Hart and Faizal begin in *Daddy's girl*. Here the reader learns of Clare's 'Persephone' project – her investigations into and television documentary series about missing girls. From the start, with the first published novel, *Like clockwork*, Orford presents the reader with a character whose main quest, both personally and professionally, is to end the violent war being waged against women's bodies.

## CRISIS IN THE GENDER ORDER

While Orford's main focus is on violence perpetrated against women, her novels also contain complex male characters, on both sides of the law. The male characters who commit atrocious acts of violence against women, for example, Cape Flats gangster, Graveyard de Wet in *Daddy's girl*, are carefully contextualised. They are shown to operate in a socio-political milieu in which masculinity is closely linked to violence. R.W. Connell (2001) famously proposed that at any given time certain ways of being masculine will be hegemonic, while others will be subordinated. What counts as hegemonic shifts across time and place, is subject to challenge, contestation and change but at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others will be culturally exulted while some ways of being a man will be subordinated to that dominant ideal. One way in which some theorists have sought to understand male violence in South Africa has been to say that it is a reflection of a gender order in crisis in the sense that it can be read as an attempt to maintain dominance under circumstances where hegemony is not assured (Connell, 1995). Hegemony, we might remind ourselves, is not the same as dominance. Dominance is a minimum requirement of hegemony, but for something to be hegemonic implies that it has the consent of the dominated. "Violence," Connell says (2001, p. 44), "is part of a system of domination, but it

is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate. The scale of contemporary violence points to crisis tendencies in the modern gender order.”

At the level of law and formal institutions, South Africa’s is a gender order that has been significantly shaken up over the last two decades. The post-1994 democratic Constitution has been held up as a model for the protection of gender rights – certainly on the continent of Africa. Section 1, which articulates the Constitution’s founding values, includes a commitment not only to non-racialism, but also to non-sexism. The Bill of Rights outlaws unfair discrimination, and makes specific mention of discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation and marital status. The right to freedom of expression enshrined in the Constitution expressly prohibits advocacy of hatred based on gender among other prohibitions. Section 12 of the Bill of Rights refers to the right of citizens to be “free of all forms of violence” and specifically includes violence both of a public *and* a private nature – a clear reference to domestic violence. Section 12 provides every citizen with the right to autonomy in decisions concerning reproduction and to “security in and control over their body”. The democratic period has seen the legalisation of civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, the establishment of the right of women to abortion on demand and the introduction of labour legislation which mandates both state and private bodies to ensure that women are given equal employment opportunities.

Augmenting the legal framework, a variety of new institutions have been established in the democratic era whose mandate is to ensure that gender equality, gender rights and the right to non-discrimination do not exist in law alone. These include, for instance, the Commission on Gender Equality, an independent body mandated by the Constitution to monitor implementation of, and progress towards, the achievement of gender equality goals. The Office on the Status of Women is meant to ensure that gender awareness is integrated into the work of government ministries, provincial legislatures and all government policies and programmes. A Parliamentary Women’s Group created within the legislature aims to bring together women MPs, and a new standing committee of Parliament – the Joint Standing Committee for Improving the Quality of Life and Status of Women – has been established. The ruling African National Congress requires a one-third quota for women on its party list which has had the result of making South Africa’s legislature one of the most gender representative in the world.

Ironically, these developments are sometimes cited as a ‘cause’ of the country’s especially high levels of violence against women – the so-called ‘backlash hypothesis’. According to this hypothesis, in the context of dominant patriarchal mores which dictate that men are breadwinners and providers, South Africa’s high rates of unemployment, poverty

and inequality leave the majority of men feeling emasculated. Media images, meanwhile, portray women as hip, sexy, economically independent and politically powerful. In order to reassert a sense of agency, power and control, so the hypothesis continues, men beat, rape, humiliate and kill women. Violence against women is an attempt to control women – as the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr (1964, pp. 43–8) pointed out more than 40 years ago, the purpose of abuse is not so much to inflict pain as to establish relations of dominance and submission. An upsurge of violence against women might be taken to mean then that there is a perceived crisis in the gender order – what the philosopher Rene Girard (2005) might have termed a “crisis of degree” necessitating the re-establishment of the predictability of known hierarchies. To put it plainly, gender-based violence has to do with positioning women within a hierarchy, and, by implication, men also.

Orford’s novels engage with this idea of gender-based violence as often being the result of male reactions to loss of dominance. For example, Graveyard de Wet’s final vicious attack on his daughter, Pearl, whom he has abused for years, comes in the context of her cooperation with the police which led to his incarceration (*Daddy’s girl* 2009, pp. 274–5). Orford (2013, p. 226) writes that her female lead’s freedom to “travel, in a literary sense, through South Africa ... is threatening to a masculine order, which is therefore endangered”. Male characters are shown to be motivated by desires to restore dominance through violence.

Louise du Toit (2014) has warned that attempts to make sense of the current rape crisis in South Africa using interpretive frames that reference current socio-economic exclusion or past trauma as an explanation for male violence risk limiting the accountability of rapists and fail to capture the devastating effect on victims. While Orford depicts worlds of stark deprivation and male dominance in question rather than being absolute, she cannot be accused of complicity in diminishing the responsibilities of perpetrators or the effects of their actions. The lead male character whose anti-gangster credentials are impeccable, Detective Riedwaan Faizal shares an impoverished and violent background with many of the criminals and their female victims. Orford holds nothing back in portraying in the starkest terms the brutalisation and casual abasement of the latter who are scarred and branded, reduced to objects of gratification and commodities for hire or sale, tortured and in some instances, murdered. From a feminist perspective, the female protagonist, Clare Hart, has a satisfyingly integral role to play in avenging these crimes and rescuing women and girls from men, in some cases literally physically shattering male power. But whilst shattering one illusion, do the novels also enact other illusions – the illusion of a realistic depiction of violence against women and girls in South Africa and the illusion of female power in the figure of Clare Hart?

## ILLUSION ONE – FICTIONAL VIOLENCE AND THE BANALITY OF THE REAL

When the body of Anene Booyesen, a 17-year-old girl, was found in the industrial area of Bredasdorp in the Southern Cape, in the early hours of a Saturday morning in February 2013, the press reports at first glance eerily suggested a Clare Hart novel. Anene Booyesen had been raped. Her body had been sliced open from her stomach to her genital area, and her internal organs and insides were described by paramedics as “hanging out” (Munusami, 2013). Her mother, Corlia Olivier, described the sight of her daughter after the attack: “My child almost looked purple. She was in such a bad state. All her fingers were broken, her legs were broken. Her stomach had been cut up, you could see her intestines. Her throat was also slit open” (Munusami, 2013, para. 5). According to the Department of Health, hospital staff had to receive debriefing counselling, “because the girl’s injuries were so horrific” (Munusami, 2013, para. 7).

Four of Orford’s Clare Hart novels are situated in the Cape where Anene Booyesen died. In the opening pages of *Like clockwork*, the elderly Harry Rabinowitz, out for an early morning walk in Cape Town’s Seapoint finds the body of a 17-year-old girl. Her throat has been precisely, meticulously sliced through. The force of the knife wound has all but decapitated her. Her naked body lies spread-eagled, blood pooling in the corners of her eyes. Harry is in shock and onlookers gag at the horrific sight of the brutalised body which has been carefully arranged, one hand bound with blue rope and bridal bouquet placed next to it (Orford, 2006, p. 9).

But the similarity between the crimes perpetrated against Anene Booyesen and those described by Orford is superficial. In contrast to the elaborately posed corpses of crime fiction which are “posed as carefully as a model for a shoot” (Orford, 2006, p. 69), the body itself used as a language with which to communicate in code, offering clues which are at first undecipherable, Anene Booyesen was left casually discarded, her insides lying beside her in the sand. In Orford’s novels, as in most crime fiction, there is a need for investigators and detectives, pathologists and astute profilers to decode the awful meaning of sickening deeds. The violated body is the main clue to solving the crime. There is a comfort in this fictional resolution. Far more difficult to digest is the casual mutilation that seems to have no real decipherable purpose at all. In the case of Anene Booyesen, there is no ‘solving’ of the crime although the perpetrators may be brought to justice. The social ills which give rise to such horrific behaviour are bewildering, pervasive, political and historical, circumstances and contexts which Orford (2013, p. 220) herself describes as “the obliterating chaos of violence” that cannot be facily resolved.

The plot lines in these real-life killings, whether corroborated fact or not, are often banal. Booyesen was reported to have named her attacker before she died and he appeared in the Bredasdorp Magistrate's Court on charges of rape and murder on the Tuesday following her death (Engelbrecht, 2013a). There were no twists and turns here, no satisfying sense of the gradual unfolding of deep-seated motive and potent intent, no fast-paced chase, no heroic deeds or clever detection on the part of the investigator. According to one source, the alleged attacker's testimony was that he and Anene had been at a bar drinking together. He walked her home and they began to vry – to make out. She pushed him away, so he raped her. She later died of her injuries (Engelbrecht, 2013b). In a crime novel, for the reader to find this level of violence against the female body believable, it would need in some way to be explained. The detective figure is key in unravelling motive and putting the pieces of the story together. The victim may, for example, have thwarted the ambitions of powerful men, or the criminal is shown to be mentally ill, a sick psychopath. In crime fiction, the violent act, as well the victim's body, are dissected so that a satisfactory resolution may be presented to the reader. But in Anene's story there is no such denouement, the story is tragic but without resolution or intrigue; hence the apathetic shrug of a bewildered public.

Through fiction, Orford's novels describe the fate of girls and women whose bodies are trafficked in the course of highly organised, premeditated male-perpetrated crime (see Levin Landman in *Like clockwork* and Milan Savić in *Water music*). The victims are women who are lured from neighbouring countries to be pimped in Cape Town's red light district, the 'stock' of illegal brothels and 'gentlemen's clubs'. The economic reasons for this trade are mentioned but what Orford highlights is the brutal violence used to subjugate and silence these women. As Clare Hart investigates, the network of dominance is revealed and organised crime, or in other cases a pathological lone criminal, is vanquished. The teleology of crime fiction demands that the crime be explained and the criminal defeated. But for many South African women their brutalisation is more mundane and as a result all the more baffling and debilitating. The opportunistic men who rape vulnerable targets cannot be easily 'profiled' like one of Clare Hart's adversaries. The two men who appeared in the Khayelitsha Magistrate's Court in May 2013 for raping a mentally disabled teenager were neighbours, not hardened gang supremos. Nor were they cunning serial rapists or members of an international ring of human traffickers. The setting for this seemingly senseless crime is mundane and the plot line simple. The 15-year-old girl was playing outside her home on a Thursday when she was lured to a nearby shack with the promise of money. She was abused for over two hours before escaping. The perpetrators were found and beaten before being turned over to police by the community within 24 hours (Lepule, 2013).



The fictional narrative and the real-life narrative take different forms. In a crime thriller novel the plot is complex, a roller-coaster ride of twists and turns, often action-packed and suspenseful, but always with the detective triumphing through a potent combination of physical feats and canny detection. Orford's Clare Hart always triumphs and the crime, like its victim, is laid bare for the reader. In Orford's novels, the satisfaction of narrative closure is not denied. But in the real-life narratives, there is very often no mystery, no thrilling plot and no satisfying explanation which could facilitate closure. However, the value of the fictionalised representations of violence should not be hastily dismissed because of a lack of verisimilitude. In transforming the banal of the real into the sensational of fiction, Orford's aim (2013, p. 221) is to "understand and then allay that fear of random violence" – to make sense of the apparently senseless.

## **ILLUSION TWO: FEMININE POWER OF THE FEMALE DETECTIVE**

For Orford's representations of violence against women to achieve credibility and not be viewed as mere gratuitous entertainment for the crime thriller fan who expects scenes of graphic violence, a discernible broader feminist narrative strategy in her texts needs to be identified. The key to such a narrative strategy would be a female protagonist who embodies feminine power. First, however, the notion of femininity needs to be unpacked. To understand masculinity, femininity needs to be constantly invoked, and vice versa. The traits of idealised masculinity in a patriarchal gender order are defined in contrast to femininity, resulting in a series of binary discourses in which the masculine is privileged while the feminine is that which is lacking in some way. In a patriarchal gender order, masculinity is associated with authority, status, public action, rationality, strength, courage, hardness, toughness; while femininity is characterised as emotion, irrationality, deficiency, subordination, fear, weakness, incapacity, domesticity, softness, vulnerability, passivity. The terms in the binary are not separate but imbricated. The feminine is the disgraced and repudiated. The exulted masculine is that which the feminine is not.

Transplanted to the fictional world of the Clare Hart novels these binary discourses can be summed up in the line "*vrou is gif*"; and the masculine antidote to the feminine poison is violence. Of significance is whether the figure of Clare Hart undoes or perpetuates the harmful masculine is strong/feminine is weak binary of patriarchal gender orders. Clare Hart is a hard-boiled female detective figure. While genetically female she is a tough-talking, physically adept masculinised figure yet she is motivated by a deep concern for the female victims of gender-based violence. Some have argued that through characters like Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, all intelligent, urban, single, gun-handling, private detectives who are streetwise

and able to physically face threats from men and to kill if necessary, crime fiction was taken in a feminist direction (Gavin, 2010). These characters are seen to be central to a feminist literary agenda – “re-writing the male hard-boiled tradition into a counter-tradition” (see Irons, 1992). What is crucial is that these early feminist hard-boiled narratives “reveal women’s experiences in the face of patriarchal systems of both crime and justice, and despite their detective successes their vulnerability is in places acknowledged” (Gavin 2010, p. 265). In other words, these female hard-boiled detectives of the early 1980s are strong women rather than masculinised women. For example, V.I. Warshawski is divorced and has no family but has “close women friends and female community is important in her life” (Gavin, p. 265) and Kinsey Millhone is a loner because macho prejudice and unwelcome sexual attentions have forced her to leave the police force and turn private eye (D’Haen, 2009, p. 149). In contrast, Clare Hart appears to be more a masculinised female character rather than being a character who reclaims the strength and the agential in the feminine.

Unlike Kinsey Millhone and V.I. Warshawski whose support groups Theo D’Haen (2009, p. 150) describes as those of the average housewife, and Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum, who uses the unofficial channels of her female network to crack cases, Clare Hart is a much more relentlessly masculinised character, from her love of power to her repudiation of intimacy. While on the one hand Clare is always on the side of good, defending and avenging female victims of violent crime, she also admits to her enjoyment of the power that holding a camera gives her. In her words “how intense the pleasure to be had from power is” (*Like clockwork*, 2006, p. 5), suggesting a complicity with masculine objectification of women. Furthermore, Clare is contrasted to her sisters, Julie and Constance, who together are a composite of the stereotypically feminine traits she lacks. When Clare makes a shopping list her sister Julie comments, “you *are* being domestic”, to which Clare responds, “I’m trying” (*Like clockwork*, 2006, p. 4). The domesticated Julie is intensely involved with her children, Beatrice and Imogen. Unlike the ever-calm and capable Clare, Julie is “unable to answer a phone without dropping it” and she speaks in an “effusive torrent” from her world of breakfasts and homework and lost hockey sticks. The character Julie, when compared to Clare who takes surfing lessons, drinks tea but with a shot of whiskey and who does not like cake, is a parody of female domesticity and motherhood.

The character Constance is cast as the feminine irrational to Clare’s rational, masculinised role. Intuitive Constance, Clare’s twin and “other self”, accuses Clare of “always thinking, never understanding”. Professionally, Clare earns her very public role as a police consultant through her powers of reasoning while Constance, who lives cloistered in a remote haven for victims of violent crime, is depicted as incapable of rational thought – she can only feel. It is also Constance’s body that is literally marked with the scars of sexual violence, a symbol of her feminine vulnerability. She is the violated twin while Clare’s body is inviolable, lean, hard and masculinised:

Where Clare's body was muscular, Constance's was soft. Criss-crossed with scars, her thighs and breasts carried the knife emblems of the gang that had used her to initiate two new members. On her back, illegible now, were brutal signatures where they had carved their initials. Her left cheekbone was curved as sharply as a starling's wing, the other had been reconstructed out of the shattered mess left by a hammer blow that had glanced off her skull and spared her life. For some reason the men, how many or who Constance could never say, had not struck a final blow. They were distracted, perhaps, or bored with the messy pulp that she had become. And so she had lived, her hip-length hair hiding a shattered face and the cold snake of fear coiled inside her thin body.

(*Like clockwork*, 2006, p. 38)

Although Constance's violated, disfigured body is the ghost body that Clare sees in the mirror when she looks at herself, Clare's body is in fact capable, strong, attractive and able to withstand violent attacks. Another indicator of the degree to which the character is masculinised is Clare's isolation and fear of intimacy. When Clare helps the young survivor Whitney, in *Like clockwork*, taking her to the safety of her flat and tucking her into bed in her spare room, she ends up needing to breathe deeply to "still the panic at having another person so close, so dependent." (2006, p. 127). In terms of the binary discourse of patriarchal gender orders, the character Clare Hart exhibits overt masculine traits.

Perhaps most surprising of all the masculine traits is Clare's feeling of complicity rather than unequivocal repugnance with the misogyny and ambition of trafficker, pornographer and brutaliser of women, Kelvin Landman. His clubs deal in ritualised public degradation of women. Men in the audience join in horsewhipping bound women whose bodies end up draped limply around poles. Clare interviews Landman at one of his clubs on "fetish night". The 'show' includes a whip cracked across a girl's breasts while a strobe light turns slowly tattooing the girl's flesh with degrading pornographic inscriptions. Clare finds herself defiled, not by what she has been inadvertently exposed to, but by her own arousal. Clare is mesmerised and Kelvin notices that she "likes it". She thinks of going home to scrub herself clean of the defilement but finds her way instead to Riedwaan's unmade bed. With this scene it becomes clear that Orford has deliberately created a female character who blurs the lines between stereotypical formulations of masculine and feminine. Clare is at Landman's club to expose the trafficking and abuse of women but finds herself unable to "short-circuit the erotic charge of the damaged female body, the building block of pornography, desire and crime fiction" (Orford, 2013, p. 227).

The masculinisation of Clare's character extends to her relationship with Riedwaan, in which stereotypical gender roles are inverted. It is he who needs her, "like a man needed

water" (*Like clockwork*, p. 197). It is he who shows tenderness and care by touching her cheek and offering her a ride. But Clare holds out. Riedwaan is sentimental, remembering her birthday and holding her pillow against him for traces of her warmth. Moreover, Clare is portrayed as a loner, as a renegade and a maverick. Seen through Riedwaan's eyes she is "brilliant and obsessive, but difficult to work with" (*Like clockwork*, p.10). Displaying the same cynicism and instinct for survival as the male hard-boiled heroes, she does not like teams and she does not trust anyone. Her relationship with the law is flexible and she lives a spartan life. The bedroom in her flat where she lives alone, except for Fritz the cat, is unadorned, containing only a bed and a wall covered with books (*Like clockwork*). Clare, it would seem, is a female character expunged of all the disgraced outward signs of femininity: softness, fear, vulnerability, dependency, domesticity and passivity. As a result of this characterisation, a sharp binary between the feminine in need of rescuing, and the possibility of rescue coming from a place of the non-feminine is evoked. The conclusion, it would seem, is that in attempting to inscribe a female hard-boiled detective figure, Orford has created a masculinised female character, a mere illusion of feminine power. Has Orford inadvertently bought into hegemonic patriarchal discourse by creating such a masculinised protagonist? Crucially, the character Clare Hart does not operate alone, in a literary sense *and* within her fictional world. She forms part of a complex narrative in which ambiguities are possible and in which graphic representations of violence against women predominate, and she plays a role in a social network of law enforcers, criminals and victims – a role which requires her to constantly negotiate the binaries and dynamics of the hegemonic gender order. When viewed against this backdrop, a slightly different assessment of the character emerges.

Orford's depiction is not without nuance: Clare Hart *is* at times vulnerable, physically and emotionally. She feels guilt and responsibility for Constance's traumatic gang rape but this serves to motivate her professionally, not cripple her. She is often attacked and beaten by criminals but she does resist male attempts to dominate her through violence and she does succeed in saving Theresa, Yasmin, Rosa and so on, towards whom she expresses a deep tenderness and empathy. She tells Pearl's story and helps Whitney escape. She also tracks down killers and kills them. She does this by working in a team despite her preference for solitude (she works with the police, forensic experts, informants, IT and sound specialists and various others). What distinguishes Clare is her "emotional intelligence and integrity which make those she questions able to trust her" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 199). Clare's achievement is rendered all the more remarkable because of the searing representations of violence against female victims which the novels contain. Clare is not intimidated by this brutality; in fact it is what spurs her on to further action. The feminist achievement of Orford's novels lies in the horror of these representations and Clare's response to it – her determination to fight the war against women abuse and her continued quest for personal

salvation (evident in her relationship with Riedwaan and acceptance of motherhood in *Water music*).

## CONCLUSION

Analysts of gender-based violence in South Africa (see, for example, Mfalapitsa, 2009) and Jewkes (2009) allude to “harmful masculinity” as causally related to male violence against women. The argument is that men who harm women are reading off a dominant script of masculinity that narrates their entitlement to women’s ‘respect’, the need to publically enact masculine heterosexuality and a strong sense of entitlement to women’s compliance with male sexual demands. Orford’s novels engage with this form of masculinity in its crudest form but this engagement is risky. The graphic representation of the violence perpetrated against women in a crime thriller novel can never fully capture the horror, the trauma, the pain of the experience itself. Neither can the novels fully analyse the root causes of this “harmful masculinity”, nor can they offer comprehensive solutions. The conventions of the crime thriller novel, a previously male-dominated literary form, require some degree of entertainment and escapism, however ethically committed the author may be to eradicating this “harmful masculinity” and its resultant violence. Thus crime fiction narratives differ markedly from other forms of narrative pertaining to violent crimes. Yet authors like Orford aim to marry ‘real’ social ills with literary conventions in order to render a plausible narrative which challenges the status quo.

One of the key elements of the crime thriller novel is a successful, strong and heroic detective figure who enacts “resolution and recovery” (Munt, 1994, p. 149). In this paper we have wondered if Margie Orford’s central female character, Clare Hart, affirms or disrupts the idea that soft-fleshed dependent femininity in some sense gets what it deserves – that to be safe it is femininity itself that must either be cloistered like Constance or expunged as it is in the figure of Clare.

An unsympathetic reading would contend that rather than envisioning a future in which culturally exalted masculinity is not violent and in which having relationships of dependency does not disqualify a person from the appellations of strength and capability, here we must rely precisely on violent masculinity – even if embodied in a female character – to save us. Rather than misogyny being parodied, it is the language of human rights and gender transformation that is lampooned. Like the pornography portrayed in the novels, gratification is short lived and ultimately at the expense of the degradation of traits associated in dominant culture with femininity and the celebration of those traits commonly associated with masculinity.

To some extent this is an outcome of the limitations of the form itself. For Orford's novels to succeed as feminist crime thrillers, her detective has to be both 'realistic' and extraordinary – both courageous and vulnerable, tough against criminals and sensitive and compassionate towards victims, tormented by personal demons but driven to resolve the crime, and she has to possess the inspirational strength to gesture towards recovery, recuperation and ultimately transformation. In other words, her female detective figure has to straddle the binaries of patriarchal discourse, combining stereotypical masculine and feminine traits in order to fulfil the larger-than-life role of a heroic detective figure.

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