



# White masculine desire and despair in *The good doctor* by Damon Galgut<sup>1</sup>

M. Crous  
Department of Language & Literature  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University  
PORT ELIZABETH  
E-mail: marius.crous@nmmu.ac.za

## Abstract

### White masculine desire and despair in *The good doctor* by Damon Galgut

*The purpose of this article is to examine the representation of masculinity in Damon Galgut's novel, "The good doctor", and in particular the interaction between the two male characters, namely Frank and Laurence. The character Frank suppresses his feelings of intimacy towards the younger Laurence through his machismo and his cruelty towards the latter. The question arises whether there is a homoerotic relationship between the two men in this postapartheid setting, or whether it is merely a mutual attempt at finding intimacy and closeness in their bleak existence. Furthermore, following Horrell (2005), the concepts of desire and despair with regard to white masculinity as portrayed in the novel will be examined.*

## Opsomming

### Wit manlike begeerte en wanhoop in *The good doctor* deur Damon Galgut

*Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die voorstelling van manlikheid in Damon Galgut se roman, "The good doctor", te ondersoek, maar in die besonder die interaksie tussen die twee belangrikste manlike karakters in die teks, naamlik Frank en*

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1 This article is an adaptation of Crous (2005:123-149) and the emphasis is primarily on the interaction between the two white males in the novel, thus explaining the choice of title. The issue of "whiteness" is dealt with by Titlestad and Kissick (2008) and Titlestad (2009).

*Laurence. Die karakter Frank, onderdruk sy gevoel van intimiteit jeens Laurence deur middel van sy machismo en sy wreedheid teenoor Laurence. Die vraag wat gevra kan word, is of daar 'n homoërotiese verhouding tussen die twee mans is in hierdie postapartheidsopset en of dit maar net 'n wedersydse uitreik na mekaar is om uit hulle uitsiglose bestaan te ontsnap. In navolging van Horrell (2005) sal wit manlike begeerte en wanhoop soos uitgebeeld in die roman ook ontleed word.*

## 1. Introduction

In an interview with Sampson (2003), Damon Galgut, the author of *The good doctor*, points out that central in the novel is the “ambiguous relationship of [the] two men”, namely Frank Eloff and Laurence Waters: “The clash at the heart of the book is really one between souls, if I can put it that way ... Frank hates Laurence not because his politics are different but because he is different.” In his review of the novel, Hope (2003:27) regards Frank Eloff and Laurence Waters as “opposite sides of the same coin” and both Wheelwright (2003) and Van Niekerk (2003:15) suggest that the relationship between the two male characters is “subtly homoerotic”. Van der Vlies (2004) feels that the “clearly homoerotic relationship” between the two men “is awkwardly marginalized” and concludes that Galgut seems “unsure of how to wring post-apartheid significance from the residual (but uncomfortably suppressed) gay sub-plot”. When asked about this ostensibly gay sub-plot of the novel, Galgut (De Waal, 2003) pointed out that he did not want to write an overtly gay novel. To him the underplaying or subtle suggestion of homoeroticism is much more effective as a literary strategy. Elsewhere he suggests “there are gay male elements in [his] work but they are not [his] central concern” (Wilmot, 1995:131). In her analysis Van Niekerk (2003) views *The good doctor* as an allegorical novel and considers Waters as Eloff’s alter ego.

It is against this background that I wish to offer a sustained gendered analysis of the representation of masculinity in Galgut’s novel *The good doctor*.

## 2. The contextualisation of desire and despair

In her discussion of a selection of South African novels written by white men, Horrell (2005:1) writes that

[...] metonymic inscriptions of pale masculine subjectivities are represented and exposed. Within and throughout these texts, written by ‘liberal’ novelists since the opening of the hearings of

the TRC, a process of confession, a wrenching of conscience is being performed. The telling of these stories – both those which narrate a historically and socially inflected coming of age, as well as those which pore over the shrivelled dreams of aging men – are indicative of an apparent and queasy withdrawal from power, an uneasy, shamed and perhaps sour submission to the political and social systems operating in the 'new South Africa'. These texts suggest that this representation of masculinity is essential to the continued occupation of formally colonised space by men of European origin [...] A reading of white masculinity in transitional, contemporary white South African writing – tales told at the cusp of change – enables a reading of the phrases of confession and contrition, desire and despair, and gestures towards discourses of both particular and global significance.

Although Horrell provides a contrasting position from which I intend reading Galgut's novel, her reference to the "desire and despair" will be the focus of my analysis as it pertains to the relationship between the two main characters, namely Frank and Laurence. I also wish to point out that within the abject space of an empty, dilapidating hospital in one of the former Bantustans (an example of contemporary colonised space referred to by Horrell; and the suggestion is that it refers to the former Ciskei), the heteronormative discourse on masculinity is subtly undermined through their conduct, which could be described as homoerotic. Following Sedgwick (1985:2) I have chosen "desire" instead of "love", because it "mark[s] the erotic emphasis" and love is usually associated with "a particular emotion", whereas desire is "analogous to the psychoanalytic use of libido". It is also the manifestation of more than just an emotional attraction towards someone else.

Frank, one of the main characters in the novel, is a remnant from the old order,<sup>2</sup> who now has to work with his black female superior. They do, however, mutually understand each other's ambitions and limitations. Her appointment is one of the major changes in the post-apartheid South African setting of the text, because now Frank has "[to take] orders from that black woman" (p. 145),<sup>3</sup> as Frank Senior

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2 Titlestad and Kissick (2008:21) examine the issue of "white male South African demotion" and in particular the way in which Frank represents "a compelling and imaginative account of a way forward" in the new political order. See also Barris (2005) and Cabarcos-Traseira (2005) for their analyses on the past and present legacies in *The good doctor*.

3 References containing only page numbers, refer to Galgut (2003).

puts it. Frank accepts his position and never really disrupts or challenges the “fragile politics” (p. 31) between the two. His original reason for coming to the hospital was personal, because he was at “a critical juncture in [his] life” (p. 31), following the collapse of his marriage. He opts to stay and to not accept “a payout” (p. 32) and with a sense of equanimity awaits his promotion.

This resolute acceptance of his position is, however, challenged by the arrival of Laurence, “[the] bland, biscuit-coloured young man, almost a boy still” (p. 2). A strategy used by the author in this novel is to make the two main characters share a room. The close proximity in a confined space provides the platform for the reader to study the tension between the two main characters and also provides interesting opportunities for the author to contrast the two men. The room was originally allocated to Frank and now he has to share his space with the new doctor. His remark that “[t]he moment you put two people in a room together, politics enters in” (p. 18), is significant, because it suggests that sexual politics and ideological differences will indeed play a major role in those two people’s lives – as is evident in the novel. Galgut (quoted in Wilmot, 1995:105) argues that what he regards as the measure of a successful novel is the way in which the novel “look[s] through the spaces between ideology” and the way in which it “deconstructs ideologies which have been superimposed over reality”.

Initially Frank creates the impression that the presence of the new “young doctor [who is] coming to do a year of community service” (p. 7) does not affect him, but as soon as he learns that the two are to share a room, he is dismayed and dares to question Dr Ngema’s authority. From the outset there is a strong sense of the division of roles with the older, established male taking the lead as the one responsible for the room. Frank is the one who has to clean up after Laurence (p. 9) and he is affected by Laurence’s smoking. Later on in the novel Frank refers to the roles (p. 71) acted out by the two of them in the room and comments on the fact that in the confines of the room he is “the shy, private one”, whereas Laurence is the exhibitionist who “[doesn’t] care how [Frank] saw him” (p. 71).

Laurence’s sense of purpose and his need to contribute to solving the problems of the new postapartheid society correspond to the observation by Collinson and Hearn (2001:157) that in the case of paternal masculinity, there is the “self-justifying claim” that “power is exercised in positive ways which enhance subordinates’ self-interests”. In a sense this type of behaviour by Laurence emulates the colonial missionaries who felt obliged to do something meaningful

for the rural people, albeit to promote their own selfish agendas. Once he acknowledges his position, Laurence also expresses his liking for Frank (p. 41). This expression of intimacy is the beginning of a sense of camaraderie that develops between the two, even though Frank does not want to acknowledge it openly. In his mind he does feel that he also likes Laurence. Immediately after having acknowledged to himself the fact that he also likes Laurence, he qualifies his feeling and claims that it “wasn’t based on anything except the few hours we’d spent in each other’s company” (p. 41). Frank’s realisation that he has a sense of affinity towards Laurence, however, immediately results in him feeling resentful.

The more intimate the interaction between them, the more it results in Frank feeling that he is now “two people in [his] dealings with Laurence” (p. 42). On the one hand there is the Frank who feels “under siege” because of Laurence’s intuitive probing into his life, and on the other hand we have the Frank who is “grateful not to be alone” (p. 42). At the same time, Laurence is also “like two separate people to [Frank]” (p. 42), namely both “[his] shadow” and “a companion and confidant” (p. 42). The notion of something like a shadow that always accompanies him was suggested earlier in the novel when Frank, following Laurence’s subtle reprimand by Dr Ngema, calls him “a puppy” (p. 14) that follows him around. This description suggests that Frank is the more dominant member of the relationship – the leader of the pack – and Laurence follows in his footsteps in a more subservient position. The reference to the shadow is also noteworthy from a Jungian point of view. The shadow is one of the archetypes in the unconscious and reveals itself in “those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people” (Jung, 1964:174) and it contains “the overwhelming power of irresistible impulse” (Jung, 1964:182). Laurence’s compassion, his sense of duty and the fact that he is able to bring about a complete change in the hospital with his “fresh energy” (p. 154), are all qualities that Frank suppresses in himself. Ironically, most readers would see the ironically named Frank as suppressing and embarrassed by his own “better feelings” – but of course the latter are seen as less than adequately “masculine”; as “weak” or “feminine” (or homosexual) by Frank. The closeness with Laurence in “a confined space” (p. 42) reminds Frank of his days in the army, but now without the strict discipline and the codes of conduct regulating their lives according to a macho system.

Whereas Laurence finds this closeness likeable (“I like sharing with you, Frank”, p. 55), Frank feels that there is more to his life than

“Laurence or the hospital” (p. 58). Yet he cannot escape from Laurence’s presence, because everybody constantly reminds him of the so-called friendship between him and Laurence. Frank’s aversion to the use of the word “friend” is based on past experiences. His friend, Mike, ran off with his wife (p. 49) and as a result he has never allowed anyone else close to him again. When Frank is questioned by Laurence about his love life and when was the last time he had a lover, his answer is significant: “Not since my marriage. Why are you asking? Are you worried about your girlfriend?” (p. 84). The irony is that Frank eventually does get involved with Zanele (p. 113), as an attempt to hurt Laurence, since Frank is unable to deal with his real feelings for Laurence. The only way of dealing with his feelings is to act in a typical macho way and sexually possess Laurence’s girlfriend. The body of Zanele is conceived as contested territory, and by having intimate relations with her, Frank imagines that indirectly he is also intimate with Laurence. Frank exercises his “regime of control” (Hook *et al.*, 1999:136) over Laurence’s body indirectly and abuses the female body – as he usually does – to hurt the masculine object of his desire. Remarks such as, “You’re my best friend, Frank” (p. 77) or references to their friendship by Mama Mthembu (p. 39) or even to Laurence’s sister (p. 97) merely irritate him because they tend to remind him of his cuckolding by his best friend. Even the reason for marrying Karen in the first place suggests that Frank has never been one to disclose his emotions and affection.

Laurence’s sense of misplaced loyalty towards Frank and his repressed desire for Frank cause him, for instance, to take the blame for Frank. This gesture also shows that Laurence’s feelings for Frank are much stronger and suggests a demonstration of his love. These undercurrents indeed have the elements of a romantic relationship, which supports the notion that there is an underlying homoerotic relation between the two doctors. Although Frank tries to be cynical about love and intimacy at all times, he reveals another side of his personality during instances when he observes Laurence with what is depicted as a strong awareness of the young man’s body. He watches him, for instance, lying “sprawled face-down” (p. 93) and focuses on his open mouth with “a string of saliva on his lip” (p. 93), which suggests an intimate awareness and an almost zooming in, camera-wise perspective on the erotic aspects of the body of the other. The mouth is an erogenous zone and in a heterosexual context, an artist might not openly study or admit studying the mouth of another male that intimately. The mouth is associated with kissing, but as Hartley (1996:4) points out, kissing in heterosexual relations “[m]ay be publicly displayed”. However, in the case of homo-

sexual relations there is a “strongly prohibitive socio-legal prejudice against the public display of homosexual kissing”. Frank thus suppresses his secret desire for intimacy with Laurence and manages only to gaze at the desired body of the other from a distance.

Frank’s description of his “perverse closeness” (p. 115) to Laurence, I would argue, suggests that he is uneasy about his feelings for another man and thus he regards these emotions he experiences as being perverse. Elsewhere he also refers to “a perverse comfort” (p. 182) that he experiences when he is very close to Colonel Moller.

Frank does not want to share his life with Laurence, as intimacy with Laurence implies sacrificing his independence. Instead of spending the night with his girlfriend after her welcoming party, Laurence returns to the room and expresses his admiration for Frank (“You were fantastic, Frank”, p. 92). Laurence expects a sense of commitment and intimacy from Frank, but his relationship with Zanele is more platonic and intellectual than physical. Frank feels obliged (p. 94) to spend time with Laurence and his girlfriend, but true to his macho, heterosexual nature, he also probably feels obliged to engage sexually with Zanele, because her relationship with Laurence lacks that facet. However, the “entangle[ment] in [Laurence’s] personal affairs” (p. 94) causes Frank to resent Laurence and immediately he wishes to create a distance between them. Therefore it is ironic that Laurence mentions that he thought Frank “[had] run out on [him]” (p. 94), because it is indeed what Frank contemplates doing instead of showing his vulnerability to Laurence or revealing that he needs Laurence’s presence in his life.

### **3. Men as mirror images of one another**

The room in which the welcoming party for Zanele takes place functions as a microcosm of South African society. It suggests that the only way in which men from different racial backgrounds in the country can really come together and forget about their past experiences, is within the context of a party atmosphere with artificial goodwill, temporary acceptance of one another and with a frenzied sense of madness fuelled by alcohol and music. Only in such a context is it possible for Frank to come to the realisation that Tehogo’s “grinning, sweating face [that] seemed mad to [him]” (p. 90) is actually his own mirror image. This moment of self-recognition calls to mind the conversation that Frank has with Laurence after Tehogo’s attack, when Frank denies that Tehogo has any symbolic role to play in his life (p. 194). The notion of a mirror image is significant because throughout the novel the different men and their

depictions of masculinity act as mirror images of one another: Frank's subservient position as medical doctor who has to obey his colonel (p. 64) is a mirror image of Frank's own torture and humiliation of Tehogo (p. 195). Masculine power is vested in the one who is in the position of authority (Connell, 1987:109). For instance, whereas Frank has no masculine power in the presence of Moller, once he has Tehogo as his object of control he is the powerful one and he is able to fit the image of a "tough, dominant and combative masculinity" (Connell, 1987:110). Similarly Frank and Laurence are also mirror images of one another – the idealistic and young Laurence is a mirror image of the older, cynical Frank.

The need to avenge Laurence is based on Frank's perception that Laurence is a Trojan horse who has managed to come "within the gates" (p. 161). Frank even compares his own malicious nature to "a dark brother" (p. 162), a "temporary resident" (p. 162) who enjoys, in a sadistic manner, Laurence's ethical dilemmas (such as Maria's abortion, p. 159) and emotional suffering. By forcing Laurence into a state of emotional confusion, Frank can triumph in the proof that he, by contrast, embodies a perceived notion of masculinity, namely that men are rational, disciplined and in control of their emotions (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001:17). Laurence is reduced to someone who embodies stereotyped attributes associated with femininity, such as docility, passivity, feebleness and sensitivity. This also corresponds to the conventional assumption that in a relationship, the male is the active and dominant party. I even want to suggest that it provides an interesting subtext for the homoeroticism that lurks below the surface of their interaction, in that Frank sees himself as the active party in the relationship and Laurence is the passive, receptive one. According to Mirande (2001:346) homosexuality "is defined not by object choice but by the distribution of power". The active partner is the one who penetrates, whereas the other assumes the "passive insertee role" (Mirande, 2001:346).

#### **4. The body of the masculine other**

Not only is Frank preoccupied with the bodily appearance and the powerful physique of the commandant, but he also has a fascination with the body of Laurence, which further supports the notion of repressed homoerotic feelings on his part. Zanele brings the issue to the fore when she confronts Frank with the fact that he and Laurence are "obviously in love with each other" (p. 101) – a remark that leaves Frank speechless. During Frank and Laurence's exploration of the countryside, Frank takes off his clothes and swims in



the pool (p. 70) whereas Laurence merely watches. When Laurence finally decides to take off his shirt, he is described as having a “pale, hairless chest, knobbly with bones” (p. 71). The inference drawn from this description is that Laurence is still young and innocent with an almost boyish look and that he lacks the stereotypical hairy chest as a sign of virility or masculinity. Throughout the text the emphasis is mostly on Laurence’s boyish looks and his somewhat adolescent-style behaviour (p. 2, 37, 43, 56, 72, 97, 129, 130, 151, 159). This immediately distinguishes him from the more cynical, adultlike Frank, who is portrayed as sexually promiscuous, divorced, and who has been in his job for years – to mention but a few so-called mature characteristics. Given the subtly homoerotic subtext of the novel, the beautiful, boyish Laurence represents “one of the West’s great sexual personae” (Paglia, 1990:110), namely the beautiful boy with his “male muscle structure but [with] a dewy girlishness”.

Elsewhere in the novel, Frank even goes as far as describing Laurence as “almost sexless” (p. 130). That supports the notion of a lack of potency and virility associated with Laurence. What we also learn from this incident is that Frank is usually “the shy one” within the space of the bedroom, but out here in the open, “the roles are somehow reversed” (p. 71). Frank is the shyer of the two, because he does not feel at ease to display his naked body to another man, but it also suggests that he is afraid that he might give in to his feeling of suppressed homoeroticism towards other men. Kimmel (2001:277) points out that the great fear associated with manhood is that “[they] are afraid of other men” and that other men will “unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up”. Laurence’s presence has already unmasked Frank’s lack of commitment to the betterment of the lives of the people in the rural areas and subsequently there is the fear that Laurence might also unmask his sexual vulnerability. He has to keep up the façade of being a lusty and virile heterosexual. The repression of supposedly homoerotic feelings for one another hence results in competitive displays of masculinity between the two men.

## **5. [S]tripped down in the disarray of the room – the pivotal scene**

During a pivotal scene in the novel it is significant that Frank finds himself – in his underwear – on Laurence’s bed and Laurence “sat on [Frank’s] bed” (p. 168). The fact that Frank is in his underwear suggests the possibility of an erotic encounter. In popular romances, in contrast with pornography, the hero is often depicted only in his

underwear to suggest the idea of a possible erotic encounter, but his phallus remains hidden from the gaze of the reader – and his partner.

Both men are seen as “stripped down in the disarray of the room” (p. 168), which suggests that the façades that they have been holding up to each other have now been stripped away. The understated homoeroticism is once again hinted at, but there is no real emotional intimacy between them. Kimmel’s (2001:276) remark that “[h]omophobic flight from intimacy with other men is the repudiation of the homosexual within”, is applicable here. From a masculine point of view, the fulfilment of erotic desires can occur without intimacy and emotional involvement, but because of both men’s repressed homoeroticism, there is no physical contact between them either. Laurence has now become “a stranger” (p. 168) to Frank, suggesting that he has been stripped of his naivety. Frank also apportions blame to Laurence for being an intruder in their close-knit community. Frank sees that there is nothing left of Laurence’s “pride and confidence” (p. 159), which he showed earlier.

Frank and Laurence end up in each other’s beds with the realisation that although “[they] were in the wrong beds” (p. 170), it does not matter. They have invaded each other’s private and intimate spaces completely. They have even swapped personalities as well, because Frank suddenly experiences a sense of heaviness. He now displays Laurence’s former sense of duty and responsibility, which is evident from his decision to clean their room first, before going out to pay a follow-up visit to Maria. The cleansing ritual, which started with Laurence’s bath, results in an analysis of one another’s characters and their respective roles in serving the community or functioning within it as doctors. Elsewhere in the novel Frank mentions that “[t]wo could play at this pseudo-psychology of [Laurence]” (p. 46), and that is exactly what now transpires between the two. The conclusion of this is that Frank has to acknowledge to Laurence and himself that he is not willing to do something about his predicament. He is also told that he is not part of the “new country” (p. 169) being built around him. Frank symbolises the white male who is content with his position and who does not want to work towards the betterment of society. He is seen as someone who “say[s] no to everything” (p. 170).

The final encounter between Frank and Laurence suggests that Frank is out to avenge himself on all the other men who cross his path. Such behaviour is typical of the weak and spiteful non-alpha male who clings to a heterosexual self-definition. He has started with

Laurence and now it is Tehogo's turn. Frank wants to restore his dominant presence in the hospital; he remembers the "trace of petulance" (p. 197) on Laurence's face and enjoys the hurt he inflicts upon the latter, particularly because it reminds him of the restoration of his power over him. In the end he has the "false peace of resignation" (p. 215) he so desires. The hospital is the domain where he, as Moller did in the army camp, can exercise his control over others and acts out the role of the alpha male.

Frank sees the sharing of his room with Laurence as a pivotal moment in his life (p. 215), but being in the same room as the young, ambitious Laurence does nothing to awaken compassion for others in Frank. He blatantly abuses Laurence's good work with the clinics "to bolster [his] own argument" (p. 214) so that he can convince the department not to close the hospital of which he is now in charge "after seven years of waiting" (p. 215). In the end he has disposed of all the men who were real challenges to him and his authority and it is only Jorge who remains behind. Jorge is no real threat to him and Frank even had a brief affair with Claudia Santander; an affair that he describes as "very powerful – lust fuelled by grief" (p. 52). Frank has a problem of intimacy not only with the women in his life, but also with the men – as can be deduced from his interaction with Laurence. He openly distrusts other men and he assures himself that he "wasn't made of the same fine stuff as Frank Eloff senior" (p. 139).

## 6. Conclusion

The discourse on masculine desire and despair as exemplified in *The good doctor* suggests that heterosexual men, when stripped of their potency and power within a particular context, in an attempt to survive this ostensibly bleak existence, develop a sense of intimacy towards one another – subtly, and not overtly homosexual. This new discourse on masculinity emulates the tenets of a male-male discourse, but as a result of the imposition of hegemonic heteronormative norms, such a discourse is characterised by a manipulative interplay between power and humiliation of the other/erotic object. In this regard, the following quote by Luce Irigaray (quoted in Sedgwick, 1985:26) is apposite: "Male homosexuality is the law that regulates the sociocultural order. Heterosexuality amounts to the assignation of roles in this economy." Irigaray does not imply actual homosexuality between men, but her remark is more in line with Sedgwick's view on male-male collaboration in order to sustain a particular order. Frank opts for a homosocial/homosexual relationship

with Laurence in order to revitalise his own phallic potency and in doing so reclaims his privileged position of the patriarchal self.<sup>4</sup> Even though Frank has accepted the inevitability of affirmative action, the only way he can reclaim his phallic power is to humiliate the other white male, whose desire for Frank is against him in manipulating him into subservience. Titlestad and Kissick (2008:6) show that in the new South African writing such as this novel by Galgut is a “defiance of the expectations of the politically righteous, irresponsible, open-ended and eccentric ways of knowing” – and even our assumptions about the traditional notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, I believe, are contested.

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4 Galgut, when asked about the ostensibly gay sub-plot of the novel, pointed out that he did not want to write an overtly gay novel. To him the underplaying or subtle suggestion of homoeroticism is much more effective as a literary strategy (De Waal, 2003). A similar strategy is used in an earlier novel *The beautiful screaming of pigs* (Galgut, 1991) and there are several correspondences between the two novels. See also Heyns (1998) for a discussion on masculinity and militarism.

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### Key concepts:

despair  
 homoeroticism  
 masculine desire  
 white masculinity

### Kernbegrippe:

homoërotiek  
 manlike begeerte  
 wanhoop  
 wit manlikheid

