

Englishness and the 'victim' hero in *One for my Baby* (2001) by Tony Parsons

Dr Joanne Woodman
Canterbury Christ Church University
Canterbury, England
CT1 1QU
jw191@canterbury.ac.uk

Biography

Joanne Woodman is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University, where she has taught courses on representations of identity and gender for several years. She has recently completed her doctoral thesis at the University of London on representations of white masculinity in crisis in British fiction of the 1990s.

Abstract

This article explores the dynamic relationship between the representation of contemporary masculinity and Englishness at the turn of the twenty-first century as it is portrayed in Tony Parsons' best-selling *One for my Baby*. The article argues that while the discourse of the 'New Left' in Britain readily promotes the mantras of 'equal opportunities', 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' as public benefits, Parsons' novel resonates with popular cultural anxieties about the loss of a specifically white English male identity, linked to nostalgia for an imperial imaginary and threatened by the very 'multiculturalism' the novel appears to promote. The article discusses how *One for my Baby* attempts to resolve the specific concerns of its white male protagonist through the literary trope of the 'victim' hero and the discursive strategies of masculinity in crisis. It argues that this has the doubling effect of exposing the problems of English heroism while also recentring its hero through a neo-Arnoldian 'civilising mission'.

Disciplines: Literature, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies.

Key words: Tony Parsons, hero, masculinity, neo-Arnoldian, Englishness.

Introduction

This article explores how the narrative strategies of Tony Parsons as white male English author of *One for my Baby* (2001) consciously or unconsciously play out ambiguous cultural and political functions which impact on what currently constitutes an ideal, white English masculinity in the cultural imaginary. Knights points out in his study of male narratives in twentieth-century fiction that masculine identities are legitimated, reinforced, reinvented and re-enacted through various social processes, practices and institutional structures in which men's fictional self-representations play an important role (Knights, 1999: 17). This article therefore traces how *One for my Baby* draws on discourses of Englishness, particularly in relation to nostalgia for imperial greatness, to construct Alfie, its white male hero, as representative of an English national identity.

Most recent literary and cultural studies of masculinity tend to assume that the dominance of privileged white masculinity depends on this category being viewed as

the universal norm because it is 'unmarked' by the characteristics of race, class and gender and so seems invisible (Robinson, 2000: 1-5). Literary men's studies in Britain therefore argues that self-conscious fictional studies of white masculinity, such as Parsons' exploration of Alfie's character, thought processes and emotions within the narrative, expose white male power by making it visible as a gendered and racialized category (Knights, 1999: 1; Middleton, 1992: 1-14; Schoene-Harwood, 2000: ix). This article expands on that premise by forging connections between the characterization of Alfie and 'masculinity in crisis'. It suggests that by representing his white male hero Alfie as a suffering victim Parsons feeds into a 'perceived' crisis in western masculinity which became accepted as a cultural metanarrative at the turn of the twenty-first century (Beynon, 2002: 76). As part of this metanarrative *One for my Baby* has a dual effect. It exposes the problems attached to Alfie's specifically white English heroism while also re-centring the status of his masculinity. It does so by conflating his narrative of crisis with a crisis in national identity, hence partly masking his gendered and racialized characteristics as they appear to be a norm.

Parsons' voice as representative

Tony Parsons, the author of *One for my Baby*, was a 1970s punk journalist whose image was transformed to sensitive New Man after retaining custody of his 4-year-old son during his acrimonious divorce. He is currently a best-selling author, a columnist for the *Daily Mirror* and popular cultural critic. Parsons can therefore be defined as holding a relatively privileged position in British society, yet the changes in his own life seem to make credible his representations of men struggling with personal and political change. Indeed a BBC web article (2001) suggests Parsons offers 'a voice for modern men, men who enjoy the possibilities of contemporary society but are bewildered by the loss of the old certainties'. *One for my Baby* explores just the kind of modern yet bewildered masculinity that the BBC suggests resonates with contemporary British men. However, the BBC article itself contributes to a much wider narrative of masculinity as threatened by social change. It equates Parsons' position with all British men, regardless of social status or ethnic background and hence obscures issues of race or status. The BBC's equation of Parsons' fictional and journalistic voice with the situation of 'modern men' offers an example of how a crisis in privileged white masculinity manifests itself culturally both in the media and in contemporary fiction by making itself appear universal and distracting from white male privilege (Robinson, 2000: 1-21).

Narrating a national crisis

In this respect the very specific, first-person narrative perspective of Alfie in *One for my Baby* becomes particularly significant. Alfie is a relatively privileged, thirty-something white male English teacher who voices his disenchantment because his male students' are unable to understand English literature or the values it represents. Parsons links Alfie's problems with his rowdy students and British male youth more generally to the state of the nation, the disintegration of English values and even world peace. As Alfie runs through a London park feeling isolated and lonely he encounters a 'little gang [...] every shade of the human rainbow' and comments 'the way these lads are casually gobbing on the pigeons does not make you overly optimistic about mankind's ability to live in peace' (11). This first person perspective encourages the reader to identify with Alfie's point of view, making his crisis seem real and visible.

Equating Alfie's crisis with the nation and 'mankind' or Parsons' voice with the bewilderment of 'modern men' enables white masculinity to hide behind what is represented as a universal crisis. This universalizing language contributes to what Robinson refers to as a new 'master narrative of identity politics' (2). Whereas the identity politics of minority groups traditionally focuses on the markings of race, class or gender as the reasons for discrimination, Parsons' narrative positions Alfie and the English values he represents as the norm. As a result, Alfie's masculinity is represented as a standard that is affronted or under attack by other identity groups, with the effect that special weight is lent to his feelings.

However, the first-person narration has another effect. By voicing Alfie's concerns as a white male English teacher it opposes him to the diverse 'rainbow' colour of the multicultural group of youths. As a result white masculinity becomes visible as an identity category by defining itself through this opposition to its others. In order to claim disempowerment for Alfie within the framework of identity politics Parsons must necessarily expose Alfie's own racial and gendered markings. Consequently, Alfie is empowered as attention is drawn to his victimization but his invisibility or normativity are also partly erased. His privileged, white English male identity exposes his representative position as a lie, enabling a deconstruction of the category he represents.

The narrative style of *One for my Baby* also contributes to the meanings associated with Alfie. The novel is written within the traditional framework of the classic literary *Bildungsroman* in which the principal male character's quest for identity is achieved through personal growth and understanding within a heteronormative framework and the value systems of family and marriage. Within this very traditional narrative Alfie is recognizable as a modern new man version of a universal heroic type. Alfie progresses with social change and transcends class boundaries when he marries the single mother and working-class cleaning lady Jackie Day. However, despite the 'progressive' masculinity which *One for my Baby* seemingly promotes it also maintains the power base of a concrete white English masculinity which defines itself through its heterosexuality and is based in a western literary tradition.

English studies, Englishness and masculinity in crisis

One way in which the novel promotes Alfie as a new English hero is by assigning him patriotic attitudes to Englishness and by portraying his role of English teacher as part of a heroic higher cause. This heroic higher cause chimes with George Mosse's suggestion that, 'the hero has constantly been devoted to a higher purpose [...] and the creation of a "national character" fulfilled the purpose of defining an ideal masculinity'(1996: 44, 52, 109). In *One for my Baby* this higher purpose comes into play through Alfie's removal to Hong Kong where as an English teacher discourses of nostalgia come into play. In fact Alfie's identity is based on nostalgia for imperialism and the use of English studies as part of a neo-Arnoldian 'civilizing mission', what Baldick (1983) refers to as the 'social mission' of English. Baldick demonstrates how Matthew Arnold's ideas that English studies would promote national pride and create social cohesion shaped 'English' as the academic subject we know today through the 1921 Newbolt Report, the result of government committee recommendations on 'the teaching of English in England' (94-95). This influence remains apparent in Tony Blair's 2001 appointment of Michael Wills as new junior Minister of Education whose

remit to explore issues of national identity through education led the press to dub him Blair's 'patriotism envoy' (Ashley, 2001). In this political environment it is not surprising that Parson's 'patriotism envoy' Alfie, who struggles to enable his students in an inner-city London boys' school to better themselves, through the 'glory and wonder of the English language' (9) has bestseller appeal as a modern romantic hero. Just as the Newbolt Report (cited in Hawkes, 1986: 252-3) suggested that literature was an 'embodiment of the best thoughts of the best minds, the most direct and lasting communication of experience by man to men', Alfie's virtuous heroism is measured by his mastery and understanding of great male authors like Shakespeare and his ability to communicate this experience to his students. As Eagleton points out,

while English literature was historically presented as incorporating universal values, its underlying aim was to persuade the masses to the viewpoint [...] of their masters [...], communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements [...], give them a pride in their national language and literature.
(1996: 22)

These ideologies underpin Alfie's teaching and become apparent in his frustration on trying to teach *Romeo and Juliet*. Alfie is unable to make his students understand the values of the play because of what he views as their illiteracy. He is outraged when his students undermine the elements of romantic love in the play by bringing condoms to the balcony scene or writing essays beginning, "Some might say Mercutio was a bit of a wanker" (9-10). Alfie concludes that the values of the canon of English literature, symbolized in Shakespeare, are inexplicable to boys who 'poured "fuck", "fucking" and "fucked" over their words like ketchup in a burger bar' (10). Alfie, who views Shakespeare as the great national poet, symbolizing English values, cannot accept his students' contemporary interpretation because of his paradoxical belief that Shakespeare contains universal truths but one correct reading. His pupils' interpretations threaten the 'common' cultural standards which in fact constitute Alfie's interested ideas on 'correct' taste and Englishness.

The specifically masculine values Alfie embodies through his promotion of the white male canon become national values to which Alfie's male students and the reader should aspire. The name of Alfie's school, 'The Princess Diana Comprehensive for Boys', connotes a specific kind of Englishness and heroism. It associates Alfie with the 'softening' and 'humanizing' processes that Matthew Arnold argued was embodied in English (Super, 1960-1977, 3: 44), encoding the idea of Alfie as a modern-day philanthropist or missionary by association with Diana's charitable works. The authorial choice of naming Alfie's school 'The Princess Diana Comprehensive' also associates Alfie as educator with the caring and nurturing emotions, associated with femininity, which Chapman has argued constituted the figure of the new man (1996: 225-248).

Chapman points out that as emotions and nurturing qualities have become more highly regarded as a result of the inroads of feminism, then 'to maintain hegemony it is in men's interests to co-opt femininity' (248). This argument seems

particularly relevant in *One for my Baby* because by making Alfie an educator in an institution that commemorates Princess Diana, Parsons puts into play a series of connotations that link his victim hero with the collective national mourning on Diana's death. As Watson suggests, by naming Diana the 'People's Princess', Tony Blair aligned himself with public criticisms about the Queen's response to her death, her treatment by her husband, parents, step-mother and the paparazzi. The title 'People's Princess' thus makes Diana representative of the populace and positions her as a 'royal sacrificial victim' (Watson, 1997: 6). Consequently, the violent threats to Alfie's sensitive and feminized masculinity in the 'Princess Diana Comprehensive' where 'the woodwork teacher had his head put in his own vice' (9) seem more appalling and through association Parsons assigns Alfie sacrificial status. In a society that accepts aggression to teachers and consequently a violation of the values that Alfie embodies, he is placed in the situation of valiant hero, struggling against pupils and abusive parents whom he describes in threatening terms as 'burly bruisers' with 'bulldog tattoos' (9-10).

From the outset of the novel Alfie's first-person narrative voice also creates an image of him as a sensitive New Man and victim. The first-person address opens in a confidential, worried tone, confessing: '[t]here is something wrong with my heart' (7). Parsons therefore draws on a wider public rhetoric of masculinity in crisis that associates masculinity with ill health and psychological and emotional trauma. This narrative technique also establishes intimacy and empathy between the white male hero and the reader as Alfie is placed in a vulnerable position, exposing his emotions, expressing his concerns and bewilderment: 'I don't understand it' (7).

As the narrative unfolds the physical impact of Alfie's heart thumping is revealed to be caused both by his lack of fitness and by his grief for the death of his wife Rose. Mingling threats to Alfie's cultural authority with grief makes him seem sincere, authentic and reliable. Hence when Alfie is confronted by a parent wearing a 'Union Jack T-shirt' with the words 'Great Briten' emblazoned on it, his response, '[s]weet Jesus' (10), invites a sympathetic reaction to a 'misplaced' patriotism which Alfie defines by the misspelling of the country it upholds. Those readers who do not coincide with Alfie's 'English' values or beliefs about what constitutes literacy are excluded from taking Alfie's high moral stance. His ideas about national identity appear decentred by a group of males whose ideal of masculinity reflects misguided, aggressive, imperialist tendencies in non-institutionalized and therefore unacceptable forms of patriotism. Consequently, through his construction of Alfie as white male narrator, Parsons articulates a particular account of masculinity in which the control and literary use of language are self-righteously employed to position Alfie as superior. Simultaneously, Alfie's working-class students and their parents put his masculinity under threat. Therefore, the novel undermines its 'civilizing mission' because the language of Alfie's students and their parents is represented as resulting from innate stupidity rather than social disadvantages or poor education.

A contradiction arises: although Alfie's role as educator bestows him with heroic status and education is presented as a solution to the violent attitudes of his students, ironically they are represented as innately ineducable. Through his associations with English literature, Alfie apparently embodies the ability to educate and address the whole of humanity, yet is distanced, alienated and victimized by those without his sensitivity or education. The novel does not challenge this contradiction nor does it

suggest that Alfie's students may be resisting his particular style of middle-class education because it attempts to colonize working-class culture rather than allow it expression. Instead those without Alfie's attributes are illogically seen as threatening his masculinity despite their disadvantage. Hence the novel perpetuates the notion of a crisis in privileged English masculinity which, by focusing on the privileged white male as victim, also recentres his masculinity.

Imperialist nostalgia

To escape the misplaced patriotism of 'Union Jack T-shirts', Alfie leaves Britain intent on 'becoming international' (43) as an English teacher in Hong Kong. Here, he paradoxically spends much time nostalgically dreaming of past imperial greatness as Britain is about to give up its final colonial outpost. Although Beynon argues that by the 1950s 'Imperial man' is no longer a shaping factor in contemporary British masculinity (2002: 50), in *One for my Baby* nostalgia for empire and Britain's loss of global power remain defining factors which link Alfie to a crisis in masculinity and then reinvigorate his masculinity through neo-colonialist imaginings. The threats of violence and the hopelessness of Alfie's role as educator make his decision to teach English in Hong Kong seem a rationally justifiable one. In this respect the novel echoes the Victorian masculine anxieties which Beynon argues linked the destruction of Empire to degeneracy (2002: 38-41).

Crang argues that one popular 19th-century fictional response to fears of degeneracy was to treat the Empire as 'a cure for alienation associated with a domestic and crucially urban working-class' (1998: 73). Being emasculated by the brutish masculinity of his illiterate students and their parents, Alfie continues to see Hong Kong as just the cure for contemporary social disintegration. In Hong Kong, Alfie assumes himself to be one of the 'heirs to something epic, heroic and grand' (8). Like his imperial forebears he regards himself as superior to the domestic working class and his renewed feelings of heroic masculinity are dependent on Hong Kong's associations with an idealized British colonialism: 'Hong Kong made me feel as though my country had once done something important and unique. Something magical and brave' (10).

Alfie's masculinity is shored up by nostalgic evocations of an imperial past. Hong Kong becomes the site where Alfie imagines he can prove and display his masculinity. However, setting large sections of the novel in Hong Kong reveals underlying anxieties about masculinity and patriotism. For example, Beynon argues that the rapid decline of the British Empire after the Second World War deprived contemporary man of his imperial role (50). Likewise, Parsons equates the return of Hong Kong to China with a crisis in colonial identity and with a new crisis in Alfie's masculinity so that empire becomes the site of male fantasies of empowerment and disempowerment:

30 June 1997. Changeover night. The night that the British gave Hong Kong back to the Chinese when the clock struck midnight. The night that the skies above Victoria Peak opened and it rained as it had never rained before, as if the heavens were heartbroken because this glittering place was being given up.

(199)

In an attempt to uphold the masculinity to which Alfie aspires, the loss of Hong Kong is overdramatized and presented as an almost apocalyptic event which affects the forces of nature and therefore seems unnatural. While *One for my Baby* critiques the misguided patriotism of the parents with 'Union Jack T. Shirts', Alfie himself is only able to revitalize his masculinity through a less obviously aggressive, yet equally neo-colonialist, project.

Despite Alfie's claims to multiculturalism, *One for my Baby* becomes complicit with what it appears to reject. In Hong Kong, Alfie criticizes his colleague Josh for his imperialist tendencies: '[t]hey give you a company flat and a Filipina maid and you think you're some kind of empire builder' (16). However, Alfie's lament for Hong Kong and his comparison of himself to a 'member of the old Imperial court' (199) points to his own involvement in imperialist fantasies. The development of a lasting bond between Alfie and Josh also suggests that Alfie's uncertainty as to whether the loss of Hong Kong should call for 'a party or a wake' (199) is a milder expression of Josh's belief that 'Hong Kong was a fishing village when we arrived and will be a fishing village when we leave' (15).

In *One for my Baby*, the loss of Hong Kong becomes another injustice against privileged white masculinity. It symbolizes the end of Alfie's romantic, adventuring heroism and the end of British greatness, so that the crisis of the privileged, white, male is again equated with a national crisis that is therefore gendered masculine. The conflation of Alfie's crisis with the nation hides the specific nature of the crisis by obscuring his whiteness, his class and gender. Alfie bears the burden for the entire nation and by linking his crisis to nationality it is given more validity. The framing of the narrative around Alfie's life as an English teacher in London and Hong Kong just before the last outpost of empire is returned to China suggests that *One for my Baby* reveals anxieties about 1990s 'New Left' multiculturalism in relation to Alfie's specifically white male identity. Although Alfie declares 'I am very much in favour of the multicultural society' (11) and he readily promotes 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' as beneficial public goods, these are minimally endorsed.

Masculinity and femininity

Because Alfie's sense of identity is derived from his white, aspirational, heterosexual masculinity, his reinvigorated manliness in Hong Kong necessarily depends on the feminine. Indeed, it is in Hong Kong where he meets his first wife Rose. Through associative language Rose and Hong Kong become reified aspects of each other and of Englishness. Hong Kong is idealized as the apogee of human achievement, but is a 'British invention' with a 'Chinese heart' (p.20). In contrast, Rose, whose name might traditionally be associated with an idealized 'English' femininity, attracts Alfie because '[h]er hair was black, as black as Chinese hair' (p.12). While Rose and Hong Kong seem to represent some kind of multicultural fusion they also become fetishized as racial, exotic others, which are employed to enhance Alfie's masculinity, at least while he is in Hong Kong.

As the novel progresses it is Rose and Hong Kong which inspire Alfie to become a better man. Rose becomes Alfie's guiding light, 'my reason' (p.10), and Alfie's 'special feeling' induced by Rose and Hong Kong is idealized as all three are linked through images of light: '[...] when I looked at those lights, they made me feel as though there was just a little bit of all that in me' (10). Rose too takes on the characteristics of Hong Kong through images of light:

I mean she really shone - the sunset, made spectacular by toxic fumes pouring from the factories of southern China, was throwing the last of its technicolor light across her face. It lit her up.
(16)

China is a dangerous other whereas Hong Kong and Rose both become the idealized objects of Alfie's desire. They enlighten Alfie to bring him to a new sense of authentic masculinity and potential:

Rose took me beyond the lights [...] she turned affection into something more. For Hong Kong. And for her [...]. And by loving me, she set me free. Free to be myself [...] she saw not only the man I was, but the man I could be.
(20-22)

The seeming sense of male authenticity and potential is derived from nostalgia for an illusory grandeur, constructed through Alfie's romanticization of Rose and of Britain's role as an imperial power, embodied in Alfie's belief in 'the sense of endless possibility that every expatriate experiences' in Hong Kong (46). The idealized relationship with Hong Kong and with Rose have transformative powers. However, by endowing them with magical and dreamlike qualities, they highlight the problems attached to a masculinity which is dependent on an idealized feminine for its authenticity. As *One for my Baby* later demonstrates, such dependence ultimately ends in failure. But at this stage in the narrative Alfie refuses to give up the dream:

Midnight. The night that everything was supposed to change forever. The night when they expected us to believe that the dream was finally over. As if it's so easy to stop dreaming.
(200)

The stroke which ushers in the newly liberated Hong Kong nevertheless breaks the magic of Alfie's dream as its toll foreshadows Rose's death in a diving accident. The exotic others, Hong Kong and Rose, literally function as the salvation of Alfie's masculinity when on the dive Rose gives up her life to save Alfie (84-85). As the final outpost of empire disintegrates and Rose dies, Alfie breaks down. In this respect the novel exposes the dangers of a masculinity which defines itself in relation to a feminine other. However, Rose's death and the loss of Hong Kong are the narrative forces that fuel Alfie's crisis and enhance his hero status. Little attention is paid to Rose's bravery. Instead, Alfie compares their relationship to that of Frank Sinatra and Ava Garner,

validating his misery by arguing '[i]f Sinatra never got over Ava, then why should I get over Rose?' (91). Nevertheless, Alfie's loss of identity is short-lived and he retreats to England to begin another romantic dream that leads to more despair and crisis.

On his return to England, Alfie's trauma is entwined with his father's mid-life crisis and the breakdown of his family so that the narrative allows the victim hero more space for nostalgic agonizing and self-aggrandizement. When his father explains that he has left the family and taken up with Lena, the Scandinavian au-pair, because he is in love, Alfie hypocritically rages, '[y]ou've insulted love [...]. Don't paint yourself as some kind of romantic hero' (74). Alfie paradoxically blames his father's affair on the same romantic ideals which Alfie himself upholds. In contrast to Alfie's romance, his father's involvement with Lena is ruled by his 'nasty little knob' (128). However, Alfie's narration ensures that his father is not really to blame:

Lena [...] has bewitched my father, made him move to a rented flat, encouraged him to search for his youth on a rowing machine, made him drop his swimming trunks in a public place, and I try hard to find her ridiculous. It's difficult. She has got blonde hair and legs that go on like a river [...].
(115)

Within the value system of the novel, if women are not idealized they are denigrated. The sexual desire of men is stereotypically presented as triggered by women and significantly by a woman who is not English and does not embody the apparent purity and innocence of Rose. However, because Alfie struggles with, and resists, his desires for Lena, his new style of sensitive heroism is represented as stronger and more heroic than his father's.

As the loss of Hong Kong leads to an escalation in Alfie's crisis the novel exposes the problems of idealized colonial fantasies to some degree. However, this reading is difficult to uphold as, on his return to Britain, Alfie takes up a post in a London language school where the anxieties of loss of empire are revealed and relieved when his command of English becomes a mark of power in new forms of cultural colonization. When Alfie sleeps with a string of female students the school principal accuses him of exploitation and 'sexual imperialism'. Through Alfie's narration the principal is stereotyped as a 'Greenham Common feminist', convincing the reader that she is 'some kind of old battle-axe' who prevents him helping 'a city full of young women looking for friendship, romance and a little help' with English, which Alfie presumes is 'the native tongue' (158-159). In an echo of his time in Hong Kong Alfie's sexual tourism and colonizing ideologies are represented as part of 'something bigger and better than myself', a higher cause that adds to his heroic status and shores up his masculinity. In the next phase of the novel the narrative projects Alfie's neo-imperialist imaginings onto new objects through his relationship with the language school's cleaning lady - Jackie Day- and his friendship with George Chang, the owner of the local Chinese take-away, who becomes his mentor and father figure. However, as I will elaborate, the novel disguises these colonizing fantasies in a utopian multicultural tale of apparently mutual influence and interaction across races and genders.

Privileged white masculinity and its others

George Chang is portrayed as a mystic yet primitive-minded man, a benevolent hero who helps Alfie salvage his masculinity. As the short-lived feelings of imperialist grandeur Alfie finds in Hong Kong dissipate and the masculine angst associated with England's loss of power returns, George becomes instrumental in recuperating Alfie's masculinity. George is mythologized as embodying the healing power of the Chinese and his masculinity is 'universalized', but he is also presented as an 'other' who can never be completely understood:

Not his face but ten thousand faces just like it [...] slurping noodles [...] covered in dust [...]. That face is very familiar to me. It's impassive, self-contained and completely indifferent to my existence [...]. That face stares straight through me [...]. I saw it all the time over there.
(8)

George's Chinese face is idealized because it represents a norm but he is also stereotyped, reinforcing racist notions that one Chinese face cannot be distinguished from another. When Alfie and Josh are attacked by a skinhead in George's Chinese take-away, he heals their physical wounds, 'rubbing Tiger Balm on my sore ribs and gently swabbing most of the dried blood from Josh's face' (53). In this respect his masculinity includes nurturing aspects of the feminine but his masculinity is also made more potent through his self-control. His face is 'impassive' and 'self-contained', signs of his autonomy and strength as he takes control of the situation, using Tai Chi to frighten the skinhead, without even touching him (51). His powers are those of a mystical master and it is this mastery which Alfie incorporates into his own masculinity through Tai Chi.

The relationship between George and Alfie seems to offer a novel resolution to Alfie's battle with his father, in the figure of a new, more nurturing and 'maternal' father. George is constantly described as gentle and literally brings Alfie back to domesticity by including him in his own family. Their relationship is charged with maternal and feminine aspects as the supportive, oriental male father figure replaces the white authoritarian father who has failed. The homoerotic element of their friendship does not get missed by a group of 'thugs' in the park. As George teaches Alfie Tai Chi they shout: '[l]ook at this pair of wankers. Fuck me. It's *Come Dancing* for benders' (163). While the narrative denigrates their comments as 'gormless' (164), it also makes available a derisory reading of homoeroticism and marks the boundaries of an ideal masculinity as heterosexual. Although the rituals which George takes Alfie through ostensibly mark new possibilities, homoeroticism is denied as the ultimate goal of the narrative is to prepare Alfie for the heterosexual masculinity of coupledness with Jackie Day.

In order to heal his wounds, Alfie passes through a painful rite of passage, symbolized in his frustrations with Tai Chi, which both reflects and soothes English concerns about the loss of Hong Kong and empire. Alfie's injured masculinity is

revealed but the values in which it is based are not challenged because he appears to be a victim of circumstance. Rose's death, the loss of Hong Kong, his problems with the feminist principal at the language school, the degeneration of the nation, represented by his illiterate male students, their parents, and the skinheads who literally attack Alfie's privileged masculinity are the cause of his problems. His suffering -'[l]ife has made me feel like death warmed up' (95)- becomes an inherent part of the burden of masculinity, an ennobling experience, which allows the narrative to transform Alfie into a sensitive yet practical new man, through the individual, psychotherapeutic process of Tai Chi. The novel therefore reflects a trend towards personal and spiritual growth at the expense of real social change which Rowena Chapman has argued derives from advanced consumer capitalism and the new male psychology and of the 1980s (1996:230).

As George teaches Alfie Tai Chi, they appear to gain mutual pleasure and understanding, but as Alfie acquires the skills of Tai Chi there is an appropriation of the East by the West which strengthens the dominant white male norm which *One for my Baby* upholds. Despite the fact that Alfie seemingly assimilates the ancient Chinese philosophy, it is actually adapted for a western ideal. George cannot understand why Alfie must put so much effort into Tai Chi, why 'westerners always want to strain', explaining to Alfie that the saying 'no pain, no gain' is rubbish (184). Even so, Alfie makes his own interpretation of the meanings and values of Tai Chi and of George's mantra 'eat the cold porridge' (3). 'Eating the cold porridge of the East', as Alfie admits, has become 'muddled up with the bitter pill of the West. Now I can't tell them apart' (4). However, his ideological confusion about what George means functions as a narrative ploy that allows Alfie, who is in charge of the English language, to 'translate' meanings as he wishes. For Alfie 'eating the cold porridge' comes to embody a politics and ethics which serves to uphold the position of the privileged white male. It means,

You work [...]. You work [...]. You work [...]. To become the master [...]. [E]ating the cold porridge means being in a time of suffering. Living through hard days, months and years [...] he meant deferring gratification for some distant goal [...] [,] the concept of self-sacrifice[...]. [I]t means enduring something that has to be endured.
(3-4)

Alfie seems to usher in a new masculinity in which a traditional work ethic is combined with introspection, pain and suffering, enabling men to get in touch with their inner selves and emotions to achieve a quasi-spiritual state which transcends race, class and gender. However, the 'politics' of *One for my Baby* justifies the maintenance of more traditional white masculine ideals and strengthens them. George becomes a reconfiguration of the benevolent 'noble savage', who receives nothing in this seemingly reciprocal relationship. He lives 'sandwiched between a dry-cleaner's and a kebab shop' in 'a little self-contained flat', with a 'number of Chinese people big and small', who spend their time watching programmes about Charles and Diana (49-52), and who name their children after British royalty. George's 'simple' family lifestyle and lack of desire for material wealth are fantasized as an ideal. This idealization masks new forms of colonization because George's family are represented as humbly grateful for the opportunity to educate their children to speak English and imbibe English values. Despite Alfie's job as an English teacher there is no indication

that he helps the family fulfil these dreams. As Robert Connell (2000: 51) puts it in another context, the values which the West promotes reduce to 'the attributes and interests of the male entrepreneur'. In *One for my Baby* this is revealed by the way those who work hard defer gratification and endure, gain advantage through individual voluntarism, which takes no account of the social inequalities that make upward mobility an impossibility for some. This maintains the privilege of dominant white male values and upholds the associated English hegemony. The novel's optimism and idealization of Englishness mean that it is unable to deal with these aspects of its story, which may suggest exploitation.

The portrayal of Alfie as the benevolent vehicle for the dissemination of English studies and its values also operate as a sign of white male power in his relationship with the working-class literature student Jackie. Alfie is attracted to her values, '[t]he way she is bringing up her daughter alone, the way she works at her crappy job [...] dreaming of going back to college. No she's not dreaming. She's making it happen' (241). Jackie is the ideal counterpart for Alfie, as unlike his former male students she already understands the importance of self-help and the universal values embodied in literature: '[b]ooks made me feel as though I was connected to the world. Magic, it was' (174).

Cultivating these values of course requires Alfie's assistance as, in a re-telling of the play *Educating Rita* (1981), Alfie plays out a male fantasy by helping her to secure a place at university and deal with her violent ex-husband Jamie, conveniently revitalizing his own masculinity in the process. Therefore, although the novel is not against the idea of the independent woman pursuing her own career, Alfie remains in charge as the teacher who facilitates Jackie's advancement with the effect that traditional gender relations are simply reconfigured. The ease with which Parsons enables Alfie to colonise Jackie's working-class culture becomes the narrative mechanism that shores up the imperial and masculine status quo and partly heals the wounds that have made Alfie's crisis visible.

One for my Baby represents a particular kind of white masculinity as in crisis and suffering yet its victim hero maintains his power base. Alfie does not relinquish his white male English values. They simply become re-symbolized in a synthesis of manly control, 'internationalism' and spontaneity. These values manifest themselves in a utopian 'multicultural' vision which evades issues of inequality by proclaiming that the Chinese restaurants in London, Sky TV and the fact that Alfie now listens to Motown music and practises Tai Chi means that 'these days the world is just one place' (310-311). Alfie's crisis and consequent healing process draw attention to a seemingly universal white male suffering, which distracts attention from the underprivileged by appearing to transcend race, class and gender. *One for my Baby* exchanges Alfie's romantic illusions of Rose and Hong Kong for another fantasy. It presents an advanced capitalist dream world in which the idealization of the feminine or exotic is ultimately replaced with appropriation. As Alfie shows his ability to accommodate various cultures and histories, the novel posits changes in taste or the individual as solutions to social change. The novel thus embodies the multicultural relativism which Clive Bloom (2001: 40-41) condemns because the disadvantaged gain access to apparently liberal ideals while the powerful actually expand their powerbase but only with those who are willing to accept this powerbase and its associated political and cultural values.

Conclusion

Returning to the premise of men's studies (mentioned earlier) that a focus on male subjectivity necessarily exposes and enables a deconstruction of masculinity, *One for my Baby* suggests that by focusing on privileged white male suffering and crisis sympathy can be created for that masculinity. The narrative strategies that conflate Alfie's particular crisis in masculinity with a crisis in national identity and a threat to the meanings of Englishness make his specific crisis appear universal and add validity to his suffering while distracting from the white male privilege he enjoys. In this respect the narrative recentres masculinity by representing it as disempowered. Alfie's masculinity and the English values it represents are established as, and remain, the ideal throughout the novel but this norm appears to be under attack from other identity groups.

In contrast, placing Alfie in opposition to his underprivileged students and the 'Greenham Common feminist' principal of the London language school forces Alfie's privileged white English masculinity to become visible as a racialized, gendered and class-based category. A tension therefore arises in the novel. The narrative struggles to uphold Alfie as representative of a universal norm that paradoxically constitutes Englishness but in order to highlight his crisis Alfie's particular version of English values necessarily become visible. As a result some of the mechanisms that maintain white male power by representing it as a norm are systematically exposed. Moreover, a heroism that perversely attempts to empower itself through a narrative of crisis, victimization and representational disempowerment points to the way that privileged white masculine identity has been weakened by the very forces of social change and identity politics which oppose and expose it.

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