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THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY: JEZ BUTTERWORTH'S *MOJO*

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Abstract: *During the late twentieth century, crisis of masculinity appears in all societal settings; at work, at school, on the street and in the family. The crisis of fatherhood, anxiety, power, and abuse create the crisis of masculinity. As a concrete example of the masculinity crisis Jez Butterworth's most discussed stage play Mojo was first performed at London's Royal Court in 1995. This paper takes Mojo under observation as a frontier play depicting a male identity that portrays rock and roll culture, gangland violence, and male Soho gangsters of the 1950s. With these concepts in mind, this paper analyses the contemporary anxieties related to masculinity through witty, absurd dialogues and homoerotic relationships of this striking play.*

Keywords: *Jez Butterworth, Mojo, The Crisis of Masculinity, Father-Son Relationship.*

1. Introduction

Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1995 when he was 26 years old. *Mojo* was widely advertised parallel to *Look Back in Anger*, and was the first play since 1956 to be staged at Royal Court's Theatre's main hall. *Mojo* represents the soul of "angry young men". Stuart (1996) states that "*Mojo* typifies not only the current predominance in the British drama of plays by and about men (of which the recent profusion of gay plays is, of course, a subset), but also the concomitant retreat to more conservative theatrical models and forms". This outstanding, multi-award winning (Olivier Award for Best New Comedy, The George Devine and Evening Standard), was set in Soho in 1950s. Apart from awards, critics have compared it with Pinter and Quentin Tarantino because Butterworth uses rhythm, repetition and absurd dialogues akin to Pinter as well as at times, extreme dialogues, extreme scenes and violence akin to Tarantino. David Ian Rabey (2015:37) provides us with general information about the play's setting:

Soho is the square-mile area of London popular with immigrants in the seventeenth century; when deserted by the rich and fashionable in the mid-nineteenth century,... from the late-nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century, it became an edge land district of London in its association with notorious plague, ... an area of multicultural restaurants, music halls, theatres, prostitution and sex industry... and non-respectable forms of musical entertainment and experimentation.

In the 1950s Soho becomes a place dominated by rock and roll, gangland violence and possibly boy gangs. In *Mojo*, gangsters are the subject of witty and communal dialogues, violence, and a playful elusiveness within situation, character, and relationships (Stuart 1996) but Butterworth does not accept the fact of gangsters:

What I didn't want it to be was about gangsters. I wanted it to be about people who think they are – or who possibly know – gangsters, but aren't. Because they're a bunch of children, everyone in the play: it's like a school playground game really. Sweets and Potts aren't gangsters (Interview in Butterworth 2011: vii).

However, *Mojo* portrays a war between two gangsters in the hustle and bustle of establishing superiority and taking ownership over rock and roll star Silver Johnny. This article will trace how Butterworth portrays ganglands, gangsters, violence, and the crisis of anxiety and masculinity through the lens of fear, and power of fathers men and fatherless. Thus the play is interpreted not only as depicting 1950s London/Soho but also how male relationships are described in this period.

2. *Mojo*

Butterworth's play starts with thundering sound of drums, pulsating bass, and screams as Silver Jonny dances like a boxer who tries to show his mannish boy performance however he does not set free his energy; he only waits and observes audiences' reactions. Butterworth's aim is to invite audiences to fill the gap in their minds as a reaction to Silver Jonny's performance. Later Butterworth portrays two other young men Sweets and Potts and their ordinariness. They are sitting at the table with a pot of tea and three tea cups. The third cup represents a third but non-present person, either Mr Rossand or Ezra, as they are talking about them and their objects:

Potts. He's Mr Ross.

Sweets. They are talking about it aren't they ... (Pause). Okay. Okay. So where's Ezra?

Potts. Ezra's at the desk, but he's not in his chair. He's round here to one side.

Sweets. The Mr Ross side or the miles away side? (Butterworth 2011: 6).

Sweets and Potts go on their conversation, describing Silver Jonny's effect on women as well as their envy towards Silver Jonny, paying special mention to girls; "Potts. These girls. They shit when he signs" (7). This jealousy is translated into wit by Potts. "One day he's asking his mum can he cross the road the next he's got grown women queuing up to suck his winkle" (7). This example of linguistic wit in the play shows Harold Pinter's and Tom Stoppard's effect on Butterworth. In Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) "two gangland hit-men find their alliance stretched to breaking point under increasingly mysterious forms of external pressure" (Rabey 2015:40). In Butterworth's play, Sweet and Potts play with a third object (cup) which reflect third person and similar pressure like in the form of Pinter's play. Sweet and Potts also make reference to Tom Stoppard's characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon:

Sweets. Good rule.

Potts. Great rule.

Sweets. There's got to be rules and that's a rule.

(...)

Potts. So what?

Sweets. So what happened?

Potts. Nothing.

Sweets. Right. (Butterworth 2011:7-8).

Beside these effects, the usage of pills and amphetamines creates a different structure containing repetitions and overstatement within the dialogues. Repetitions and overstatement are introduced with Baby, Ezra's son and heir of Ezra's nightclub Atlantic in Soho. Following Baby's entrance, Sweets and Potts try to conceal Silver Johnny's situations and, when Baby

exits, Sweets and Potts realize that Ezra does not trust Baby, and then tell him about Silver Johnny: “Potts. What do you think? Sweets. Ezra wouldn’t tell him” (14). They also mention “their baroque fantasy of reflected glory that enfolds them into the honourable historic tradition of the entourage, visible portraits of Napoleon” (Rabey 2015:42), alongside Sam Ross with his dyed hair and different typed of clothes. With the entrance of Skinny, “a small time crime”, (Middeke et al 2011:44) violence and cruelty appear in the play: “(shouts). You cheap fucking sweaty fucking... fucking... Jew... fucking... (Pause. Lights a cigarette.)” (Butterworth 2011:18). This stems from Skinny’s decision to part from boss Ezra, and is tormented by Baby because of his bad breath. Baby also awes Skinny, squeezing his bollocks: “Skinny Not playful. Really gripping. And you know when you’re crying but water comes to your eyes” (19).

Violence and cruelty continue in Scene 2. Baby enters with an old navy cutlass, and threatens Skinny with death. While Sweets and Potts try to stop Baby, Mickey, Ezra’s older child, enters and observes the others’ behaviours, and tries to understand what’s going on in the club. Sweets and Potts talk about how they got swimming pills. Skinny gains Baby’s hatred and Baby explains his hatred implying Skinny’s homoerotic feelings for Mickey: “Skinny. Mickey. Enough. Remember what we spoke about in the van. And this isn’t for me. It’s for you. Fuck me. For you. Baby. This is advice you’re about to get Mickey” (23). After warning Baby about looking at the door of the club, Mickey drops a bombshell stating that ‘Ezra is dead’. Everything and everyone stops in the club. After receiving the news, behaviours and words of others are pure shock:

Omnes. Oh Jesus. Jesus, Jesus fucking Christ.

(...)

Skinny. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. We’re fucked.

(...)

Sweets. Warm milk. I need some warm milk (26-27-28).

(...)

Potts. It’s a joke. It’s Mickey’s joke. It’s Mickey morning joke.

(...)

Skinny. You hear that? Is it clear now? He is dead because they fucking cut him in half. So yes, he’s fucking passed away.

(...)

Sweets. Wake up have breakfast. They saw you in half (29-30-31).

Because of Ezra’s death and his body parts, they start to worry about their own personal security and lives. Baby reappears, unaware of anything. Mickey tries to inform him about his father’s murder. “Mickey. Baby, I call... I got a call this morning. Somebody’s murdered your dad” (38). Baby, going against the grain of what is believed, astonishes the others by saying: “there’s a Buick park out there. A Buick in Dean Street. Right outside the Bath House. It’s brilliant. (Pause.) Makes it look like Las Vegas” (39). This reaction shows his psychological disorder and dramatic world: “Baby. Mickey, I just drink the beer, have a laugh, kiss the girls and make them cry” (43). He states that he is a working man who needs to work, a continuation of is already his confused mood. While the others are in state of panic, Baby takes pleasure from the developments around him. Mickey, without considering Baby’s reactions, appeals for help because Baby is Ezra’s son and heir, too. However Baby, mentioning the phone conversation that Mickey makes, does not respond to the incident: “Baby. So why did they call you? (Pause). Somebody decides to kill my daddy, do they call me tell me? No Mickey. They give you the call. (Pause). You see what I mean Mickey? You got the call” (48). Following Baby’s utterances, a third bombshell then occurs. Skinny finds a box on the doorstep. Everybody thinks that it is Silver Jonny’s head and with the exception of Baby, nobody is brave enough to open the box. While others’ fear hit their peak, Baby

approaches the box, opens it and shows the silver jacket to them, and later walks closer towards Mickey and stares at him.

As the play progresses, the characters are downstairs in the Atlantic club. There is a banner overhead that reads “Ezra’s Atlantic Salutes Young People” (51). Baby is wearing the silver jacket found it in the box, while Mickey places his support behind Sam via a phone conversation. Sweets and Potts on the other hand try to avoid situation, however Mickey is not at one with them. Sweets and Potts show sympathy for Baby and start to discuss about how Baby feels after his father’s death. There within, Potts states that Baby should start a new life considering Baby’s father figure: “... Oh. His dad did the funny on him. Well that’s all the past isn’t it. Fucker’s dead. He ought to draw a line now. Start afresh. But he won’t. I know he won’t” (55). While gossiping about Sweets and Potts, Skinny enters with a derringer pistol to protect himself and those around him. Sweets and Potts both ridicule with this derringer, Skinny’s uncle Tommy and his RAF service adventures.

In the following part we observe Sweets’ and Potts’s support towards Baby. Baby, contrary to Act I, starts to question the developments around him. Sweets and Potts especially question Skinny’s behaviours and sayings towards Baby:

Potts. Fucking bad breath... He opens his mouth something uncouth plops out.
Baby. What did he say then?
Potts. He saying to Mickey he reckons we should brush you off. That ‘blah blah
pissing on we don’t need the Jew no more (69).

After Sweets and Potts tell Baby about Sam Ross’ mercilessness related to his manager, Baby wants to meet Sam Ross, stating: “there’s nothing like someone cutting your dad in two for clearing the mind. (Pause)” (p. 73). Later, Baby does not permit Mickey to phone call with Sam Ross. Baby gives an order to Mickey, asking him to dream as if Ezra would order. The others think that Baby loses his consciousness and is in shock. When Baby returns with a cutlass, Mickey wants to take control, again saying:

Mickey. I’m not listening to you Baby. You’ve fucked around here for too long. I’m sorry.
(...)
Mickey. I’m sorry. I’m not going to ask you again (79).
However Baby reminds Mickey who the owner of the club is:
Baby. Mickey. (Pause). Watch what you say to me.
Mickey. I don’t think I have to. I don’t think any of us do.
Baby. This is my dad’s place. And there’s... I’m his son. There must be deeds, and it Passes on to me
(79-80).

Silver Jonny appears again in *Mojo*’s last scene (scene 2). Here we see Baby wearing the silver jacket. He starts to talk about his father’s story. He goes to Wales, here resembling “a personal version of the story of Abraham and Isaac” (Rabey, 2015: 50), with sharp knives that Baby points out were used to kill this. However, the knives are used to slaughter a cow in the dark. While Baby telling all of this to Silver Johnny, Sweets comes but is not aware of Silver Johnny’s presence. When Potts enters he realizes the presence of Silver Johnny and says: “Potts. Baby. Okay. Listen. This changes a couple of things. First of all, you’re my hero” (Butterworth 2011: 90). Later, Baby starts to narrate how he found Mr Ross: “And I parked it, right, and asked around, and the first bloke I ask actually knows where Mr Ross lives” (91) and how he slashes him from the top of the head. He later Baby starts to question why Mickey is near Mr Ross when Ezra and Silver Johnny head over there. “Moreover, Johnny has related Mickey’s presence and central implication in Ross’s plan and in Ezra’s disappearance” (Rabey, 2015:51). Mickey has to accept his guilt and admits: “Baby, I had no choice. We were going to lose everything” (Butterworth 2011:51). He tries to explain why he helps to Mr Ross in Ezra’s death. Skinny enters and tends to guard Mickey:

Skinny. Mickey's done nothing. Bastard's been hanging upside down for two hours he's gone back to front. And I'll prove it. I'll prove it. Because Mickey was at home and then he came here. He was ill then he came here. Anyone listens to some little fuck ditched us all in the lurch is a sissy. I believe Mickey (96).

Then Baby puts the derringer to Skinny's head and fires it, however "Skinny does not die immediately: the fatal but indirect wound leaves him to explore his own shock, outrage and fear, and the other characters (...) are thrown into further ineffectual panic by his death throes" (Rabey, 2015:51). Silver Johnny appears again and approaches them in order to speak with Baby. They together clarify the beauties of life, mentioning the sun, air, heat, light and people on the street, and leave silver jacket on the floor. In the ongoing process this study examines the play *Mojo* with the aim of demonstrating how abusing, father-son relations and violence construct masculinity crisis.

3. The Crisis of Masculinity in *Mojo*

Masculinity is a complicated term and it is difficult to define exactly because its meaning is continuously changing. Masculinity is socially constructed therefore; it shows variations according to factors such as age, ethnicity, race and class. Without a doubt the masculinity of an aging, high class is different than the masculine behaviours related with urban youth. David Collinson and Jeff Hern (2001: 149) states that "(m)asculine identities constantly have to be constructed, negotiated and reconstructed". In *Mojo* young urban boys (Baby, Mickey and other groups of male) are portrayed to declare and show their maleness. Masculinity theory examines the orders that masculine elements and ideals reflect society as a whole and masculinity, inferred as an organization of practice in everyday life, is significantly a social construction. Haddox (2011:32) reveals that "construction of masculinity is usually associated with construction of power in a society". As a social construction masculinised power, maleness or manhood can be separated from individual power because masculinised power refers to "hegemonic masculinity". This term is elucidated as:

Hegemonic masculinity is far more complex than the accounts of essences in the masculinity books would suggest... It is, rather, a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance. An immediate consequence of this is that the culturally exalted form of masculinity, the hegemonic model so to speak, may only correspond to the actual characters of a small number of men... Yet very large numbers of men are complicit in sustaining the hegemonic model (Carrigan et al 1987:92).

Particular groups of men in Butterworth's play *Mojo* question their positions of power and wealth in their own society because these positions build their social relationships which constitute their hegemony. Hegemony between father and son relation is observed through Baby and Mickey. In the course of the play, actual characters (Baby and Mickey) desire to produce their dominance over small group of men. While producing their dominance, Jez Butterworth depicts a world where father-son relations are destroyed. This theme is evident in most of In-yer-face plays of the 1990s. As Ian Rickson has pointed out "one of the most important issues of the late twentieth century has been the crisis in masculinity- in the workplace and the family- and that's why there's been a lot of boys' plays" (qtd in Sierz 2000:154). During this period, the contemporary male psyche suffers from disorders due to destructive effect of patriarchal masculinity. Jez Butterworth handled the term by using the loss of power and crisis in fatherhood with his *Mojo*. In this context, fatherhood and violence among relations are presented as masculine crisis.

In Butterworth's *Mojo*, besides violence, gangland, addiction, and cruelty; shocking, comical and absurd events are shown on stage. *Mojo* especially focuses on father-son

relationships, masculine desire, and the crisis of masculinity. Aleks Sierz describes the crisis of masculinity and its relation with young writers:

Then years on (1980s – 1990s) young writers were looking for an equally urgent preoccupation, an equally symbolic theme. They found it in the crisis of masculinity. Writers obsessively and probably unconsciously returned time and time again to stories which are not about family but about boys. And, in opposition to the feminist plays of the 1980s, artistic directors chose plays that had a laddish nature: all men casts became common and the theme of violent and homo-erotic male relationships unavoidable. Examples are numerous, but Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* is a classic case (Sierz, *Cool Britannia- In-Yer-Face*).

Towards the late twentieth century, crisis of masculinity seems to occur everywhere – at work, at school, on the street and within the family – so playwrights produce plays about boys and male relationships. Mangan (2003: 247) lay bares that “we may indeed be experiencing a current crisis in masculinities, but there is no single stable anterior position against which was contemporary crisis is to be measured... On the contrary, it now seems, crisis and anxiety are rather the conditions of masculinity itself”. In his play, Butterworth writes his play around dealing with contemporary crises and anxieties relating to masculinity. *Mojo* is a gangster play with men as its central theme. Aleks Sierz states that “like other gangster plays, it dips in and out of violence, but, more significantly, its theme is men” (Sierz 2000:161). It concerns itself with men and their existence, their struggle for power, their desire, their anxieties, their courage, and their revenge, all in turn symbolizing a crisis of masculinity.

At the very beginning of the play, this crisis starts when Sweets and Potts backstab Silver Johnny and his growing influence:

Potts. One day he's asking his mum can he cross the road the next he's got grown women queueing up to suck his winkle
Sweets. Seventeen child.
Potts. These girls. They shit when he signs (7).

And also they envy Silver Johnny's relationships with women as well as women's reactions towards Silver Johnny. The other crisis we witness between Skinny and Baby. Baby usually ridicules with Skinny, especially for his bad breath, and squeezes Skinny's bullocks: “Baby torments Skinny, squeezing his nuts or threatening to cut them off” (Sierz 2000:165). It causes anxiety for Skinny, saying that “I might want to have children one day” (Butterworth, 2011:19). This refers to “the spectre of consequences of long-term damage to his manhood” (Rabey 2015:43) and crisis of masculinity. In Act I Scene II, Mickey gives the news of Ezra's death “it's all right. Baby, I call... I got a call this morning. Somebody's murdered your dad” (Butterworth, 2011: 38) however Baby's reaction “somebody decides to kill my daddy, do they call me tell me? No Mickey” (48). This shows a serious problem between two men, Baby, and his father Ezra. It shows the crisis of the father and son relationship. On the other hand when the box arrives, only Baby has the power to open the box. This power stirs fear among others and, with this power and stare into Mickey's eyes; Baby tries to use the agitator effect of masculinity over both Mickey and the other characters. In the second part of *Mojo*, the source of the crisis, between Baby and his father Ezra, is abuse and torture:

Sweets. Yeah but there's dads and dads. You're thinking of a dad. Like in a book. Fucking figure of something.
Potts. Yes but –
Sweets. Not some bloke waits for you come home from school stuffs his hands Down your pants. Not one has you biting the sheets and then don't tell your mum (55).

It is powerful point that Baby was victim of abuse when he was a child, “just a lost soul, damaged by his father’s sexual abuse of him, capable of disarming childlike enthusiasm as well as terrifying childish cruelty” (Rabey, 2015: 43). Now he becomes abuser by torturing Skinny and humiliating his psychological disorder.

The other crisis of the play is when Skinny and Potts mention about Silver Johnny and Ezra, causing Skinny to express his confusion: “Skinny. What? Ezra never saw straight again the day the kid walked in here. Buying him silver suits. Wearing tight trousers himself. I mean an old man wearing tight trousers. It’s asking for trouble” (59). He expresses the abuse and how it critically affects them: “just because some old man wants to fuck children for a hobby don’t mean we all have to die in his good name” (59). Apart from the abuse and power crisis, depressive feelings and repressed homoerotic fascination between Skinny and Baby are observed though the way they continuously quarrel with each other:

Potts. He saying to Mickey he reckons we should brush you off. That ‘blah blah
pissing on we don’t need the Jew no more
Baby. Ah... He doesn’t mean that.
Potts. He said it. Something like it...
Baby. He doesn’t mean that. He only says that because he loves me (69).

Actually these homoerotic feelings spill over into other characters in the play as well, and are easily expressed. These feelings include “allusions to child abuse and relationships with minors to the implication of a homoerotic dimension to Sweets and Potts’s relationships” (Stuart, 1996).

At the beginning of scene two, the other main source of the cruelty and crisis of masculinity is narrated again by Baby. This long monologue represents that they took a journey to Wales when Baby was nine. There were sharp knives on the front seat. Ezra kills and slaughters a cow. Baby witnesses to it and is covered in blood. This blood forms a psychopathic male. Sierz expresses this event: “more on exercise in black humour than a psychological portrait, the story still underlines the play’s main theme: boys will be bloody boys” (2000: 165). These bloody boys are sons of cruel and abusive fathers. The absence of fathers and their masculine desire causes *Mojo*’s overall themed crisis of masculinity. As mentioned before, this journey also represents a journey of sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac. In these two journeys, fathers do not sacrifice their sons. This shows their obedience towards the divine father figure and “their pact to exclude feminine principles” (Rabey, 2015: 28). This sacrifice is a “purely masculine ritual and a period of sexual segregation, a journey, often the fear of danger and death, and eventually some form of sacred initiation of the adolescent male by the elders of the tribe” (Mangan, 2003: 39).

In the play Ezra and Sam Ross are never seen on the stage; however their existence and influence are always felt by means of other characters in the play. Their existence creates an additional crisis among them because Sam Ross kills Ezra with Mickey’s help, slicing his body in two parts. Baby, the main abuse victim, later kills Sam Ross using a cutlass. In these events, Mickey’s betrayal and lies are revealed: “instead of Ezra, there is a parade of surrogate fathers led by Mickey, whose maturity is finally revealed as based on lies and betrayal” (Middeke et al, 2011: 45). Psychological destruction and relationships crises create the core of the story. Yet again, Baby has to deal with his psychological destruction because of Mickey. For the second time Baby’s thoughts and beliefs are disoriented. Mickey’s guilt and Baby’s psychological disorder reflect the crisis of masculinity because “both states of mind are silent, solitary and male” (Sierz, 2000: 164). Mickey is another father figure for Baby, but he “turns out to be a study in failed masculinity – never is cool and strong as he’d like to be” and neither helps or nor leads Baby for that reason; “Baby becomes a symbol of maleness psychopathology” (165).

In *Mojo*, the crisis of masculinity comes from absent fathers. Baby's father cannot be seen and even if Baby knew he was abused. On the other hand, Skinny does not have his real father, so he feels admiration towards his stepfather Uncle Tommy and Mickey. He shows loyalty and supports Mickey throughout the play. This support "provides Skinny a definite paradigm of masculinity based on the sacredness of obedience" (Rabey, 2015: 31) and causes a homoerotic spark. When Skinny dies, Mickey is sick at heart and "he is hunched over Skinny's body" (Butterworth, 2011: 99). Butterworth deals with homoerotic feelings, with written perversion, misogyny and homosexuality being important sub-themes within the place.

The absence of fathers is analyzed by Sierz: "its images of masculinity also shoulder a simple and powerful message: these boys have never grown up. And maybe never will (2000: 166). At the end of the play, Baby, who experiences a current crisis in masculinity at the hands of his father's abuse, Ezra's death, becomes a difficult journey like Abraham and Isaac. Furthermore the killing of Sam Ross, takes Silver Johnny with him, representing "homoerotic subversion of the sacrificial (postlapsarian) scenario" (Rabey 2015: 31). Like Adam and Eve, Baby and Silver Johnny start a new life without innocence.

In the film version of *Mojo*, Ross asks Mickey to prove his fidelity and gives Mickey a gun to kill Ezra: "(...) when Mickey finally summons the resolve to pull the trigger, Ross ironically reveals that the gun is empty: like a demonic version of an Old Testament God, Ross primarily seeks a demonstration of obedience to his power and authority as tribal patriarch" (31). This patriarchal point is expressed by Butterworth who, when prepares about the story "the fairytale idea I came up with right at the start: two kingdoms, two kings, both of whom are off-stage and with Silver Johnny like a princess who gets stolen from one by the other. Then there are all the knights fighting over who's going to take over" (Gilbey 2013). Butterworth, showing Silver Johnny like a princess, tries to form the war of power, crisis of power and relations among males.

4. Conclusion

Mojo, starting as a gangster tale, ends with fatherless men. A crisis of fatherhood, anxiety, power, and abuse in turn create crisis of masculinity. While dealing with these terms Butterworth portrays social problems in *Mojo* as problems of fatherless men, abuse and violent crime in contemporary society. In this contemporary society, the abuse of boys by their fathers as well as lack of fatherhood cause aggressive strength, as observed in Baby, the inadequacy of Potts and Sweets, the mortification of Mickey, and the crisis of masculinity. The crisis of masculinity forces the characters to hide their feelings. They are not allowed to be weak in society and, for that reason, they turn to violence and kill the other men because of their own inner oppression. This in turn leads them to experience a different crisis: as loss of identity and masculinity, all at the hands of abuse.

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