A pioneer in West Indian literature, Indian Caribbean writer Samuel Selvon received international acclaim with his first novel, *A Brighter Sun*. The novel was published in 1952 and is set in Trinidad, Selvon’s native land. There has been some speculation that this novel was already completed when Selvon, like many West Indians at the time, migrated to Britain after World War II (Dyer, 2002, p. 113). Selvon puts this idea to rest in his interview with Michel Fabre (1988). When asked whether the book was written in Trinidad, Selvon responds, “No, I wrote it, or completed it in London. In Trinidad, I wrote poems and a good deal of short stories … but I mostly worked” (p. 65). The novel was significant for a number of reasons, one of which was that, according to Ivan Van Sertima, “It was in *A Brighter Sun* that an East Indian writer himself spoke for the first time … about the life of an Indian family in the Caribbean” (1968, p. 43). Harold Barratt notes that the novel also received critical acclaim because of Selvon’s use of Trinidadian dialect (2003, p. 28).

Samuel Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun* has been largely approached in terms of Selvon’s use of language and his social themes. In this paper, I start from the premise that approaching Selvon’s text from a gendered, masculinity studies perspective produces alternative insights into this text. I focus on protagonist Tiger’s journey from boyhood to manhood and argue that, through his depiction of Tiger’s engagement with his culture, Selvon constructs a central metaphor where the tenor is masculinity and the vehicle is prison. To examine Selvon’s representation of Tiger’s journey, I utilize Michel Foucault’s idea of the panoptic and Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performance, suggesting that Selvon develops a carceral conception of normative Indo masculinity, supervising and restricting Tiger.

**KEYWORDS**  
SAMUEL SELVON, *A BRIGHTER SUN*, MASCULINITY, METAPHOR CRITICISM

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Selvon has stated that the protagonist, in *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger, is based on a “really old man [whom] he knew,” (Fabre, 1988, p. 69). At the beginning of the novel Tiger is married off to a girl, who, like himself, is Hindu. He moves from Chaguanas to Barataria. Tiger “starts off by gradually discovering about life” (Fabre, 1988, p. 69). He is exposed to a whole new way of life and begins to mature as an individual and a man. His transformation is set against the landscape of changing Trinidadian society.

Many of the critical essays which have been written about *A Brighter Sun* have tended to consider together (or separately addressed) Selvon’s use of language, his commentary on race relations, and his treatment of the move toward independence in Trinidad. Frank Birbalsingh, for example, contends that “Tiger’s biography is merely the frame in which a lavish social canvas is hung” (1988, p. 83). Birbalsingh’s comment suggests that Selvon’s primary focus in the novel is the changing Trinidadian society with Tiger’s story and development largely instrumental to this focus. And while Roydon Salick cautioned that it is important that we do not miss “the historical, colonial context that Selvon so carefully constructs in the novel” (2001, p. 3), it seems equally important to see the protagonist’s biography as more than a mere frame, as there is much to be gained from paying attention to Tiger not only as individual but more importantly as gendered individual. As Kenneth Ramchand states, the book’s real theme is “the growing into manhood of the rural Indian, Tiger,” (1988, p. 160). This is, in fact, an analytic dimension to which many critics have alluded while focusing on other aspects of Selvon’s novel. Critics including Mark Looker (1996), and Harold Barratt (2003), for example, acknowledge the theme of manhood in *A Brighter Sun* but go on to elaborate other themes including community, self-awareness, and the use of language.

Lewis Macleod, in his essay on *The Lonely Londoners*, sums up much of how *A Brighter Sun* has been critically approached, and offers an explanation of why gendered approaches to the novel would prove useful:

While previous studies have noted, but not pursued, the decidedly masculinist emphasis in Selvon, the emerging discourse studying masculinities might well provide a particularly illuminating analytical viewpoint on his work. At the very least, discourses of masculinity provide a critical apparatus that approaches (and … reaches) Selvon in ways that previous racial, geographic, and self-consciously “progressive” analyses have not. (2005, p. 158)

Mcleod’s comments reinforce Selvon’s own belief that manhood is in an important theme in his writings. Asked by Michel Fabre (1988) about the place of women in his writing, Selvon responds, “But they do [have a place]. Of course, there is the question of manhood, or malehood and the role of male chauvinism” (p. 72). One critic who has answered Selvon’s call by focusing specifically on Tiger as a gendered individual is Curdella Forbes (2005).

In this paper, I *want* to extend the conversation started by Forbes and to do so by drawing on MacLeod’s challenge to develop new approaches to Samuel Selvon, with specific reference to Macleod’s belief that reading Selvon’s work
within a frame of masculinity is productive in offering new insights into Selvon’s texts. To explore masculinity within *A Brighter Sun*, more specifically Tiger’s masculinity, I utilize metaphor criticism to argue that Samuel Selvon utilizes a central metaphor, one in which normative Indo-Caribbean masculinity is likened to a prison. Tiger, Selvon’s protagonist, is at risk of becoming a “prisoner of masculinity.” A prisoner of masculinity according to Christopher Kilmartin, is someone “who compulsively conform[s] their behavior to masculine norms and lose[s] sight of their individuality in the process” (1997, p. 27). Tiger’s prison can be best understood when Foucault’s notion of the panoptic and Butler’s idea of gender as performance are used to examine how Tiger performs masculinity, and is socialized into a form of masculinity which is extremely stifling to him.

To argue that Selvon utilizes a central metaphor in his text necessitates a discussion of what is meant by “metaphor.” In his *Models and Metaphors*, Max Black explains metaphors by drawing on visual imagery:

> Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen’s structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen and the system of “associated commonplaces” of the focal word as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principal subject is “seen through” the metaphorical expression—or, if we prefer that the principal subject is “projected upon” the field of the subsidiary subject. (1962, p. 41)

Black’s definition of a metaphor as a “filter,” is similar to Kenneth Burke’s (1989) *terministic screen*. Burke suggests that, “If language is indispensable to human experience it also selects and narrows that experience. It acts a filter and a screen” (1989, p. 12). Burke notes with reference to the terministic screens:

> When I speak of “terministic screens,” I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here, something so “factual” as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded. (pp. 115-116)

Suggesting that metaphors are very much a part of our everyday life, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) write, “We have found that metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another;” (p. 117). They believe that “metaphors … are systematic devices for further defining a concept and for changing its range of applicability” (p. 125). These various definitions suggest that a metaphor is “a major technique (which a rhetor can use) for facilitating comprehension” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985, p. 42) and that, as Sonja Foss contends, “the structure of the metaphor itself argues” (2009, p. 270).
If metaphors act as screens and filters, and act as arguments on the part of the orator, how does metaphor relate to Selvon’s novel? To address this question is to ask what Selvon’s screen is, what the lens through which he wants readers to see normative Indo-Caribbean masculinity. How does he attempt to shape our understanding of Indo-Caribbean masculinity? This is done through the central concern in the novel with Tiger’s journey to manhood. Tiger’s journey is the “smoked glass,” like the photographs in Burke’s terministic screen, through which we look at Indo-Caribbean masculinity. What does Selvon want us to see when we look through Tiger’s eyes? We see that masculinity is a form of incarceration, limiting and restricting the individual. It is like a prison. How then might Selvon’s metaphor be analyzed?

Ivor Richards writings are particularly useful.

To facilitate the description of how a metaphor best secures its effects, Richards introduces two terms, “tenor” and “vehicle,” which are already so widely used that they scarcely need explanation. But, briefly, in the sentence, “The Oxford Movement is a spent wave,” “Oxford Movement” is the tenor; “spent wave,” the vehicle. The tenor, thus, is the main subject, while the vehicle is that to which the tenor is compared. Richards warns us, however, that we must not jump to the conclusion that one, the tenor, is central while the other is peripheral. (Bilsky, 1952, p.132)

Examining metaphor in terms of tenor and vehicle correlates with Black’s notion of metaphorical and non-metaphorical use. He explains, “In general, when we speak of a relatively simple metaphor, we are referring to a sentence or another expression in which some words are used metaphorically while the remainder are used nonmetaphorically” (1962, p. 27). In Black’s example, “The Chairman plowed through the discussion,” the word “plowed” is being used metaphorically, while at least one of the words is being used literally (p. 28).

If Selvon’s central metaphor is carceral masculinity, the tenor or non-metaphorical word would be “masculinity,” while the vehicle and metaphorical word, the thing to which masculinity is being compared is prison/incarceration. Selvon obviously does not mean a physical prison, but suggests that features associated with a prison, such as surveillance, control, and correction, if we are to use Michel Foucault’s elaboration of the panoptic (as discussed below), can be seen to be associated with normative Indo-Caribbean masculinity. Selvon builds up this vehicle of the prison through Tiger’s engagement with his culture and traditions, especially through religious customs; through general societal definitions of manhood, about which he is educated by older Indian men, particularly his father; and through Tiger’s internalization of the models of manhood to which he has been exposed, proving destructive not only to Tiger, but also to his wife and child.

In any society, culture helps inform how individuals engage with themselves and each other. Culture is reinforced through the socialization of children and sometimes adults into the society’s expectations. According to Michael Crotty (1998), culture may be seen as a way in which societies control their individual members and also reflects the expectations that individuals in turn have of so-
ciety. “As a direct consequence of the way in which we humans have evolved, we depend on culture to direct our behavior and organize our experience,” Crotty states (p. 53). Clifford Geertz (1973) reinforces this notion when he points out that “Culture is best seen as the source, rather than the result of human thought and behavior. It is “a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”)—for the governing of behavior” (p. 44). One specific manner in which culture is intertwined with gender is that culture sometimes affects gender roles. Gender roles, according to Christopher Kilmartin (2007) may be defined as “a set of expectations for behaving, thinking, and feeling that is based on a person’s biological sex” (p. 23), or rather, based on “beliefs about how males and females should be (prescriptive) and about how they should not be (proscriptive)” (p. 24).

One way in which Selvon constructs prescriptive and proscriptive beliefs about gender roles as particularly incarcerating in A Brighter Sun is through his depiction of the religious customs about marriage. Selvon suggests that his community’s religious customs contribute to Tiger’s imprisonment. Coming from Chagunas, “arguably the epicenter of the Indo-Trindadian culture in early forties” (Salick, 2001, p. 25), Tiger’s religious heritage as a member of Indian society has implications for the form of masculinity which he is expected to embody. One aspect of this religious heritage was that “[m]arriage among Caribbean Indians used to take place early, soon after puberty, through arrangement by their families” (Chevannes, 2001, p. 5). In keeping with the cultural traditions and cultural expectations about the trajectory of young males like himself, Tiger is thrown into marriage by his parents, an institution for which he is ill-prepared, involving him with someone whom he does not know. Thus begins a journey into an imposed notion of what it means to be a man:

Tiger didn’t know anything about the wedding until his father told him. He didn’t even know the girl. But he bowed to his parents’ wishes. He was only sixteen years old, was not in the habit of attending Indian ceremonies in the village. But he knew a little about weddings, that Indians were married at an early age, and that after the ceremony friends and relatives would bring him gifts until he began to eat; only then would they stop the offerings. (pp. 4-5)

The sense of impending doom which one would associate with a prison sentence is noted when we are told that, at the ceremony, Tiger “looked at everybody and everything with a tight feeling in his throat. He wished he knew more about what was going to happen to him” (p. 5). As Simon Gikandi’s (1992) analysis suggests, Tiger is trapped—a prisoner/colonized by the expectations of Indian culture. “The juvenile groom and his bride are asked to live up to a prescribed image of their culture; indeed, the wedding becomes the medium through which Hindu culture in Trinidad rationalizes its function and relevance” (Gikandi, p. 119).

Foucault’s notion of “normalizing judgment” helps us to understand why Tiger’s predicament is that of being “colonized.” Such judgment
differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierachizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals. It introduces, through this ‘value-giving’ measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved ... it normalizes. (1995, pp. 182-183)

Normalizing means that individuals are “the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else” (Gutting, 2005, p. 84). And as Geoff Dansher et al. (2000) point out, “because most people don’t want to become delinquents, they accept the normative values that are supposed to make them ‘good’ citizens” (p. 60). This is what Tiger’s parents have done. For them, “the preservation of their son’s Indian identity is mandatory” (Barratt, 2003, p. 29) and to this end they follow custom and marry him off because this is the norm in their society. This is what happens to young boys who turn sixteen. Indeed, as Gikandi suggests, “to his Indian parents [Tiger] is the heir to a proud Hindu tradition defined by masculinity” (p. 119). Tiger’s identity is controlled not only through his parents’ decision to adhere to religious customs and marry him off at sixteen, but to subsequent definitions and expectations of Indo-Caribbean manhood after marriage. Scholar, Linden Lewis (2006), in his article “Unsettling Masculinity in the Caribbean,” helps illustrate how masculinities are imposed upon Caribbean males. He writes that Caribbean masculinity, like other masculinities, is

simultaneously a set of social practices or behaviors, and an ideological position by which men become conscious of themselves as gendered subjects. Masculinity is therefore an ontological process of becoming aware of societal roles and expectations that are inscribed on the text of the body. Men are not born with this awareness of themselves. Society must impose this understanding on them, as it does in similar and different ways for women. This is the context in which we can talk about the idea of masculinity as being socially constructed. For not only does society play a determining role in shaping the consciousness of subjectivity, but it proceeds by sanctions and rewards to police the boundaries of the identities it establishes. (pp. 2-3)

Barry Chevannes and Janet Brown (1998) provide insight into the social practices to which Lewis alludes. They state that Caribbean men generally accept their primary role as that of provider. It is felt that a man who “cannot provide for his family is not a man” (Chevannes & Brown, p. 24). Further, “manhood implies authority, particularly over women and offspring. This authority is seen as natural, being part of ‘God’s plan’” (p. 24). In terms of man-woman relationships, most men believe they have ultimate power and authority (p. 25). “This view is defended by Christians, Hindus and Moslems as religious tradition, ordained by God, and as historical and cultural inheritance” (p. 25). These
are the broad ideologies about acceptable manhood into which Tiger is indoctrinated, only started off with his wedding.

Alan Johnson’s (1997) discourse on the “masculine mold” helps highlight how society shapes and molds Tiger’s masculinity and thereby begins a process of indoctrination. Writing about boys and their vulnerabilities as they attempt to acquire masculinity, Johnson states: “Boys have to shape their broad human potential to fit a narrow masculine mold— to devalue emotional attachment, tenderness, vulnerability, and nurturing; to objectify themselves and others” (p. 189). After his wedding, aware that he is now considered and should consider himself a “man,” Tiger internalizes what is accepted as normative masculinity and attempts to fit the masculine mold. His reactions to his friends speak to Tiger’s attempt at manhood and to the burden and restriction this places upon him.

All the boys and girls from the neighborhood came up and started to call out to him…. Some of the older folk drove them away, but Tiger would have liked for them to come. He was familiar with them, he could make jokes and talk. But now he was a man. He would have to learn to be a man, he would have to forget his friends. After all, he thought, they still little children. (p. 6)

This situation reveals much about how Tiger’s masculinity is supervised, disciplined, and corrected, and can be understood in light of Michel Foucault’s theory of the panoptic gaze. “For Foucault, the ideal architectural form of modern disciplinary power is Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a proposal for maximizing control of prisoners” (Gutting, 2005, p. 82). Foucault saw the panopticon as “one of the ways of disciplining and managing bodies” through surveillance (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 53), “a way of looking that could operate as a general principle of surveillance throughout the social body. This logic of the gaze, like that of discipline, was not confined to the prison, but moved throughout the various institutional spaces in society” (p. 54). Foucault (1981/2000) writes that the panopticon is:

One of the characteristic traits of our society. It’s a type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of continuous individual supervision, in the form of control, punishment and compensation, and in the form of correction, that is the molding and transformation of individuals in terms of norms. This threefold aspect of panopticism— supervision, control, correction— seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of power relations that exist in our society. (p. 70)

In this incident, Tiger’s identity and manhood is being supervised by the “older folks.” While Tiger would have liked to engage with his friends he is quickly corrected and is made aware of the normative behavior expected of “men,” and it becomes evident that these norms are restricting and limiting. According to the dictates of his society, engaging with his friends is the behavior of boys and not married men. He is being shown that isolation and lone-
liness are requisite if one is to deem oneself, and to be deemed, a “man.” This form of manhood dictates that he must not act on his emotional desire to be with his friends and must not seem vulnerable. Manhood is defined by acquiring a wife, almost like one acquires property.

The normative form of masculinity which is embraced in his society, and reinforced through the “older folks,” not only requires stoicism, but is rigid as it configures manhood within a binary. Tiger’s identity is narrowly defined. If he is not a “man” he is a “boy” and if he is not a “boy” he is a “man.” One of the traits of Caribbean manhood, according to Chevannes and Brown, is the concern that many remain “bwoys’, or males only—never becoming real men who can meet the later criteria for manhood, beyond the exercise of their sexuality” (1998, p. 24). Tiger’s socialization, by the men who surround him and who themselves have internalized normative models of what it means to be a man, seemingly unaware that “[b]y virtue of their greater social power, [they] are …in a unique position to help shift this power” (Kilmartin, 2007, p. 3), is such that Tiger becomes obsessed with ensuring that he is not considered a “bwoy.”

Tiger observes how the men around him, especially his father, perform masculinity. Judith Butler’s idea of gender performance helps us understand how the older men behave. In Gender Trouble, Butler argues that gender is socially constructed. According to Butler, “the gendered body is performative” (1999, p. 173). She argues that “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences … we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right (pp. 177-178). Gender is an act “[a]s in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (p. 178).

Society has already established how masculinity must be performed if one is to be considered “a man;” Tiger follows this script and he learns how to “perform masculinity,” from the direct and indirect instruction of the older men around him because he wants to be accepted as “man” by the other men. This is because an important aspect of masculinity involves men defining themselves against other men in order to be accepted by them, and in the case of especially boys, being accepted by their fathers. As Mike Marlowe (1998), notes, a child’s sense of maleness, or femaleness, is derived from, among others, “the attitudes of parents … toward the child’s biological sex or gender role” (p. 1). Observing his father and other men around him, Tiger learns that “only men got drunk, not boys” (p. 14); consequently, he seeks to define his masculinity through drinking. Thinking about his father Tiger remembers that:

once in Chaguanas his father was drinking in a rumshop and he had to go and bring him home. When his father saw him he said, “Ohe, boy, come an’ take ah little one, it go killam all de germs in yuh belly.” And he took a little one, urged by his father’s companions, and the rum coursed down his throat as if pitchoil had been soaked in his mouth and a match set to it. (p. 14)
Tiger had decided to drink because “he wanted to … show them he was a man, that he could swallow rum just as they did” (p. 14).

Another older man, Sookdeo serves as an example. He closely aligns drinking and acquiring masculinity. Sookdeo attempts to numb his failure at acquiring normative definitions of manhood—providing proper housing, attending to his wife’s needs, and feeling very trapped by the responsibility of providing for his daughter through drinking:

Sookdeo lived in a broken-down hut which he was always promising Rookmin, his wife, to repair. But he was never sober enough to do it. Every day, every night, it was the same question he asked in the hut—when was Dolly and Seta going to get married and relieve him of the responsibility of having to feed them? (p. 65)

Given what is suggested by the models around him, drinking becomes integral to Tiger’s definition of manhood, and features prominently in his marriage. As Salick points out, “rum helps Tiger overcome initial sexual ignorance sufficiently to consummate his marriage” (2001, p. 21). The presence of rum in his house symbolizes achieved manhood and its absence the opposite. He has no rum in his house when his friends visit and he feels ashamed (p. 40). This shame is solidified by his father’s response to the absence. “The old man said, ‘Well, you should have am here already! After all, you is man now, boy, and you must have am drink in house for when friend come.’” This whole incident is built on the fact that “Tiger’s bap seemed to take it that the marriage had turned him into a man right away. He adopted a man-to-man attitude with Tiger, and Tiger tried to keep up with him” (p. 44).

Tiger’s actions reinforce Foucault’s theory that the panoptic gaze, explaining how modern society functions, is also internal. As Danaher et al. (2000) points out, in Foucault’s theory of the panoptic gaze:

the panoptic gaze … is not something that is simply directed against us by others—it also becomes a way of looking at our own behaviours. Part of our socialization influences us to make ourselves the subject of our own gaze, and so we are constantly monitoring our bodies, actions and feelings. There is a gender dimension to this authority of the gaze. Males are also subject to the gaze.” (pp. 54-55)

The men around him teach Tiger how his masculinity should be performed not only before the men around him but before women. Tiger internalizes their gaze and treats his wife in a manner in which he believes these men would approve. Boysie, another Indian, socializes Tiger into a form of manhood according to which women are to be treated with suspicion and distrust. Using his conversation with Boysie to justify his actions, Tiger questions his wife Urmilla’s loyalty and commitment to him, treating her as an object of disdain:

Look at how much thing other people does do. And what I do? I only ask she if she if she sure is my baby. Boysie did telling me how one time a girl
try to stick him with a child, and it wasn’t he own. He tell me I must watch out for that kind of thing. Man, people too worthless, yes! You have to be on guard all the time! (p. 145)

Tiger is taught that not only does being a man require distrust of women, it also requires intimidating and mentally abusing them:

Tiger refused to think about the baby. Somehow he felt he had done wrong by speaking to his wife and neighbour the way he did, accusing Urmilla of being unfaithful. But he righted the wrong in his mind, arguing that all sorts of things had to happen, not just good all the time. And he hadn’t struck Urmilla, he had just threatened her—all of that was good for man to do his wife sometimes. (p. 145)

Here, Tiger creates a distinction between physical violence and verbal violence and, in this instance sadly believes himself to be a better man than those who resort to physical violence. This does not mean that he has not been taught to manifest physical violence in establishing his manhood, for his thoughts reveal the connection he makes between manliness and violence against his wife, a connection attributable to his father. Joseph Pleck’s views on fatherhood offers some perspective. “[A] father’s involvement may be beneficial not because it will help support traditional male roles, but because it will help break them down” (1981, p. 72). Tiger’s father is instrumental in supporting traditional male attitudes to women rather than breaking them down. His father’s actions have taught Tiger that bullying a woman is one of the prescribed roles of being a man:

Tiger had never smoked. He had only seen his father and others. But he had decided that he was not going to appear a small boy before his wife. Men smoked: he would smoke. He would drink rum, curse, swear, bully the life out of her if she did not obey him. Hadn’t he seen when his father did that? (p. 11)

Tiger’s internalization of the fact that manhood should be built around “issues of control and dominance” (Johnson, 1997, p. 189) is expressed in another incident, in which he resorts to physical violence. Theories on boys, men, and masculinity would suggest that “Anger is, in fact, one of the few emotions boys are encouraged to have and as a consequence, a lot of other feelings such as hurt, disappointment and even fear get funneled into it” (Levant, 1992, pp. 11-12). Tiger engages in hypermasculinity and expresses his manhood through one of the few emotions he has been taught are available to him as a man—anger. This afforded anger is also fuelled by another outward manifestation of manliness—rum, which proves destructive to Urmilla:

“You never taste the weight of my foot, girl. Is time. I go learn you respect. I go learn you who is man in this house.” ... “Take that!” He kicked her across the face.” And that!” He kicked her in the stomach, and she doubled
up in agony. He kicked her as she writhed on the floor, the rum spinning in his head and making him dizzy. (p. 176)

Here, Tiger’s manhood operates through a “negation of womanhood” (Johnson, 1997, p. 189). Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef comment that, although there were some who resisted, the Indian woman in Trinidad and Tobago was traditionally seen as “passive, dutiful and subservient,” while the man, “in contrast, was … both overlord and master” (2006, p. 13). It is this attitude towards women to which Tiger subscribes and one which imprisons him, is destructive to Urmilla, and limits his perspective of what constitutes a healthy intimate relationship.

The object of mental and physical assault, we learn that, soon after the wedding, Urmilla’s “emotions were too tightly drawn, like ropes across her breasts. And she felt that if she laughed the tautness would snap and set her free. Acting on what he has observed from the older men around him, “It flashed in Tiger’s mind that this was rudeness and that he should slap her into respect for him when she laughed” (p.12). An examination of his fears and concerns reveals how normative definitions of masculinity have forced Tiger into a mode of manhood which he does not fully comprehend. One aspect of his fears is revealed in the following extract:

When he was in Chaguanas he was never worried by his thoughts. Was worry one of the signs of a man? And all the incidents since marriage came like giant hands out of the night to hold him down. The sudden movement from boyhood to manhood, his hut, his acquiring the land to plant a garden, the nights with Urmilla, days turning the soil, the baby just born. The hands clutched at his throat. He wanted to cry out in terror and run until he couldn’t run again…. He shut his eyes tightly; night came into his head…. Suddenly he sprang up. He was not alone. He had a wife. He had a child….Don’t mind it not boy chile. I is a man… (pp. 43-44)

William Pollack explains some of the anxiety that boys like Tiger face and the performances of masculinity into which they are forced as they grow older:

As they grow older, the inner conflict boys feel about masculinity is exacerbated, and they feel compelled to hide their confusion by acting more self-confident than they truly feel (a sense of false self-esteem, leading to increased sadness)…. Boys have grave concerns about growing up to be men: They overwhelmingly see manhood as filled with unrewarding work, isolation from friends and family, unhappiness, and disappointment…. Despite the outward appearance they often give of being cheerful and contented, many boys of all ages feel deep feelings of loneliness and alienation. (2006, p. 192)

In one illustration of his anxiety, we learn that, just like he felt directly after the wedding ceremony, Tiger is afraid to show his fear and uncertainty during the course of his marriage. “He signed a contract…. He was worried about the
negotiation; he wished his father or one of his uncles was there with him. But the thought made him ashamed. He was married, and he was a big man now. He might as well learn to do things without the assistance of other people” (p. 13). Thus, a “big man” is not a boy and does not need to be guided. Needing others is a source of shame. Tiger’s schizophrenia may be explained in light of Máirtín Mac an Ghaill’s comment that “A central dichotomy in many young men’s lives is between their projection of a public confident masculinity and their experience of private anxieties and insecurities” (cited in Flood, 2002, p. 25). Soon after his marriage, Tiger is frightened and wishes “he knew more about what would happen to him” (p. 5).

His later actions reveal how ostensible performances of masculinity, like drinking, are destructive to men as these acts help them to mask, rather than confront, their fears and insecurities. Tiger is “frightened for himself” after he abandons his wife. This fear takes him to the rumshop. “And the next he knew he was drunk” (p. 179). Tiger displays the symptoms of what sociologist Andreas G. Philaretou and Professor Katherine Allen call a “covertly depressed” man. “Covertly depressed men,” they declare “usually turn to any substance, person or action to regulate their self-esteem. In this addictive process, they hope to replenish their basic sense of self as valuable and important, in other words, their from-within self-esteem. As long as their connection to the object of their addiction, be it any tangible substance or intangible ideal, is undisturbed they tend to feel good about themselves” (2001, p. 314). Tiger’s drinking can be further understood in light of Pollack’s belief that rigid gender guidelines, or gender straitjackets, push many boys to repress their yearnings for love and connection and to build an invisible, impenetrable wall of toughness around themselves—a “cool pose” (Majors & Billson, 1992) hidden by an emotional “mask” of masculine bravado or invulnerability, leaving them to experience a gamut of lonely painful problems that range from academic failure to drug abuse, from struggles with friends to clinical depression, and from attention deficit disorder to suicide and murder. Behind their masks of pseudo-invulnerability and the drama of action, it is often hard to hear boys’ stifled but genuine voices of pain and struggle, their yearning for connection. (2006, p. 191)

Turning back to Kilmartin’s (2007) definition of a prisoner of masculinity as someone “who compulsively conform[s] their behavior to masculine norms and lose[s] sight of their individuality in the process” (p. 27), we find that Tiger’s actions and thoughts toward the end of the novel, indicate that he has not “lost sight” of his individuality. He moves to find his comfort level within the social institution of masculinity which has been imposed upon him. Tiger’s actions can be best understood in light of Michael Kimmel’s explanation of identity. Kimmel explains that gender is both a social and individual construction:

Gender identity is socially constructed … our identities are a fluid assemblage of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from values, im-
ages, and prescriptions we find in the world around us. Our gendered identity is both voluntary—we choose to become who we are—and, coerced—we are pressured, forced, sanctioned, and often physically beaten into submission to some rules. We neither make up the rules as we go along, nor do we glide perfectly and effortlessly into pre-assigned roles. (2000, p. 87)

The first step in attempting to construct his identity occurs when Tiger begins to acknowledge the extent to which the social code of masculinity, a code which he had internalized, has defined and restricted his masculinity. According to Pollack, findings from his study on boys indicate that there exist boys who “are beginning to reject and rebel against outdated rules of masculinity and manhood (2006, p. 94) For Pollack, the voices are saying: “We’re getting ready for a second gender revolution.” He writes: “The boys’ voices we’ve heard seem to be telling us, some directly and some more subtly, “I want out of the old boy code,” “I’m sick of hiding important parts of who I really am,” and “I want to be able to be myself” (p. 94). Tiger tries to “be himself.” His awareness is important and significant for, as Gikandi notes, “in order to subjectify himself in A Brighter Sun, Tiger must raise a new knowledge against the overdetermined world of … Indian culture” (1992, p. 118).

Part of his enlightenment involves interrogating accepted social definitions of manhood. Tiger comments, “To my wife, I man when I sleep with she. To bap, I man if I drink rum. But to me, I no man yet” (p. 45). Here, Tiger involves himself in the process of defining his manhood. In a conversation with Joe, Tiger says: “[t]he first time, I used to think as long as you have wife and child, you is a man. So long as you drink rum and smoke, you is a man. That is what my father and them tell me. But no. It take more than that” (p. 116). He comments that, “He soon realized that with their [the other men’s] tongues loosened over a bottle of rum they just talked and argued to pass time away, and he would learn nothing” (p. 64). “Tiger learns that manhood does not mean possessing a wife and fathering a child; it does not mean smoking and drinking rum. Manhood means awareness of one’s identity as a unique individual; it also means satisfying one’s hunger for knowledge” (Barratt, in Zehnder, 2003, p. 29). This hunger for knowledge is expressed in a conversation with Joe. Joe asks, “tell me something. Yuh tink dat because yuh cud read and write yuh is ah better man dan me?” Tiger responds, “Is not a matter of who better than who, Joe. Is just me, inside of me. Things I want to learn, things I want to find out” (p. 109).

There are other ideas which Tiger “must push aside if he is to understand what true manhood is” (Wyke, 1991, pp. 64-65). He pushes aside earlier ideas about literacy. He no longer believes that “Joe couldn’t write, because Joe was a man” (p. 109). Instead literacy features as a part of a revised notion of manhood, as Tiger learns to read and write. Tiger also challenges the notions of manhood which the older men had imposed upon him. His response to an approach from a prostitute reveals Tiger’s more mature and critical outlook on masculinity:
A prostitute approached him with an unlighted cigarette but changed her mind as she came closer and turned away. He thought. It must be a hard night for if she can’t find a sailor or a soldier, and so much of them all about! He could have shown her money, and that would have brought her back. But what was the use? It didn’t prove you were a man. Nor drinking rum, nor swearing, nor screwing a woman. The way Joe talked, you would think these things counted. But look at Joe, man! He still young, and yet he have no ambition! What sort of man is that? (p. 112-113)

Reflecting upon his journey Tiger says, “It seemed such a long time ago. But he was a boy then. Now he was—what? A man? Maybe, but not a man like Joe Martin or Boysie or any of the others. They were content, he was not” (p. 113). His revised definition of manhood is closely aligned with being responsible to his wife and to his child. This is revealed in an exchange with Boysie, who has decided to migrate. Tiger says to Boysie, “So you really going, eh, Boysie? You make up your mind? You leaving Trinidad?” (p. 213). His response to Boysie: “How you want me to leave my wife and child and house and go away just so?”…. A man just can’t take up heself and do this and do that” (p. 213). When we juxtapose his words against his earlier belief that that being a man means “coming and going as he pleases” (p. 15), Tiger’s transformation is evident. In his new world view, being a man involves a deeper sense of responsibility which is revealed through a commitment to his wife and to his child.

For Tiger, manhood also means not adhering to expected cultural norms and to the belief that only Indians should be his friends. Very early into Tiger’s marriage, his uncle had instructed him that “Indians must come first” (p. 203) and that he is to ensure that “creole people keep they distance [and he should maintain only] Indian friend” (p. 48). He rejects his uncle’s instruction on interracial friendships: “Why should I look only for Indian friends? What wrong with Joe and Rita? Is true I used to play with Indian friend in the estate, but that ain’t no reason why I must shut my heart to other people. Aint a man is a man, don’t mind if he skin not white, or if he hair curl?” (p. 48).

As Curdella Forbes (2005) points out, at the end of A Brighter Sun, there are still issues with which Tiger must contend. One of these issues is that Tiger, like any member of a society, cannot simply break out of the social confines of what his society and culture define as manhood, but as Kimmel (2000) suggests, gender is not just something into which individuals seamlessly enter, they can also play a part in constructing their masculinity within the wider societal and cultural expectations. Tiger does have power over himself and the choices he makes about his wife and his child. What is important is that Tiger works toward finding an acceptable space for himself in his quest for masculinity. No longer is his a masculinity which is imposed; he becomes actively involved in the process and seeks to, if not totally reject, then interrogate, the prescribed and proscribed gender role expectations imposed upon him.

CONCLUSION

Selvon uses the metaphor of masculinity as prison, with the changing vehicles of religious customs, socialization by older men, and the internalization of
cultural definitions of masculinity, to interrogate the prescribed and proscribed
gender roles for young boys and men. Approaching Selvon’s text from a mas-
culinity studies perspective reinforces that Selvon was innovative not only in his
use of language, his exploration of immigration, of community and of nature,
but also in his representation, exploration, and commentary on Indo-Caribbean
masculinity. Selvon was willing to draw attention to an often overlooked issue,
the extent to which normative masculinity can often be limiting, restricting and
stifling men and especially for young boys. This would suggest that in some
ways, Selvon was well ahead of his time, in pointing out what is one of the
major thrusts of men’s studies, a movement which Kenneth Clatterbaugh
(1997) suggests might have begun in the 1970s, suggesting hegemonic mas-
culinity is destructive not only to women, but also to men and especially to
young boys. As Michael Kaufman (1993) in Cracking the Armour states, “there
is privilege, but there is also pain” (p. 7) when it comes to masculinity. Hege-
monic masculinity allows men to wield power but is also painful, resulting in
confusion, uncertainty and dissatisfaction, feelings from which men who do
not allow themselves to be “prisoners of masculinity,” might find some escape.

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