

The Promise.

Damon Galgut.

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Damon Galgut's novel, *The Promise* (2021), winner of 2021 Booker Prize, is a poignant voice within the white South African literary Canon. Perhaps this might be attributed to the various identity positions that Galgut simultaneously occupies as a white and queer male. Galgut's occupation of the centre and margins of racialised and gendered power enables him to narrate a story that indicts and places the Afrikaner at the heart of South Africa's delayed and convoluted political and economic transitions. The novel is set on a very important, yet barren piece of land/farm near Pretoria, halfway to the Hartbeespoort dam, during the 1986 state of emergency. This time was characterised by a sweltering township atmosphere; political unrests/violence; ambivalent feelings of entrapment, nostalgia, loss and defeat within the Afrikaner nation. The narrative of *The Promise* revolves around the members of the Swart family who also double as a microcosm of the Afrikaner nation. However, Galgut does not use the family as symbol for the nation in the crudest Fanonian mode and/or the tradition espoused by the first generation of post-independence African writers. The family in this text is used as narrative tool that traverses through apartheid and its aftermath in a manner that enables alternative ways of race relations beyond the horizon of apartheid.

The heightened political unrest of the time; the National Party's loose yet tightening grip on power; the racial tensions in the country; the licensed killing of black people; the death of Rachel (the Swart's matriarch and domestic martyr) and the stench of death she

leaves behind in the Swart's house—all allude to the impending fall of apartheid and the falling apart of the Swart family. The barren land and Rachel's death due to an unnamed sickness that has hollowed her body are at the heart of the novel's conflict. It is Rachel's dying wish (a promise made over a terribly sad knot of crying and Manie's choking sounds) that Salome, the black house help, should be gifted the Lombards's house. The Lombard/Salome house, perched on a useless piece of land filled with stones, remains at the heart of the Swart family drama and conflict for 33 years—the span of the narrative.

The history of the Swart family is narrated alongside the South African national history from 1985/6 to the present decade (post Jacob Zuma's resignation), with the divergent national atmospheres accompanying each presidency. These also form the backdrop of each of the Swart funerals. Manie is buried on the eve of the iconic rugby world cup game that temporarily unites a nation ravaged by racism and political violence. Astrid dies in a crime-related incident during the Mbeki era—an era infamous for a rise in crime and the HIV infection rate. Anton, the heir of the Swart family, is haunted by social and personal impotence, symptomatic of postcolonial nations and masculinities. His impotence is physiological, spiritual and psychological. His spiritual bankruptcy is mapped onto the Dutch Reformed Church's support of racism and its representative in the novel, dominee Alwyn Simmers, fornicates with his sister and harbours sinister intents towards Manie. As a result, he sacrifices Manie for material gain.

At the age of eighteen, Anton is conscripted into the army. His cousin, Wessel, who has completed military training, suffers withdrawal symptoms that no one understands. The family describes him as "lazy, depressed, finding his way" (15). Anton realises that he lives in a psychological hell caused by his intentional/nonpolitical killing of a black woman in Katlehong in 1986. He conflates the death of the black woman with his mother's death, and from then on, the country becomes a miniature hell for Anton. He becomes a fugitive and seeks solace in alcohol. Manie's death, his quest for redemption, reconciliation with his father as well as financial freedom compels him to come home. The return follows a decade-long family fallout due to Manie's refusal to honour the promise made to Salome. Anton returns to a farm that is bursting at the seams. On the one hand, he has to deal with land grabbing from the dominee turned pastor and the black people. On the other hand, he is unable to run the family businesses—the snake park and the farmhouse renovations. He lives on handouts from his father's trust funds and fails

to sire children and become financially independent as expected of a man. His wife, Desiree, resents him for his alcoholism and sexual impotence. He eventually kills himself due to depression and his wife inherits debts. Astrid is the only member of the Swart family who outlives the promise that has metamorphosed into a familial/national curse. Astrid's dogged attempts at restorative justice for both Salome and Lukas bear fruit 33 years late. The complicated web of dispossession and sense of (un)belonging/landlessness/homelessness for both Lukas and Salome are compounded by apartheid laws that prohibited them from holding a title to a home/house/land and postapartheid land claims that seek to return the land to 'rightful' owners. Though Rachel's promise is fulfilled, Salome might lose the house due to a pending land claim made with regard to the Swart farm.

'The promise' can be read as a verbal speech act made by Rachel on her sickbed within earshot of her reflective/dissident daughter, Amor, and nonchalant husband. In addition, 'the promise' is a spiritual battleground that both registers and challenges a perception of unbelonging for the (Jewish) Rachel within the Swart family/Afrikaner nation. According to Tannie Marina, the female patriarch of the Swart family, "Jews and her the resilient Voortrekker ancestors are like oil and water-don't mix [...] why couldn't her brother [Manie] just marry into his own tribe?" (17). The conflict between the two tribes/religions emanates from the fact that apartheid created a fertile ground for anti-Semitic sentiments to grow. Frantz Fanon (92) reminds us that whoever hates the 'negro/ Kaffir' harbours anti-Semitic sentiments. Rachel's self-identification as a Jew makes her empathise with Salome at a time when the family she is married into denies Salome a house and sense of belonging and self-actualisation.

The Promise is not only a curse handed down to the Swart family by Rachel, but also a curse that haunts South Africa today in the form of the failed and perverted transformations of the postapartheid governments after the negotiated settlement, the TRC and the deferred reparations. *The Promise* sits squarely at the heart

of South African politics of (un)belonging, poverty, despair, and deferred dreams, against the backdrop of the "mass of suffering South Africans—a growing throng of the wasted and depleted and maimed, brandishing their wounds" (192). The deferred promise made to Salome does not only depict the hypocrisy of a Christian/Afrikaner "who goes back on his word" (25), but it also shows the complacency of the ANC presidents who are not keen on ensuring that restorative justice prevails in the country.

The novel's multiple layers unfold through multiple voices of narration—realist, stream of consciousness and magical realist modes of narration. The narrative intertwines with and blurs the sacred/profane; life/death; physical/ghostly realms; religiosity/spirituality/secular; hetero-/homosexual; black/white binaries in ways that make the narrative explicitly 'ordinary' as opposed to political. Like Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *The Promise* falls short of reimagining and normalising racial relations beyond apartheid architecture of extrinsic difference in the sense that Salome is made invisible and speechless throughout the narrative. Lukas grows up to be a malevolent black man whose sense of identity is deeply rooted in willful amnesia and a blackmail of whiteness which is symptomatic of the shaping present. It is fascinating to note that the structure of the novel is adopted from Anton's 'failed' novel. However, the grey lines between hope and despair that hover in the narrative paint a realistic rather than imaginary picture of how contemporary South Africa is constituted.

Works cited

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