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Unkept Promises and Land Conflicts in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

Damon Galgut'un Vaat Romanında Yerine Getirilmeyen Sözler ve Toprak Çatışmaları

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the conflicts surrounding land, unfulfilled promises, and the dichotomy of self versus other in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*. The novel provides a profound exploration of the manipulation and subjugation of individuals and cultures under oppressive political regimes, particularly the apartheid system in South Africa. A state-sanctioned system of racial segregation and discrimination that was institutionalized from 1948 until the early 1990s, systematically privileging the settlers while marginalizing the indigenous populations. Through a close reading of *The Promise*, this study reveals how the novel reflects the broken promises that defined apartheid and its lingering aftermath. Central to this analysis is the exploration of apartheid's legislative framework and its devastating socio-economic consequences, particularly for black South Africans. The study investigates how apartheid entrenched systemic inequality by fostering a rigid hierarchy that positioned the white "self" as superior and the black "other" as inferior. Galgut's narrative captures the psychological and material repercussions of this ideology, exposing its dehumanizing effects. Furthermore, the study examines post-apartheid South Africa as depicted in *The Promise*, focusing on the unresolved issue of land redistribution. Despite the end of apartheid, equitable land restitution remains an unfulfilled promise, perpetuating historical injustices. The novel portrays the resistance of white landowners to relinquishing property, highlighting ongoing racial and economic disparities. By interrogating these themes, this study underscores the enduring legacy of apartheid and the challenges of achieving true reconciliation and justice in contemporary South Africa. The study examines the symbolism of the unfulfilled promise and the silencing of black persons in the novel. Eventually, it displays the disputes and confrontations between settler and native characters, highlighting their viewpoints and the reverberations of colonialism and racist policies.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Damon Galgut'un *Vaat* adlı romanında toprak çatışmalarını, yerine getirilmeyen vaatleri ve "ben" ile "öteki" arasındaki ikiliği eleştirel bir bakışla inceler. Roman, özellikle Güney Afrika'daki apartheid rejimi altında bireylerin ve kültürlerin nasıl manipüle edildiğini ve boyun eğdirildiğini derinlemesine irdeler. Apartheid, 1948'den 1990'ların başına kadar kurumsallaşmış, devlet destekli bir ırk ayrımı ve ayrımcılık sistemiydi; yerleşimci nüfusu sistematik olarak kayıncı, yerli halkları marjinalleştiriyordu. *Vaat* üzerine gerçekleştirilen bu metin odaklı analiz, romanın apartheid döneminin kırık vaatlerini ve kalıcı mirasını nasıl yansıttığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmanın merkezinde, apartheid'in yasal çerçevesi ve özellikle siyahi Güney Afrikalılar üzerindeki yıkıcı sosyo-ekonomik etkilerinin incelenmesi yer alır. Çalışma, apartheid'in beyaz "ben"i üstün, siyah "öteki"yi ise aşağı konumlandırarak katı bir hiyerarşi oluşturarak sistematik eşitsizliği nasıl kökleştirdiğini incelemektedir. Galgut'un anlatısı, bu ideolojinin psikolojik ve maddi yansımalarını ortaya koyarak onun insanlık dışı etkilerini gözler önüne serer. Ayrıca, çalışma, *Vaat*'ta betimlenen apartheid sonrası Güney Afrika'yı, özellikle çözülmemiş toprak yeniden dağıtım sorununu ele alır. Apartheid'in sona ermesine rağmen, adil toprak iadesi hala yerine getirilmemiş bir vaat olarak kalmakta ve tarihsel adaletsizlikleri sürdürmektedir. Roman, beyaz toprak sahiplerinin mülklerinden vazgeçmeye direnişini tasvir ederek devam eden ırksal ve ekonomik eşitsizlikleri vurgular. Bu temalar üzerinden, çalışma apartheid'in kalıcı mirasını ve çağdaş Güney Afrika'da gerçek uzlaşma ve adaletin sağlanmasındaki zorlukları sorgular. Romanın merkezindeki yerine getirilmeyen vaat sembolizmi ve siyahi bireylerin sessizleştirilmesi incelenir. Son olarak, yerleşimci ve yerli karakterler arasındaki çatışmalar, perspektif farklılıkları ve sömürgecilik ile ırkçı politikaların yankıları ortaya konulur.

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Introduction

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* is a Man Booker Prize winner in 2021. Galgut employs the stream of consciousness technique in his novels; consequently, some critics draw parallels between his style and that of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner (Alter, 2021; Day, 2021; Perry, 2021). The Booker Prize judges praise him for "an unusual narrative style that balances Faulknerian exuberance with Nabokovian precision, pushes boundaries, and is a testament to the flourishing of the novel in the 21st century" (Obioma, 2021, para. 2).

What makes *The Promise* unique is that it is divided into four parts. The primary focus of each part revolves around a funeral and the enigmatic death of a member of the Afrikaner Swart family. These parts take the names of deceased individuals whose funerals are being held: Ma, Pa, Astrid, and Anton. Throughout four distinct periods, Galgut intricately portrays the evolving landscape of South Africa, addressing the unique circumstances of each era while primarily focusing on the nation during and after the apartheid regime. Galgut was inspired to write the novel by a friend who shared the stories of the funerals of his parents and two siblings; after all, he stated, "the dramatist in me saw the potential in staging a family history in four acts, each one centered on a burial. And if each act took place in a different decade, with a different president in power" (Flood, 2021, para. 12). Galgut preferred third-person narration in the novel, employing this style to convey his ideas effectively and provide clarity and explanation within the narrative. To illustrate, he rendered Salome, a black maid, her son Lukas, the black chauffeur, and most black people silent in the novel to express their oppressed situation in the apartheid era. Moreover, instead of hearing the black people talk, the narrator tells us what they are thinking and what they feel until the novel's last pages, when Lukas bursts with anger into Amor, the heroine of the story.

While Galgut's third-person narration shapes our understanding of the characters' inner lives, it also interacts with the novel's temporal framework. Rather than providing specific dates, Galgut relies on indirect historical markers, such as the semi-final of the Rugby World Cup between South Africa and France, the inauguration of one president, and the resignation of another. These references situate the narrative within a broader historical context, while the story unfolds primarily as a family saga centered around the Swart family, descendants of European settlers. Amor Swart, the novel's central character, begins the story as a thirteen-year-old girl and emerges forty-five years later as a woman shaped by personal experiences and familial obligations. The title, *The Promise*, refers to a long-delayed commitment that takes nearly thirty years to be fulfilled, reflecting both the persistence of personal, collective, and historical debts. Through this interplay of narrative perspective and temporal markers, Galgut captures the weight of apartheid on individual lives while exploring the intersections of memory, obligation, and social change.

This study explores the topical triad of self versus other, land dispute, and broken promises in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, arguing that the novel uses the Swart family's failure to fulfill a vow to their black maid, Salome, as a microcosm of post-apartheid South Africa's broader failures in land restitution and decolonization. By refusing to honor their pledge—a promise of land that symbolizes both material and moral reparation—the Swarts epitomize the lingering colonial mindset that perpetuates racial and economic disparities. The novel critiques the systemic inertia surrounding land redistribution, exposing how apartheid era injustices persist under the guise of democracy. Furthermore, the study contends that the unfulfilled promise is not merely a personal betrayal but a direct consequence of apartheid's legal and social structures, revealing their corrosive impact on both white South Africans at large and the Swart family in particular. Through their moral decay and fractured relationships, Galgut

illustrates how historical injustices continue to shape individual and collective identities, reinforcing the entrenched division between self and other.

Self and Other Dichotomy

The apartheid regime entrenched social and economic disparities, functioning as a system inherently built upon the binary opposition of a self-deemed superior and an “other” deemed inferior (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Mokgatle, 1971; Smith, 1984). Colonial powers reshaped the South African landscape through the practices of discrimination, oppression, and division, which reached their conclusion in apartheid. As a result, Smit (2005) argues that rejection and disputes became hallmarks of the South African environment that promoted the distinction between oneself and others. Edward Said opines that the Occident recognized the Orient as an other and as a rival culture, in his words: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (2003, p. 1). Being white has frequently been used in binary comparisons that link particular positive traits to white people and try to ascertain whether these traits exist or not in other groups (Crenshaw, 2011).

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* argues that the West constructs the East as its “other,” an exotic, inferior counterpart against which it defines itself. This binary, rooted in power and domination, allows the Occident to justify control over the Orient, framing it as irrational, backward, and in need of civilizing intervention. Said writes, “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, and remarkable experiences” (2003, p. 1), highlighting how the “other” is not a reality but a projection serving Western hegemony. Similarly, in *The Promise*, the white Swart family upholds apartheid-era hierarchies by “othering” black South Africans, particularly Salome, whose promised house is withheld—a metaphor for systemic disenfranchisement. The novel mirrors Said’s claim that “the relationship between Occident and Orient is one of power, of domination” (2003, p. 5), as the Swarts’ unfulfilled vow exposes how racial and colonial legacies persist through enforced subjugation. Crucially, Said emphasizes that the “other” is denied agency, rendered silent or spoken for by those in power. This resonates in *The Promise* through fragmented narratives that marginalize dark-skinned individuals’ voices, centering the Swarts’ flawed perspectives instead. Galgut’s South Africa, like Said’s Orient, becomes a site of “geographical violence” (Said, 1993, p. 225), where land, memory, and identity are contested. The novel’s unresolved promise reflects the enduring grip of “othering,” revealing how post-apartheid society, much like the postcolonial world Said critiques, remains trapped in inherited structures of exclusion.

In *The Promise*, Damon Galgut constructs the self/other dichotomy through spatial exclusion, narrative omission, and rhetorical minimization. The Swart family’s withholding of legal ownership from Salome, their black servant, literalizes the denial of full personhood, anchoring the political hierarchy in the control of land and property. This hierarchy is sustained by what the narrator exposes as selective attention: “if Salome’s home hasn’t been mentioned before it’s because you have not asked, you didn’t care to know” (Galgut, 2021, p. 85). Here, the metafictional address implicates the reader in the same indifference that defines the white characters’ gaze. Even when Salome’s suffering is acknowledged, it is diminished “for she too has her little pains, and they wear her out, though she does not speak of them, or is not asked” (p. 128), a phrasing that simultaneously notes her marginalization and reproduces it through diminutive language. Further, Galgut ties personal consciousness to national politics when Amor “begins to understand what country she’s living in” (p. 83), signalling the moment privilege meets awareness of systemic inequality. Such moments are underscored by the narrator’s assertion that “what happens in a room lingers there invisibly” (p. 283), suggesting

that acts of neglect and broken promises persist in the moral architecture of both household and nation. Collectively, these strategies position the white South African “self” as the default narrative subject, while rendering the black South African “other” simultaneously central to the story’s ethical stakes and absent from its centre-stage, exposing the structural imbalance the novel critiques.

This tension between complicity and awakening is not unique to Galgut; it echoes across South African literature, particularly in the works of Nadine Gordimer, who similarly interrogates the fragility of white identity when confronted with the racialized “other.” Gordimer’s fiction, for example, investigates the exclusive white female identity whose perception of the “self” is destabilized when political activism and personal encounters force a reckoning with historical and moral blindness (Smit, 2005). Like Galgut, Gordimer subverts the foundational myths of whiteness under apartheid, revealing how legal and social structures — what Williams (2013) describes as the defense of white civilization’s norms — were weaponized to enforce racial hierarchy. Leon de Kock (2006) and William Tate (2003) extend this analysis, arguing that South African whiteness was constructed through a controversial relationship with wildness, a binary that positioned blackness as the antithesis of rationality and order. This framework, as Mabasa (2019) notes, ties apartheid capitalism directly to “white supremacy and black super-exploitation” (p. 180), reinforcing Peter Hudson’s (2019) Althusserian reading of colonialism as a system that “constitutes the white as a full Althusserian ego-subject and the black as a non-subject lacking self-possession and subsisting at the level of nonbeing” (p. 161). Together, these critiques reveal how Galgut’s novel operates within a broader tradition of South African literature that exposes the violent fictions of the self/other divide and the construction of identity, whether through land dispossession, narrative erasure, or the legal codification of racial difference.

The construction of identity through oppositional binaries engenders deleterious consequences for both the self and the other, as it reinforces a dialectic of mutual alienation. The Swart family’s assertion of racial and social dominance over Salome exemplifies this alienation and the zero-sum logic Lenz (2020) describes, in which the assertion of self necessitates the negation of the other. In the South African context, the Swarts’ dehumanization of the “other” simultaneously enforces and nourishes their own psychological constraints. This dynamic manifests in what Memmi (1974) terms the “dialectics of oppression,” a process wherein “the dehumanization of the oppressed, on the other side of the coin, becomes the alienation of the oppressor” (pp. 23-24). Here, the oppressor’s psyche becomes paradoxically constrained by the very hierarchies it seeks to impose, resulting in what Fanon (1963) might describe as a petrified consciousness incapable of authentic self-reflection. A mind that refuses engagement with alterity remains imprisoned within its own epistemic boundaries, reproducing the “tyranny of hidden prejudices” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 272). In other words, A human being that refrains from communication and idea exchange remains limited by its prejudices and preconceptions. Such mindsets hinder one’s own growth and constrict their potential (McEwan, 1996). Cognitive and moral development is hindered when one does not engage with the other’s difference, a process that Bakhtin (1981) describes as the dialogic imagination. Thus, oppositional identity not only perpetuates systemic violence but also forecloses the possibility of mutual becoming, condemning both self and other to a necropolitical stasis, a condition in which their humanity is suspended (Mbembe, 2001). Thereby, the social and familial structures

in *The Promise* prevent the opportunity to engage across racial and social divides, leaving both the oppressors and the oppressed suspended in this necropolitical stasis.¹

Furthermore, *The Promise* vividly illustrates the self/other dichotomy through the stark contrast between the Swart family's home and Salome's shack, a physical manifestation of apartheid's spatial violence. The Swarts' house, with its large, luxurious, and comfortable furnishings, symbolizes their entrenched privilege, a spot where whiteness is normalized and insulated from the realities of black populations' dispossession. In contrast, Salome's dwelling is rendered as an almost uninhabitable shack, a deliberate act of neglect that literalizes her exclusion from the rights of ownership, dignity, and belonging. This spatial hierarchy mirrors Frantz Fanon's observation in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism divides the world into compartments, where the colonizer's home is a fortress of power, and the colonized's dwelling is a site of enforced precarity. Galgut amplifies this disparity through the family's willful blindness to Salome's living conditions. The Swarts' refusal to acknowledge the inhumanity of her shack reflects what Edward Said (2003) terms the quiet violence of knowledge, where systemic oppression is sustained not just through overt cruelty but through strategic indifference. The house's material decay—leaking roofs, cramped quarters—becomes a metaphor for apartheid's moral rot, a structure built on broken promises and deferred justice.

Gravely, the houses also reveal the psychology of apartheid's "self". The Swarts' home, though materially solid, is spiritually hollow, cluttered with the detritus of their moral failures (e.g., the death of four members of the family). Meanwhile, Salome's house, though physically degraded, becomes a site of resilience and silent resistance, a space where she endures despite being rendered invisible. This duality echoes Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" (2004, p. 13), where colonial spaces expose the uncanny tension between oppression and survival. Galgut thus frames spatial inequality not just as a policy outcome but as an active process of othering, where the built environment enforces racial hierarchy. By juxtaposing these dwellings, *The Promise* exposes how apartheid's violence was architectural as much as ideological, a system that designed homes for the self and hovels for the other, ensuring that privilege and precarity coexisted in stark, unspoken proximity. The novel's unresolved promise underscores how these spatial hierarchies persist into the post-apartheid present, where the ghosts of segregation linger in South Africa's uneven landscapes.

Not only that, but also separating the self from the other caused a housing problem in South Africa. According to Marutlulle (2022), the apartheid government contributed to the housing issues in the country by separating the ethnic groups. Moreover, apartheid primarily impacted black individuals by preventing them from owning homes at present. (Malpass, 1986; Uduku, 1997; McDonald & Pape, 2002; Baloyi, 2012; Marutlulle, 2019 & 2022). That is because they were segregated and banned from possessing houses in the urban and metropolitan areas; they were only allowed to have houses in the rural districts and suburbs, which left a challenge to the post-apartheid governments to solve this unfair housing division and demographic composition. The narrative demonstrates the hardships South Africa faced in addressing the post-apartheid period and drafting a new constitution that protects people's rights to freedom and equality regardless of skin color. The segregation system lasted for centuries in the country; therefore, the scars are not expected to disappear in a short time. Amor is aware of that; thus, she tells Salome that Lukas has the right to be angry and that he undoubtedly has valid grounds and "none of it easy" (Galgut, 2022, p. 287). In the story, the black people

¹ We mean by necropolitical here, the political and social death not the physical one.

embodied by Salome could not own a house in Pretoria during the apartheid era. However, she was able to get a house after the collapse of the apartheid system.

Ultimately, Human beings exhibit inherent diversity, manifesting in various forms, wherein the recognition and acceptance of this plurality is paramount. This acknowledgment extends to the dialectic between the self and the other, encapsulating the intrinsic distinctions between the original and its replication, the image and its mirrored counterpart, the tangible entity and its reflection, the form and its shadow, as well as the vocalization and its echo. Such distinctions underscore the complex interplay between individual identity and external manifestations, elucidating the nuanced relationship between the self and its alternate representations. The underlying idea, however, is that mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence are possible, making harmony the sole viable path forward. In *The Promise*, Amor is the voice of this reconciliation between the ethnic groups to bring order to the domain; she emerges as the exclusive mediating figure capable of recuperating the previous situation to its original state. Ultimately, Amor's unwavering determination to bequeath the house to Salome may be understood as reflecting a growing awareness among the descendants of settlers that their ancestors played a significant role in displacing indigenous communities and reshaping the African continent's social and cultural fabric.

Revisiting Land Policies

The final climactic confrontation between Amor and Lukas reflects territorial tensions and the complex legacy of land ownership in a post-colonial context. While Lukas sincerely believes the property rightfully belongs to him, Amor's decision to give the house to Salome represents an attempt to address historical imbalances. Lukas's visible distress and anger during this transfer reveal the deep personal and collective wounds that such transitions can uncover. Galgut portrays this moment not as a simple conflict between individuals, but as a poignant illustration of how historical injustices continue to resonate in contemporary relationships. This tension erupts in Lukas's raw, grief-laden outburst:

My mother was supposed to get this house a long time back. Thirty years ago! Instead she got lies and promises.

Salome tries to shush him, but he keeps on.

Now because all of them are dead, you come and give us a present. I saw you looking at it. Nice, nè? Three fucked-up rooms with a broken roof. And we must be grateful?

It isn't much, Amor says. I know that. Three rooms and a broken roof. On a tough piece of land. Yes. But for the first time, it'll belong to your mother. Her name on the title deed. Not my family's. That isn't nothing.

Yes. Salome agrees, speaking Setswana. It isn't nothing.

It's what you don't need any more, what you don't mind throwing away. Your leftovers. That's what you're giving my mother, thirty years too late. As good as nothing.

It's not like that, Amor says.

It is like that. And still you don't understand, *it's not yours to give. It already belongs to us. This house, but also the house where you live, and the land it's standing on. Ours!* Not yours to give out as a favour when you're finished with it. Everything you have, white lady, is already mine. I don't have to ask. (Galgut, 2022, pp. 285-86; emphasis added)

This exchange between Amor and Lukas crystallizes the deep resentment and structural injustice at the heart of *The Promise*. Lukas's voice disrupts the polite, compromised discourse that has characterized much of the novel, replacing it with a direct articulation of historical dispossession and the limits of symbolic restitution. The repetition of "broken roof" foregrounds the inadequacy of the gift, framing it as a gesture of appeasement rather than a meaningful act of justice. By calling it "your leftovers," Lukas exposes the logic of white

benevolence as inherently patronizing: the self (the Swarts) retains the authority to decide *when* and *what* to give, reinforcing the other's dependency. His assertion, "it's not yours to give... it already belongs to us," inverts the colonial property narrative, asserting an indigenous claim that precedes and exceeds colonial law. The movement from the specific house to "everything you have, white lady, is already mine" shifts the conversation from personal grievance to systemic indictment, positioning Lukas as the voice of historical truth in a novel where black individuals' voices are often muted or mediated. Amor's response: "It's not like that," underscores the persistent gulf in perception: for her, the act is a moral gesture; for Lukas, it is an insult wrapped in legal formality. The dialogue thus exposes the enduring failure of post-apartheid reconciliation to address the asymmetry of power embedded in land ownership, showing that the promise of equality remains structurally unfulfilled despite the end of apartheid.

Lukas' rejection of Amor's gift resonates strongly with postcolonial and decolonial critiques of symbolic restitution. Frantz Fanon (1963) posits that decolonization does not constitute a benevolent concession granted by colonial powers, but rather represents what he terms "an agenda for total disorder" which is a fundamental restructuring of power relations wherein oppressed populations reassert sovereignty over territories, resources, and cultural identities that had been forcibly appropriated under colonial regimes (p. 2). Lukas's insistence that the land is already *ours* aligns with Steve Biko's emphasis on psychological liberation, the refusal to accept the colonizer's framing of ownership as a matter of permission or charity (Biko, 2004). Contemporary decolonial scholarship, such as Tuck and Yang's seminal essay "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" (2012), cautions against conflating token acts of recognition with genuine structural change, particularly when they leave existing property regimes intact. In this light, Amor's transfer of a degraded property thirty years late functions less as an act of justice than as an example of what Tuck and Yang (2012) call "settler moves to innocence" (p. 1), which are gestures that allow the settlers to feel reconciled without relinquishing systemic privilege. Lukas's anger, then, is not simply personal grievance but a radical articulation of land justice that refuses the temporality, scale, and moral framing of restitution dictated by the descendants of the colonists.

This intense conflict between Amor and Lukas, symbolically representing the struggle between white and black citizens, embodies their rivalry over land. Each of them has a point and strives to justify themselves in various ways. Lukas asserts his claim to the land, believing it to be his and his forebears; however, Amor acknowledges this perspective while disavowing responsibility for the deeds of her ancestors for colonizing the others' territories centuries ago. Though she attempts to rectify past wrongs by returning a portion of the land, her gesture feels insufficient to Lukas and other black South Africans, who see it as too little, too late. This tension between historical entitlement and delayed restitution is further emphasized through the novel's portrayal of white South Africans who still romanticize colonial conquest. The narrator, for instance, satirizes Ockie's self-aggrandizing fantasy of being a Voortrekker² pioneer, riding an ox cart and claiming land with no regard for indigenous rights:

[Ockie] imagines himself one of his Voortrekker ancestors, rolling slowly into the interior in an ox-wagon. Yes, there are those who dream in predictable ways. Ockie the brave pioneer, floating over the plain. A brown-and-yellow countryside passes outside, dry except for where a river cuts through it, under a huge Highveld sky. (Galgut, 2022, p. 10)

² Voortrekkers were Dutch-speaking settlers who migrated into the interior of South Africa in the 19th century.

Galgut's narrator satirizes Ockie's colonial fantasy by depicting him as a self-styled Voortrekker, anachronistically reenacting the violent conquest of land while willfully disregarding indigenous sovereignty. The passage ironically frames Ockie's delusion of heroic pioneering "rolling slowly into the interior in an ox-wagon" as a tired repetition of apartheid-era mythmaking. The imagery of the "brown-and-yellow countryside" and the "huge Highveld sky" evokes the romanticized frontier narratives used to justify settler colonialism, yet the arid landscape, "dry except for where a river cuts through it," subtly underscores the scarcity and contested ownership of resources. By reducing Ockie's pretensions to a "predictable" dream, the narrator critiques not only his individual entitlement but also the broader Afrikaner nationalist psyche that glorifies land seizure as destiny. The ox-wagon, a loaded symbol of the Great Trek,³ becomes a metaphor for the stubborn persistence of colonial logic in post-apartheid South Africa, where whiteness still asserts dominance through imagined historical legitimacy. Framed in Afrikaner nationalist mythology as a heroic odyssey, the Trek was, in reality, a colonial project that entrenched white supremacy, land seizures, and racial segregation—ideologies later formalized under apartheid. The ox-wagon became a potent symbol of this legacy, romanticizing settler pioneering while erasing the displacement and resistance of black South Africans. In *The Promise*, Galgut subverts this imagery through Ockie's delusional reenactment, exposing how such myths perpetuate entitlement and historical amnesia in post-apartheid society.

This critique of colonial mythmaking and land dispossession resonates with J. M. Coetzee's interrogation of South Africa's literary and historical narratives. In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Coetzee examines the intersection of land, ideology, and representation, arguing that European intellectual frameworks have long mediated South Africa's landscape as both property and myth: "I have two concerns in this book: with certain ideas, the great intellectual schémas, through which South Africa has been thought by Europe; and the land itself, South Africa as landscape and landed property" (1988, p. 10). Like Galgut, Coetzee reveals how colonial discourse from early 20th-century landscape writing to apartheid-era spatial politics constructed the land as a site of white possession, a theme he extends in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Here, the titular character's struggle to cultivate unowned land (despite his ambiguous ethnicity) underscores the broader exclusion of black South Africans from territorial autonomy. As Mitchell (1998) notes, Michael's "appropriation of this land affords him control of space, a control he could not have acquired in apartheid-riven Cape Town" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 87). His precarity, like that of Lukas and Salome in *The Promise*, reflects Marais's (1989) observation that non-white South Africans inhabit an intolerant world where suffering is the norm, a world where land remains both a battleground and a measure of unfulfilled justice.

Overall, in Coetzee's literary works, land restitution in South Africa emerges as a subtle yet profound theme, reflecting the broader socio-political tensions of post-apartheid reconciliation. His *Disgrace* (1999), for instance, explores the complexities of land ownership through the character of Lucy Lurie, a white South African farmer who faces a violent land invasion. Her decision to remain on the land, despite the trauma, symbolizes the fraught negotiations of power, guilt, and historical redress. Coetzee does not offer easy resolutions;

³ The Great Trek (1836–1852) was a mass eastward and northward migration of Dutch-speaking settlers—known as Voortrekkers—who fled British colonial rule in the Cape Colony, seeking autonomy and territorial expansion in the South African interior. Traveling in ox-drawn wagon trains, these settlers carved out independent republics (such as the Natalia Republic, the Orange Free State, and the Transvaal) through violent dispossession of indigenous peoples, including the Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho nations.

instead, he presents land restitution as an ambiguous moral landscape where justice is neither linear nor assured. The novel critiques both colonial dispossession and the inadequacies of post-apartheid restitution policies, framing land as a site of unresolved historical wounds. Coetzee's treatment of land restitution also intersects with themes of displacement and identity, particularly in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, where land is allegorized as a contested space of belonging. In *Michael K*, the protagonist's struggle to cultivate barren land mirrors South Africa's broader tensions over rightful ownership and sustainable futures. Coetzee's sparse, philosophical prose underscores the existential dimensions of land claims, suggesting that restitution is not merely a legal process but a deeply human one, fraught with ethical dilemmas. His works thus challenge readers to confront the limitations of restorative justice in a society still grappling with colonial and apartheid legacies.

While Galgut's works are explicit and direct regarding land issues in South Africa and his political critique of the apartheid regime, Van Wyk Smith (1990) thinks that Coetzee's historical material is impaired and shapeless. Easton (1995) posits that placing Coetzee in a national or regional context presents a specific paradox, particularly for a writer like him who has disassociated himself from such a reading. Even though Coetzee is regarded as an anti-apartheid writer, he has been greatly criticized for not being explicit in his condemnation of apartheid policies. Pandhare (2016) ascertains that Coetzee, in his first six novels that he wrote during the apartheid era, has an indirect address to the apartheid period. While Coetzee's engagement with apartheid may be indirect, the thematic undercurrents in his works often intersect with one of the most enduring and contentious issues in South African history: land.

To encapsulate the subject of land, the land often takes on human characteristics and becomes a part of the body; the land shapes how people perceive their social and historical identities. In addition to offering a geographical location for human settlements, land has given people and nations a sense of identity, prosperity, and power. People's struggle over land is rooted in history and will remain so. In South Africa, all groups competed to obtain land, and this led to disputes, wars, and grouping on an ethnic basis. Still, even to this day, in some parts around the world, the struggle on land is occurring because these intricacies and dynamics mold human civilization and human nature. The land crisis in South Africa has been a very contentious issue in the works of South African authors, and it will persist as so due to its constant impact on individuals' lives and futures.

The Cursed Unfulfilled Promise

Though Manie Swart believed no one was listening to what was said, his youngest daughter, Amor, overheard him promise his wife Rachel on her deathbed that he would give their black maid, Salome, ownership of the home she shares with her son Lukas. Amor told Lukas that her "mother told [her] father to give it to your mother. A Christian never goes back on his word" (Galgut, 2022, p. 21). Amor was thirteen years old, still naive and innocent enough to believe that a Christian does not break his pledge. Shortly after that, she bleeds and moves from childhood to adulthood, hence this metamorphosis is not only a physical transformation but also a mental one; from naivetés to the harsh reality of the world that she is living in and the country that she was born in. Some days later, Amor's mother dies, and her father refuses to grant the house to Salome, bringing a curse to the whole family. Amor futilely argues with her father on the promise, reiterating several times, "You said you would give her the house. You promised" (Galgut, 2022, p. 61). Ultimately, she comprehends that he will never fulfill his commitment.

The Swart family falls apart, Amor travels to London, and Anton turns into a prodigal son, moving out of the house to live in a strange place and accruing debt. Astrid gets pregnant by a poor young man out of wedlock and is forced to marry him. Insanely, Manie puts himself

in a snake tank to die, not too long after. The parents of the Swart family are dead now, and the children—Anton, Astrid, and Amor—reunite for their father’s funeral. When Manie made the promise, Amor was young, and she did not know that the laws of apartheid did not allow black people to possess property in the white area. Yet now, after the funeral, apartheid has been abolished and Nelson Mandela is the president. Amor brings up the subject of keeping the promise once again, “it was never sorted out. When my mother died, it wasn’t possible for Salome to own the land. But the laws have changed and now she can” (Galgut, 2022, p. 149). Even though the law permits it now, Anton and Astrid are likewise unwilling to give Salome the house. This deeply frustrates Amor, prompting her to leave the house once again. Astrid engages in a succession of bad decisions: she forsakes her husband, moves with her children to wed another man, and subsequently betrays her second spouse by initiating a liaison with a third.

The shadow of the deferred promise remains over the family, and tragically, Astrid was carjacked and killed in cold blood. Presently, only two persons from the Swart family are alive: Amor and Anton. All over again, following Astrid’s funeral, Amor confronts Anton by stressing that “the house was promised to Salome. Why will you not give it to her?” (Galgut, 2022, p. 218). Nonetheless, Anton procrastinates doing that again, which leads Amor to depart the house. At this moment, it is expected that Anton will receive punishment for his intransigence. He turns into an alcoholic; moreover, he becomes impotent and childless. Consequently, overwhelmed by despair, ends up committing suicide with his father’s gun. Currently, Amor is the only survivor of the Swart family, perhaps because she is the only one who has always wanted to give Salome her rights. It can be posited that the underlying message is that the cursed promise is the apartheid system itself; it prevented black people from their entitlements, but its outcomes were fatal on both sides, the white and the black individuals alike.

Though the undone commitment to Salome underscores the Swarts’ ethical failures, their tragedies cannot be reductively attributed to this alone; instead, their unraveling reflects deeper pathologies of whiteness, privilege, and the unresolved legacies of colonialism. Further, their misfortunes arise from a complex interplay of personal failings, intergenerational tensions, and the broader socio-political transformations of South Africa, of which the unkept promise is but one significant thread. To reduce their series of misfortunes to a single unkept promise would risk oversimplifying the novel’s complex interplay of personal, familial, and historical forces. The broken oath, therefore, should be understood less as a direct causal agent of tragedy than as a symbolic thread weaving through a broader tapestry of decay and the inability to reconcile with a transforming nation.

The apartheid system, symbolically referred to in the novel as the unfulfilled promise, caused feelings of displacement and a lack of sense of belonging to the white population before the black population, and Amor is the perfect epitome of that. Amor’s traveling to London and living there for roughly ten years insinuates her refusal of the apartheid decrees; her departure from South Africa during the apartheid rule, and her return to the country after the annulment of apartheid provide further support for this theory. Amor’s emigration during apartheid may also symbolize the self-exploration experienced by white settlers in South Africa. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, she continues to avoid staying at home, which underscores her pronounced sense of rootlessness. She “likes the feeling of being between two places, recently departed and not yet arrived” (Galgut, 2022, p. 106). More than that, while going home from the airport, her rootlessness motivated her to feel that “the delay is a relief” (Galgut, 2022, p. 106) when the Congolese driver was roaming astray in the streets because he was new to South Africa. Inasmuch that Amor departed home right away after her mother and father’s funerals, she did the same at her sister’s funeral; she cut her two-day trip to one day and left home without a farewell to anybody. Her transitional status made her come several times to her family’s house

for short periods, then return to her place. Amor is a terrific paradigm of in-betweenness, as she is between being a white girl who represents the white ethnicity in South Africa and being the voice of truth in the novel, who sympathizes with the black ethnicity. Her sympathy always puts her in between, either choosing her family and accepting their unjust acts or following her good conscience and leaving the house.

In Galgut's story, the unachieved promise serves as a powerful allegory for South Africa's broken post-apartheid promises of justice, restitution, and racial reconciliation. The Swart family's repeated deferral of this obligation mirrors the broader national failure to redress historical land dispossession and systemic inequality. Despite political transitions and rhetorical commitments to transformation, the novel suggests that structural and psychological resistance among the privileged (embodied by the Swarts) perpetuates old hierarchies under new guises. The unkept promise thus becomes a metaphor for the hollowing out of the democratic rainbow nation⁴ ideal, exposing how legal and moral obligations are evaded through delay, denial, and self-justification.

Moreover, the promise's unfulfillment symbolizes the cyclical nature of betrayal in South African history, where each generation inherits but fails to resolve the sins of the past. Galgut's fragmented narrative style, jumping across decades with abrupt shifts in perspective, reinforces this stagnation, suggesting that time alone does not bring progress. The house, as both a material and symbolic site of denied restitution, reflects the enduring spatial and economic legacies of apartheid. Salome's silent, enduring presence underscores the human cost of these failures, positioning her as the novel's moral center amid the Swarts' moral decay. The voicelessness of black folks and their silence in *The Promise* mirrors Spivak's argument that the subalterns are structurally denied agency within dominant discourses. Salome's near-total silence in the narrative can be read through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), which interrogates whether those positioned at the margins of colonial and postcolonial power structures can ever truly be heard within dominant discourses. As a long-term domestic worker residing on land owned by others, Salome occupies a social position shaped by the structural hierarchies of apartheid and sustained by post-apartheid economic disparities. Her lack of direct narrative voice is not merely a stylistic choice but a manifestation of what Spivak describes as the subaltern's "structural silence," wherein speaking is either rendered impossible or is mediated through the very systems that suppress agency. In *The Promise*, Salome's life and desires are filtered through the perspectives of the Swart family, meaning her subjectivity is always narrated *about* rather than *by* her. This absence parallels Spivak's argument that, even when the subaltern "speaks," her voice is reframed, translated, or appropriated by dominant epistemologies, thus preventing an authentic self-representation. Galgut's novel thereby stages the paradox Spivak outlines: Salome's silence simultaneously signifies her exclusion from the national narrative and becomes a powerful indictment of the very structures that claim to represent her. In this way, Galgut critiques not only individual hypocrisy but also the systemic inertia that perpetuates inequality, leaving the pledge of liberation unfulfilled.

The complex dynamics of historical memory and accountability in post-apartheid South Africa have been extensively analyzed by scholars. As prominent South African historian Saul

⁴ "Rainbow nation" is a term used to describe post-apartheid South Africa after South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. The term was intended to encapsulate the unity of multi-culturalism and the coming-together of people of many different nations, in a country once identified with the strict racial division under the apartheid regime. The term was coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was used President Nelson Mandela as well.

Dubow observes, “white [people] have every reason to forget the odious system that they had actively supported for so many years” (2014, p. vi). This collective amnesia stems from what scholars have identified as a psychological defense mechanism against confronting uncomfortable historical complicity (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2012). The pervasiveness of white support for apartheid is underscored by Thomas Ross’s admission that the system irrevocably “scar[red] our history” (2013, p. 87), suggesting a belated recognition of institutionalized racism’s enduring legacy. However, as Dubow (2014) critically notes, following apartheid’s collapse, a paradoxical phenomenon emerged where few white South Africans would openly acknowledge their previous support for the system. This historical revisionism reached its most striking manifestation when even Frederik Willem de Klerk, South Africa’s last apartheid-era president, repeatedly denied the full extent of his government’s human rights violations (Sparks, 2003; Dubow, 2014). Such disavowals reflect a strategic forgetting, a deliberate distancing from apartheid’s atrocities that enabled many beneficiaries of the system to navigate the post-apartheid landscape without fully confronting their historical responsibility.

Conclusion

Overall, the colonial era in South Africa was characterized by a conflict primarily centered on land, representing a struggle for physical hegemony between colonizers and the colonized. In contrast, as *The Promise* illustrates, the apartheid period saw a more complex contestation between settlers and indigenous peoples, where the struggle extended beyond mere territorial disputes to encompass issues of authority, culture, and identity, ultimately reflecting dynamics of racial and ethnic hegemony. This shift underscores the profound transformation in the nature of conflict from colonial land acquisition to the deeper, more insidious battles over societal power structures and cultural dominance during apartheid.

In *The Promise*, land dispute serves as a fundamental and symbolic theme, inextricably linked to South Africa’s historical context of racial injustice, colonial legacy, and post-apartheid transition. Galgut examines this theme through the persistent motif of a broken promise. The white Swart family’s neglect to fulfill the dying request of the mother, Rachel, to bequeath the black household worker, Salome, possession of the little house and land she lives on their farm. The symbolism of the broken promise epitomises national treachery. It reflects the inadequacy of South Africa’s democratic transition to provide substantial reparation and equity, especially regarding reforming land ownership. The Swart family’s apathy (except Amor) reflects the general hesitance of white South Africans to forfeit their privilege.

Amor embodies the voice of moral integrity; she desires the promise to be honoured. Nevertheless, she is perpetually disregarded or overridden by her father and siblings, illustrating the ethical avoidance and passive cooperation of several white South Africans. This familial discord reflects the broader ethical shortcomings of the nation in the restitution of property. Galgut’s deliberate removal of Salome’s voice exposes the historical silencing and marginalisation of black South Africans, particularly women, even within accounts concerning their own existence and land. The land battle in *The Promise* transcends mere property disputes; it encompasses voice, equity, and the enduring scars of colonialism.

The white identity embodies a fragile self in Galgut’s narrative; the Swart family, particularly the family’s patriarch and the older siblings, epitomise a white South African identity intricately woven with privilege and denial. They perpetually define themselves in contrast to the “other,” particularly Salome and the black populace, by alienating, denigrating, or disregarding them. This self-concept depends on the exclusion and marginalisation of others. Furthermore, Salome epitomises the voiceless, racialised other. Although essential to the narrative conflict, she is deprived of a voice in the novel; she never articulates her thoughts directly. Salome’s muted presence underscores how post-apartheid reforms fail to dismantle the

epistemic hierarchies of colonialism; her subjectivity is never afforded space in the narrative. This silence is potent; Galgut compels the reader to examine how the self is formed via the silencing and exclusion of the other. Her subdued presence serves as a perpetual reminder of ethical obligation and systemic inequity. The novel's architecture of four funerals spanning four decades reflects South Africa's political trajectory. The contrast between the self (white, traditionally privileged) and the other (black, traditionally disadvantaged) persists, indicating that systemic change has been more superficial than substantive.

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