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Sneidermanis, Silvia.

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The Promise: a family story as a metonymic force for apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa

Silvia Sneidermanis

Universidad Nacional de San Martín

silviasneidermanis@gmail.com

Abstract

Carrying the wounds of apartheid, *The Promise*, 2021 Booker Prize winner, Damon Galgut, depicts the life of a family: Ma, Pa, and three children with alliterative names, Anton, Astrid and Amor. Salome, the character that appears and disappears from the plot can be considered the one that carries these wounds – the maid – ‘she came with the house’. Salome has been working with the family for more than 40 years, and together with her son, Lukas, are the voices of silence, oppression, racism, poverty and neglect. The centrifugal forces of tradition, education, loss, anger, power, displacement, resentment and alienation revolve around all the characters in the novel. There is a promise that prevails in the whole story. Is the promise fulfilled or unfulfilled?

Damon Galgut through fiction, recreates the microcosm of a larger social world with actual references of South Africa in its apartheid and post-apartheid period. It is a novel about 4 funerals, each funeral has a time span of ten years. The macrocosm is forty years in South Africa governed by Pieter Botha (Ma’s funeral), Frederik de Klerk, Nelson Mandela (Pa’s funeral), Thabo Mbeki (Astrid’s funeral) and Jacob Zuma (Anton’s funeral).

Walter Benjamin, German philosopher and innovator in literary criticism, deconstruction and historiography claims in his famous essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, that the adherents of history clearly and inevitably empathise with the victor. ‘All the rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers’. Benjamin goes on to say that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not, at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such document, it is not free of barbarism. Barbarism also taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. [...] He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain’ (248).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse, through the novel *The Promise*, how literature ‘brushes history against the grain’.

Key Words: post-apartheid, history, promise, neglect, guilt.

Introduction

The Promise, refers to a commitment – a promise - made by the central family, the Swarts, who are Afrikaners, to give a home and land to Salome, the maid, who spent her life working for them – ‘she came with the house’ (Galgut , 2021. p. 30), the novel reads.

Reunited by four funerals in four decades, the dwindling family reflects the atmosphere of their country. Galgut moves among distinct phases – from 1986 to 2018 of the development of modern South Africa. Each section fully inhabits that particular political moment. In each decade there is a different president in power and the national spirit that is conjuring is different.

There is a double decline in the novel, the decline of the characters, who in the end of each section die, and the secondary story which is of South Africa itself.

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Ma

This section begins in 1986. It is the decline of the Swart family during South Africa's transition out of apartheid. Rachel Swart, a 40-year-old Jewish mother, dies of cancer. On her deathbed, she feverishly forces her Christian, Afrikaans husband to promise to give the maid, Salome, the house where she already lives; so the drama of the novel turns on a promise that her husband, Manie, made to her before she died.

Despite its illegality, black people could not own property at the time. The conversation is overheard by Rachel's teenage daughter Amor, who spends the next thirty years attempting to convince her father and two siblings to make good on her mother's dying wish.

On June 12 1986, a State of Emergency was declared throughout the country. Prime Minister Pieter Willem Botha (1987-1984) implemented a new constitutional arrangement of multiracial government but, perpetuated the concept of racial separation. The constitution only inflamed further opposition to apartheid.

'In the same impassive way that Salome sweeps and cleans the house, she looks after Ma through her last illness, helping her to bathe, to go to the toilet , even wiping her arse for her, mopping up blood and shit and pus and piss. Let Salome do it, that's what she's paid for, isn't it? She was with Ma when she died, next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her; she's apparently invisible. And whatever Salome feels, is invisible too' (Galgut, 2021, p. 30).

Pa

Ten years have passed. Mannie, the father, has been bitten by a snake and is dying in hospital. The three children are warned about Mannie's serious injury. They go back to the farm.

While driving past the government's house, Anton muses, 'wonder if Mandela is in there right now. From a cell to a throne, never thought I'd see in my lifetime. Weird. How quickly it's come to seem ordinary. When before, Jesus Christ!' (p, 98).

The presidency of Nelson Mandela began on 10 May 1994, when Nelson Mandela, an anti-apartheid activist, lawyer, and former political prisoner for 27 years became President of South Africa. He was the first non-white head of state in South African history, as well as the first to take office following the dismantling of the apartheid system and the introduction of full, multiracial democracy.

Anton arrives at the hospital, he can see a black man next to his father's bed, 'bandaged up like a mummy. Verwoerd must be spinning in his grave. The man groans aloud; it is the language of pain. Apartheid has fallen, see, we die right next to each other now, in intimate proximity. It's just the living part we still have to work out' (p. 100).

Hendrik Verwoerd was the architect of apartheid and the 6th Prime Minister of South Africa; he was assassinated on September 6th, 1966.

Soon afterwards, Amor arrives at her father's funeral. 'Today it's the Rugby World Cup semi-finals. Never did the middle of town look like this, so many black people drifting casually about, as if they belong here. It's almost like an African city!' (p. 106)

It was 1995 when the Springboks – the South African rugby team – were supported both by the black and the white communities. It was the first major international sports achievement, with the presence of president Nelson Mandela.

Amor is there, watching the macrocosm. And suddenly, she starts musing on her microcosm: 'Ma, dead that day nine years ago. How much has changed since. My body, my country, my mind. I ran from all of you as hard and as far as I could, but the past has its little claws' (p. 107).

And the narrator interferes in Amor's ruminations to show how the turmoil of the family is metonymically the turmoil in South Africa. 'The general unease in the family around the time Rachel died, now appears to have infected the whole country' (p. 110).

Astrid

Astrid is Amor's bulimic sister. She becomes a social climber who, lured by proximity to power, cheats on two husbands.

Amor is a nurse in this decade, working in the HIV ward in a hospital in Durban. 'She lives in Susan's place, her lover. [...] Nothing in the room belongs to Amor, the look of permanence has been borrowed too' (p. 156).

One of the things politics did not do at that time, was to set the sights on thousands of people dying of AIDS, this is what Amor is doing in the ward.

It is Mbeki's inauguration. 'Astrid's husband Jake is in partnership with a well-known politician, let's not mention names, but he is a popular, powerful guy, and black, which is what counts these days. Big bucks in security these days, with crime rates through the roof' (p. 157). The narrator is musing and ironically foreseeing Astrid's fate.

Astrid's fears haven't erased with time. 'When the blacks took over the country, people were stockpiling food and buying guns. And then nothing happened, except it was nicer because there was forgiveness and no more boycotts' (p. 164).

The fear has at last reached Astrid, the certainty that what cannot possibly happen is actually happening to her. A mugger jumps into her BMW. She curls up in a dark space of the car.

'When the woman is looking down, the barrel of his gun at the shrinking diameter of her life, it's himself he's so viciously cursing, not her. Come on, coward, do it, do it! He almost takes pity on her, but he doesn't. Then it's over, loudly and suddenly done, and so is she' (Galgut, 2021, p. 166).

What saves *The Promise* from being an exercise in history is its pitch-black sense of humor. Galgut even manages to force a genuine laugh during Astrid's murder scene with his stinging depiction of South Africa. What seemed to be a dream with the advent of democracy and the end of apartheid, now seems to be a parody of the former regime.

Anton

Anton is the fair haired boy who bitterly resents his life's unfulfilled potential. He lives in the shadow of an unrecognised crime committed while being a conscript in the 1980s.

This is the sequence of the last chapter. Anton alone with his thoughts in his too-big, falling-down house. Anton wandering around his house. 'Power's gone again, fourth time this week, and everything's off' (p. 219).

Jacob Zuma from Zulu origin, was elected president in 2009. In 2014, it was found that Zuma had improperly benefited from state expenditure. There were widespread allegations that the Gupta family, who took control over the national electricity company, had acquired an immense and corrupt influence over Zuma's administration.

'The electricity is off again. Yes, happening all over the country, long dark patches in the power. No maintenance and no money, the President's friends have run off with the cash. No lights, no water, lean times in the land of plenty' (Galgut 2021, p. 237).

Galgut moves from free indirect speech, entering Anton's consciousness to his own narratorial intrusion when he gives his opinion about Anton. He has a tormented, frustrated life and is unable to overcome his unhappiness.

'I've wasted my life. Fifty years old and he's never going to do any of the things he was once certain he would do. Not read the classics or learn a foreign language or travel the world or marry a woman he loves' (Galgut 2021, p. 228).

He staggers down the stairs, shotgun in one hand. He rushes out into the terrifying dark as he goes down the driveway. 'The electric fence, then the rest of the farm, and only then the world. Circles inside circles, inside which is me' (p. 229).

Amor is called up, for the fourth time, to attend her brother's funeral. She's the only survivor in the Swart family and the one who will fulfil the promise. Or is it too late?

Amor is walking away from her inheritance. She sets off on the footpath where Salome lives. She has the paper in her hand.

'Salome, who has been patient for thirty-one years, has only recently given up hope, and resignation brings relief. She's old now' (p. 260).

Lukas – Salome's son - interferes in the conversation. 'My mother was supposed to get this house a long time ago. Instead she got lies and promises' (p. 262).

Lastly, Amor climbs the roof of the old farm, holding Anton's ashes in an urn. She spreads her brother's ashes 'where the sky feels huge and vacant' (268). She starts to climb down the roof 'towards whatever it is that happens next' (p. 269)

Conclusion

Both the Swart family and South Africa's politics depict resentment and hatred. The microcosm is dissolved, the macrocosm seems to carry renewal and ultimately hope, All the family is dead, but Amor could be said to be the promise for South Africa. She represents the voice of empathy and moral codes.

The story may have a pessimist or optimistic resolution. History will tell. Meanwhile, this novel remains as a manifesto of South African modern history.

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