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A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF DAMON GALGUT'S *THE PROMISE*

LIU Hui<sup>1\*</sup>, YAN Ping<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor and MA supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

<sup>2</sup>MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

\*Corresponding author Email: 1491165683@qq.com.



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ABSTRACT

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* depicts the three decades of South African sociopolitical history through a promise of an Afrikaner family. This paper applies Edward Said's post-colonial theories to the study of *The Promise* and through analyzing the threefold meaning of the promise to point out that both historical and realistic factors have brought heavy disasters to the South Africans and the former white colonists. After the realization of democracy, South Africa did not honor its former promises, but repeatedly pulled the people into the political quagmire. The conflicts between the blacks and the whites over land, which has lasted for hundreds of years, has not yet reached an effective reconciliation, but has intensified with the gradual awakening of the blacks' national identity and social consciousness.

**Keywords:** Edward Said; post-colonialism; *The Promise*; apartheid; existential plight

1. Introduction

Damon Galgut is a South African novelist and his works have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize for literature three times before *The Promise* (2021) was awarded in 2021. Galgut's works not only addresses the state of his country and the shadow left by the apartheid, but also focus on the power play between individual people, and the forces which bind or sever them. Galgut is an expert in a subtle, engaging way to deal with complex situations of politics, history, and legacy of the apartheid.

*The Promise*, set in South Africa during the country's transition out of the apartheid, tells the story of the Swarts, a white family descended from Dutch settlers, and explores the relationship between the whites and the blacks, and the historical and present factors that hinder the development of the country and the individual through the sequential four funerals of the white family--Ma Rachel in 1986, Pa Manie in 1995, Sister Astrid in 2004, and Brother Anton in 2018. The story begins with a promise and ends with the fulfillment of it after more than 30 years.

*The Promise* was first published in 2021 and won the Booker Prize in the same year, so the research on the work is still in its infancy. For instance, Gao (2023) analyzes it from the perspective of the politics of emotion. Researches on Damon Galgut's other works mainly focus on moral writing and interpersonal relationships (Zheng 2022), cosmopolitanism (Kostelac 2020), narrative form (Kostelac 2017; Slabbert 2019), and trauma (Borzaga 2020).

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

Edward Said (1935-2003) was a well-known Palestinian-American literary theorist, critic, and activist, who was regarded as the “father of post-colonialism”. In particular his own thought derived critically from Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and many other theorists. In the introduction of his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said begins by elaborating on the book’s aim “to expand the arguments of the earlier book (*Orientalism* 1978) to describe a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories” (Said xi). This book has two main themes, “a general world-wide pattern of imperial culture, and a historical experience of resistance against empire” (Said xii).

This paper mainly uses the relationship of imperialism and territory to explore the irreconcilable contradiction between the colonizer and the colonized over the land; the resistance of the colonized to the empire and the generation of social consciousness to analyze the reasons for the deepening of hatred and contradiction between the blacks and the whites. Moreover, the influence of imperialism does not end with the end of colonial rule, but permeates all aspects of the former colony and will continue to have a profound impact.

## 3. The “Promises” in *The Promise*

The word “promise” has twofold meant as a noun: “a statement telling someone that you will definitely do something or that something will definitely happen in the future”, and “an indication of future success or improvement, or a reason to expect that something will happen in the future” (The Britannica Dictionary). On the basis of the above definitions, this paper divides the promise in the novel into three aspects, namely, the promise made by the Swarts family to the black maid Salome, those made by the South African governments before and after the abolition of the apartheid, and the great expectations of those people living in South Africa for a promising future.

### 3.1 The Swarts’ Promise to Salome

One of the most important original intentions of European imperialists in colonial activities was to obtain more living spaces and means of production to maintain their imperial rule. “Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth.....therefore must do something about its indigenous residents” (Said 7). Therefore, the land ownership reflected a dominant position in a power relationship, and has always been one of the major reasons for the irreconcilable contradictions between the colonists and the colonized no matter in colonial or post-colonial times.

The Swarts have refused to fulfil their promise for more than 30 years. In *The Promise*, Rachel Swart, the hostess of the Swart family, died in 1986. Before she died, her husband Manie Swart promised her to grant the family’s black maid Salome the ownership of the house she lived in on the Swart family’s land to thank her for her devoted service. After Rachel’s funeral, when Amor urged her father to honor his promise to give the house to Salome, she was opposed by all the families. The land of the Swart family was bought by Amor’s grandfather along with Salome who was an accessory to the land. Amor’s brother Anton said that Salome cannot own the house because “it’s against the law” (Galgut 69). According to the apartheid legislation, there were given residential and business sections for each race, and members of other races were barred from living, operating businesses, or owning land in them. Therefore, the blacks were not allowed to own their own land or even “three fucked-up rooms with a broken roof” (Galgut 221).

The apartheid legislation was just an excuse, and the Swarts’ refusal to honor their promise was more about their ethnic superiority. In 1986, South Africa was still in the grip of the brutal apartheid and the whites were still basking in their imperial glory and racial superiority. Like Amor’s uncle Ockie, most of the whites in South Africa were still passionately nostalgic for the glory days of their pioneering Voortrekker ancestors, “My people are a valiant, durable bunch, they outlasted the British and they will outlast the kaffirs too” (Galgut 13-14). The whites even though they represented superior “order”, “rationality”, and “symmetry”, whereas the non-European stood for inferior “disorder”, “irrationality”, and “primitivism” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 51). Just as the influential French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan (1823-1892) maintains, in the eyes of the whites,

the blacks are ignorant and “species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge” (Renan 85).

Therefore, even if the blacks can legally own the land, the Swarts were still reluctant to give Salome the house, even fearing other South Africans would take away their farm. After President Nelson Mandela’s coming to power (1994-1999) and the democracy of South Africa (1997), “with new laws in favour of tenants and squatters” (Galgut 123), Anton Swart was afraid that the blacks would “build up any claim on the land” (ibid). Therefore, he thought of “kicking the workers off the farm” (ibid) and “let them live in the township, come in each day” (ibid), to prevent his black tenants from coveting and fighting over his land.

These Westerners traveled thousands of miles to South Africa to seize a large amount of land through violent ways, forcing the local people to lose the means of production. Instead of being guilty of what they had done, they deliberately tried to prevent the South Africans from taking back the land that should be their own. “At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (Said 7) The three shabby rooms were not worth mentioning to the Swart family, but for the poor Salome, they were very important and were the only place to live. Before Rachel died, the kind Salome stayed by her bed day and night to take good care of her, while her families were far from doing so. Even so, the greedy and selfish descendants of the colonists still refused to fulfill the promise.

### 3.2 The Government’s Promise to its People

Apartheid imposed heavy burdens on most South Africans for really a long time. The economic gap between the white wealthy few and the poor black, coloured masses was larger than in any other country in the world. Most South Africans struggled daily for survival and suffered from poverty, malnutrition, and disease. Just as Frantz Fanon maintains, “Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the (foreign) capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than criminals” (Fanon 101). Therefore, it was much more difficult than expected to carry out democratization and economic construction under such national conditions.

The promise of democracy in South Africa has been fraught with hardship and disappointment. In the early 1990s, with the efforts of Nelson Mandela and many other people, South African ended the apartheid and began to path toward democracy and peace. Since 1994, several presidents had implemented many positive policies to develop the economy and improve social governance. However, the influx of foreign immigrants and drug trafficking had contributed to the growth of AIDS. The Nelson Mandela government and the Thabo Mbeki government could not effectively prevent the entry of AIDS externally and control its spread internally, which objectively resulted in the spread of AIDS and the intensification of social contradictions. Jacob Zuma, who was elected as South Africa’s president in 2009, has been dogged by allegations of corruption and rape for almost all of his political life. Due to his mismanagement, his henchman even ran off with a large amount of cash. Although it was already 2017, more than two decades after apartheid ended, “water is rationed” (Galgut 199); “the electricity is off again” (ibid); “the grid is collapsing, no maintenance and no money” (ibid), which were happening all over the country.

In addition, the government has not put forward some effective solutions to ease the long-term accumulated contradictions and hatred between the blacks and the whites. After gaining the long-awaited social status and identity, the blacks practiced more fierce resistance against the whites who had enslaved them, both the recovery of the “geographical territory” (Said 209) and the “changing of cultural territory” (ibid) were gradually implemented. Salome’s son Lucks complained loudly to Amor why it had taken her and her families more than thirty years to fulfill their promise to give the house to his mother, and he told Amor that “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 are finished with it” (Galgut 222). What’s more, Lukas no longer called Amor by her name, but instead called her “white lady” (ibid), such a term with highly political and aggressive color. Although Lukas and Amor were childhood friends, and when Amor’s mother died, he had sincerely comforted her, but now everything had changed. Lukas’ words reflected not only his resistance and

dissatisfaction with the long occupation of the land of his country by the whites, but also his ideological awakening and his willingness to recreate his national identity. Lukas realized that he was no longer an appendage of the whites' farms like his mother, but an independent-minded South African.

Fanon had pointed out that it was equally important to "recreate national identity and consciousness in the process of de-colonisation and to go beyond and create a social consciousness at the moment of liberation" and "without it, de-colonisation merely becomes the replacement of one form of domination by another" (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 114). As South Africa moved toward independence after more than 300 years of apartheid, it needed millions of people like Lukas to wake up and form a powerful social consciousness to unite the South Africans together. In the meantime, said reiterated Fanon's warning that "nationalist consciousness can very easily lead to a frozen rigidity" with the potential to degenerate into "chauvinism and xenophobia" (Said 214). The South Africans' great hostile to the whites and the huge contradictions between them hindered the democratization process in South Africa to some extent.

After the blacks took back power from the whites, a succession of new regimes did not deliver the words they had promised. Instead, they put South Africans into the very awkward situations repeatedly. Coupled with the fact that the hatred and contradictions between the blacks and the whites have not been effectively mediated, the realization of the democracy in South Africa and the Government's desires for peacefully multi-racial coexistence in this country were bound to be a long and difficult process.

### **3.3 A Distant Promising Future**

The social ills brought by the long-term apartheid have been putting many obstacles on the development of the country and its people.

Yet, once again recalling the words of T. S. Eliot, although that era clearly had an identity all its own, the meaning of the imperial past is not totally contained within it, but has entered the reality of hundreds of millions of people, where its existence as shared memory and as a highly conflictual texture of culture, ideology, and policy still exercises tremendous force. (Said 12)

Therefore, the end of the colonial era does not mean that it is really over, and the arrival of the democratic era does not mean that it has really come. The end of the former and the arrival of the latter both have a strong delay. In addition, the contradictions and hatred between different races in South Africa are constantly fermenting and deepening. Multiple factors are superimposed together, which jointly hinder the economic and social development. Under the poor economic conditions and chaotic social management, the prospects for personal development are very bleak and the mental state is quite confused for both the blacks and the whites.

Both Lukas, the representative of the descendants of the blacks, and the Swarts as those of the whites, were struggling in the chaotic country caused by multiple historical and realistic factors. After the abolition of the apartheid, Lukas' way of schooling and earning a living was not smooth as he had expected. What troubled him most was that the whites still controlled a lot of land and still had a high discourse power in South Africa. The Swart family had sponsored Lukas' education, and he was very talented and planned to go to university, but then he got into trouble at school and was expelled. For people such as Lukas, who have no skills or property, the wish to escape from the original life in this age is doomed to be impracticable. Then "after he went to jail the first time, he was never the same" (Galgut 223). Since then, he lived the same life as his ancestors living with his mother in three shabby rooms on the Swarts' farm. Lukas eventually gave up fighting his fate and resigned himself to it.

Unlike Lukas, the Swart children were quite wealthy, and even so, they have not been immune to the turbulent times. Anton could not face the great changes and wanted to escape from the reality of South Africa in vain, so he spent most of his life on the farm and his unfinished novel, achieving nothing. Finally, he chose to commit suicide at the age of 50 to end his life of mediocrity and meaninglessness. Astrid, the eldest daughter of the Swart family, after the white people lost power, she did not want to lose her former privileges, so she enjoyed befriending prominent South African politicians and was proud to have been invited to the inauguration of President Mbeki. He and his government did nothing about the still-high crime rate. Ironically, Astrid finally

was accidentally killed by a black man. Amor was the only one of the Swart family who insisted on giving the house to Salome in accordance with her mother's will. Partly out of the guilt for the evils her ancestors and families had committed on the land of South Africa, she has spent almost her whole life and was nearly paranoid to atone for the sins. She helped the poor blacks, cared for the patients in the AIDS wards as a nurse, and she gave Salome a great amount of fortune her father had left to her. Unlike her white compatriots, who were still steeped in imperial glory and racial superiority, Amor was haunted by the burden and guilt of the colonial past and can not get relief and happiness throughout her life.

Both the whites and the blacks not only have to share the common historical problems brought by the apartheid, but also need to face the existential plight caused by the insufficient governance capacity of the new governments. Therefore, different races living in this country are in varying degrees of distress and confusion for their own survival and development, and a promising success or an indication of future success or improvement is far away from them.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the analysis of Damon Galgut's novel *The Promise* from the postcolonial perspective, this paper analyzes the word "promise" from three aspects and the existential plight of South Africans. More than 300 years of apartheid brought great misery to them, but they did not obtain the prosperity they had hoped for when they regained power from the colonialists. The historical legacies of centuries of apartheid made it difficult for the country to return to vitality in several years or even decades and thus South Africans have become disillusioned with the promises made at the birth of the country, like the promise the Swart family had made to Salome.

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