

Poetics of Vulnerability and the Hope for Reconciliation: Entanglement in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

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ABSTRACT

*Despite the official end of apartheid, contemporary South African literature continues to highlight the persistence of historical trauma and systemic racial inequality in the country. This paper examines Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) to address how narrative form can be used to critique these unresolved social divisions. Analysing the novel through Sarah Nuttall's (2009) concept of entanglement and Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) reflections on vulnerability, the study argues that Galgut's fluid and hyper-omniscient narration functions as an ethical and ontological strategy for exposing the impossibility of individual isolation in a society shaped by historical violence, racial inequality, and unresolved trauma. The article explores how spaces such as the Swart family farm and recurring funeral scenes become symbolic sites of forced entanglement, where personal grief intersects with collective histories of dispossession and privilege. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between Amor and Salome, whose lives embody the asymmetrical but unavoidable connections between white guilt and Black dispossession in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Amor's gradual recognition of ethical responsibility and Salome's enduring silence, the novel interrogates the limits of restitution and reconciliation. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that *The Promise* presents vulnerability not solely as a marker of trauma, but also as the basis for mutual recognition and fragile hope. The expected findings imply that true reconciliation remains incomplete without an acknowledgement of shared vulnerability. This paper offers new insights into how post-apartheid literature envisions ethical accountability amidst structural paralysis.*

*Keywords: vulnerability; entanglement; reconciliation; *The Promise*; South African literature*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary fiction, the manipulation of narrative perspective serves as more than a stylistic exercise. It is, in fact, a fundamental tool for mapping the precarious boundaries of human connection. In Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021), the presence of a fluid, almost invasive narrative voice works as a captivating way of shaping the fabric of storytelling. By creating a "hyper-omniscience that knows no bounds" (Attwell, 2021, n.p.n.) that drifts seamlessly between characters, Galgut represents a rich canvas of experiences that highlights a profound tension: the struggle between individual isolation and the inescapable reality of a collective, shared existence.

The aim of this work is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of how these formal narrative aspects shape existence as a constant state of vulnerability (Butler, 2004, 2009). Drawing upon Sarah Nuttall's (2009) concept of entanglement, I intend to examine how Galgut's shifting focalization fosters a social tapestry where characters are bound to one another across racial and generational divides, leaving a note of hope for reconciliation between them even if they actively seek to remain separate.

Spanning four decades of South African history—from the late-apartheid era of 1986 to the political shifts of 2018—*The Promise* traces the protracted disintegration of the Swart family, a white farming household near Pretoria. The novel's structure is anchored by four funerals, each

marking a decade in which a family member dies, and each reflecting a pivotal moment in the nation's socio-political evolution. At the centre of the narrative is a deathbed promise made by the matriarch, Rachel: that her husband, Manie, would grant legal ownership of a small house on the property to Salome, the family's Black domestic worker. As the years pass and the promise remains unfulfilled, the house becomes a symbol of moral debt and stalled restitution, haunting the family's survivors—particularly the youngest daughter, Amor—as they navigate a landscape defined by generational trauma and the fading illusions of their own privilege.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly reception of *The Promise* has largely centred on its status as a definitive post-apartheid novel (Carolin, 2023; Rahaman & Bhagat, 2023; Sneidermanis, 2022), often focusing on its biting satire of the white South African family or its engagement with the failed promises of land restitution (Akyüz & Avcu, 2025). On the other hand, in a recent study that will be published in 2026, I analysed entanglement in contemporary literature. In that work, I took *The Promise* and two other works as objects of study: *Mrs Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf; and *Minor Detail*, by Adania Shibli. The study focuses on examining the employment of free indirect discourse to weave together different individual consciousnesses, constructing a sense of community in the novels (Aguza Berral, in press). This paper aims to build on the insights of the previous study to develop an analysis focused on the nuances of *The Promise* since, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been analysed from the perspective of the intertwined vulnerabilities of the black and white characters, vulnerabilities that lead in the end to a hopeful note of possible reconciliation between the two communities.

Post-apartheid studies have analysed the cultural, political and social landscape of South Africa after the formal end of white minority rule back in 1994. In this line, post-apartheid novels such as *The Promise* serve as a canvas for this field, because they interrogate the messy reality of the transition. In these narratives, there is often an exploration of unresolved historical trauma, racial privilege, and the nature of truth and reconciliation.

On the other hand, from a formalist perspective, critics such as David Attwell have argued that “the real triumph of *The Promise* lies in the narration”, noting that Galgut “rewrite[s] the rules of third-person narration” by creating a voice that, as we pointed out before, “knows no bounds” (Attwell, 2021, n.p.n.). Much of the existing scholarship has sought to categorise this technique by linking it to European Modernist traditions or viewing it as a technical evolution of the omniscient narrator. However, to the best of my knowledge, attention has yet to be paid to the aspect of radical and carnal vulnerability that the novel exposes.

The innovation of this article lies therefore in moving beyond these stylistic categorisations to explore the ontological implications of Galgut's form. Rather than treating the narrative voice as a mere literary inheritance, this essay argues that Galgut's fluid narration is the primary vehicle for representing a specifically South African state of vulnerability that can lead to a real reconciliation that goes beyond the prescriptive end of apartheid. By applying Sarah Nuttall's (2009) theory of entanglement—a concept that the scholar has reconceptualised from a perspective born from the complexities of the South African metropole after the end of apartheid—this analysis moves the conversation away from traditional Western narrative theory. Instead, it proposes that the hyper-omniscience of the novel serves to expose the visceral, often unwanted ways in which bodies and lives are enmeshed. In doing so, this article provides a new reading of *The Promise* as

a study of how form can mirror the messy, entangled reality of a society still grappling with its own fractured identity, and how the relationships that arise from this entanglement can lead to reconciliation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the analysis of how *The Promise* represents the possibility of ethical relation in post-apartheid South Africa, I intend to bring together Sarah Nuttall's concept of entanglement and Judith Butler's reflections on vulnerability. The notion of "entanglement," developed by Sarah Nuttall in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009), describes "a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited" (p. 1). Emerging from the historical and cultural realities of post-apartheid South Africa, the concept addresses the dense interweaving of identities, histories and social formations produced through colonialism, apartheid and globalisation. Rather than conceiving these categories as separate or oppositional, entanglement foregrounds the ways in which lives remain interconnected despite histories of division and exclusion. In this sense, the concept challenges binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized and instead emphasises reciprocity, interaction and mutual implication across racial, cultural and social boundaries.

In the South African context, entanglement is inseparable from the legacy of apartheid and from the unresolved tensions that continue into the democratic era. The concept does not deny the persistence of racial and epistemological forms of separation; rather, it shifts attention toward those moments and spaces in which division and proximity coexist. As Nuttall explains, entanglement

is intended less to imply that we contest that forms of [racial] separation and difference still do occur, materially and epistemologically, than to draw into our analyses critical attention to those sites and spaces in which what was once thought of as separate-identities, spaces, histories—come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways.

(2009, p. 20)

Entanglement therefore provides a productive framework for examining heterogeneous communities marked simultaneously by fracture and interdependence. It draws attention to the ways in which intimacy and separation coexist, particularly in societies attempting to confront historical violence and social fragmentation. Within literary studies, the concept becomes especially relevant for analysing how narratives represent the intersections between race, class, ideology and memory, while also exploring the fragile possibilities of coexistence and reconciliation.

This framework is particularly pertinent to Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, a novel deeply concerned with the unresolved legacies of apartheid and the precarious forms of connection that persist within post-apartheid South Africa. The Swart family exists within a network of historical, racial and ethical entanglements that cannot be escaped, despite repeated attempts at denial or withdrawal. The unfulfilled promise made to Salome functions not only as a narrative catalyst but also as a symbolic reminder of the enduring inequalities upon which white South African privilege has historically depended. The novel repeatedly exposes how private lives remain implicated in broader social and political histories, suggesting that separation between communities is ultimately illusory.

On the other hand, to understand how entanglement operates at the level of human subjectivity and ethical accountability in the novel, we must turn to the concept of vulnerability. The characters are bound together not through harmony or shared identity, but through exposure to one another and through the persistence of historical responsibility. The decline of the Swart family mirrors the instability of a society struggling to redefine itself after apartheid, while the novel's fragmented structure reflects the difficulty of achieving coherence within such a fractured social landscape. Relationships in the novel are frequently marked by silence, guilt and emotional distance, yet these tensions also reveal the impossibility of complete isolation. Even acts of avoidance or repression become forms of entanglement, demonstrating how individuals remain connected to histories and communities they attempt to disavow.

In this line, Judith Butler's reflections on vulnerability in *Precarious Life* (2004) further illuminate this dimension of Galgut's novel. Although Butler is known primarily as a Gender Studies scholar and is best known for her contributions on gender performativity (1999), she has also offered very important insights on vulnerability. Butler argues that vulnerability is constitutive of human existence: "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (2004, p. 20). Her emphasis on dependency and exposure challenges notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency, foregrounding instead the ways in which lives are inevitably shaped through relations with others. Vulnerability, in this sense, is always relational and collective rather than purely individual.

The two theoretical strands can be combined in an interesting dialogue: on the one hand, Nuttall maps the socio-spatial network of post-apartheid relations; on the other, Butler helps us to theorise the ethical demands of being trapped inside that network. Entanglement establishes that disparate lives in South Africa are bound together across racial divides, while Butler's ontology explains why this structural binding manifests as emotional and bodily exposure. Entanglement without vulnerability risks reducing post-apartheid proximity to a neutral crosshatching of histories.

Read together, both frameworks suggest that coexistence within heterogeneous communities is defined simultaneously by risk and ethical responsibility. Exposure to others may generate discomfort, conflict and instability, but it also creates the conditions for recognition and accountability. In *The Promise*, this shared vulnerability emerges through the persistent intersections between personal memory and national history, private guilt and collective injustice. The novel does not offer reconciliation as a completed achievement; rather, it presents it as fragile, incomplete and constantly deferred. Nevertheless, the eventual fulfilment of the promise to Salome gestures toward the possibility of an ethical relation grounded not in sameness or harmony, but in the acknowledgement of mutual implication and historical responsibility.

These frameworks will be applied in the analysis of the text at three levels, building on previous investigation (Aguza Berral, in press). First, I intend to read the Swart family farm as a material and spatial location of entanglement, where land ownership and racial privilege are brought into forced proximity with Black labour. The farm makes visible the historical interdependence between those who possess land and those whose labour sustains it. Second, the four funerals that appear in the novel are examined as temporal and affective sites of entanglement, in which individual grief intersects with broader histories of social fragmentation. As we will see, the funerals expose the limits of solipsism because death interrupts the illusion of individual autonomy. Third, the relationship between Amot and Salome is analysed as an asymmetrical interpersonal form of entanglement in which two women occupy different social and racial

positions in the post-apartheid South Africa but nevertheless are able to be connected through the promise and what it represents. While entanglement manifests across other textual dimensions of the novel such as its narrative structure, linguistic register, and shifting perspectives, the analysis has been intentionally focused on these specific sites of space, mortality, and interpersonal relationships. This choice responds to these three dimensions being primary conduits for the thematic negotiation between vulnerability and hope. By focusing on them, I intend to demonstrate how unavoidable but unequal connections function in a conflicted environment such as the novels.

The two concepts of entanglement and vulnerability therefore become central to understanding how *The Promise* imagines post-apartheid community. Galgut's novel portrays a society in which divisions remain deeply entrenched, yet where lives continue to intersect in unavoidable ways. Through its exploration of vulnerability, responsibility and coexistence, the novel suggests that reconciliation can only emerge through the recognition of these shared entanglements and through an ethical engagement with the histories that continue to bind individuals and communities together.

DISCUSSION

THE FARM AS A PLACE OF FORCED ENTANGLEMENT

The farm, in the South African context, emerges as a charged site of forced entanglement, as historical, racial, and economic dynamics interact there. According to Crang (1998, p. 22), the ties between people and landscape manifest themselves in the way people relate to, shape and are shaped by the farm. As a physical space, it embodies both the literal and symbolic legacy of colonialism and apartheid, where ownership and labour are based on racial hierarchies and dispossession. When *The Promise* opens, the Swart family, as landowners, occupy a position of inherited power, while black labourers, here exemplified by Salome, are entangled in a system that denies them autonomy over the land they have historically worked on. The farm in South Africa has been studied by various critics as a place that consisted of a micro-society which was able to subsist on its own produce and thereby function as both an ecological and social unit (Devarenne, 2009; Rooney, 2005; Viljoen, 2004), and this has a direct reflection on the literature around it, as the pastoral landscape in South African literature has been widely explored (Attwell, 2005; Chapman, 2003; Coetzee, 1988; Walder, 2011). This enforced proximity of mutual necessity (as white people needed the black servants to work their land, and the black servants needed a way to survive) creates a form of intimate estrangement, where unequal relationships are perpetuated, even after the official end of apartheid, as depicted in the novel due to the unfulfilled promise of restoration by the mother. This post-apartheid entanglement translates directly into an asymmetric, shared spatial vulnerability, wherein both the dispossessed and the privileged are exposed to the precarity of an unreciprocated history.

In their introduction to *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Nuttall & Mbembe, 2008), titled "Afropolis," Nuttall and Mbembe describe the new urban space that has been emerging in the South African context after apartheid, as the book aims to "present a city in formation, a metropolis in the making, a moment, captured in print, in the life of a city overwritten with possibility, underwritten by anxiety" (p. 32). Although this book focuses on urban settings, Nuttall's concept of entanglement can be applied to rural spaces, such as the farm, as it becomes a space of tension and unresolved histories. Entanglement, as Nuttall conceptualises it, speaks to the dense interweaving of histories, identities, and material conditions that shape a given space.

The farm, much like the city, becomes a site where past and present remain in constant negotiation, revealing how spaces are never neutral but always charged with the residues of history and the tensions of transformation. If we frame the farm through this lens, it becomes evident that post-apartheid entanglement acts as the structural architecture that mandates proximity, while vulnerability becomes the experience of being unable to separate one's destiny from the landscape of the racialised other.

In *The Promise*, the Swart family's farm near Pretoria serves as the backdrop for key events in various chapters. It is interesting to note how it works as a central space in the first and in the last chapter, whereas in the second one it is not so present, and in the third it does not appear at all. As Manià has pointed out, "*The Promise* is both a family saga and farm novel" (2023, p. 31), highlighting how the novel "points to the ongoing questions about land dispossession and restitution that have captured the attention of the nation as it tries to unravel itself from the inequities of apartheid spatial planning" (2023, p. 31). Thus, the farm could be regarded as a place representing those inequalities.

While the farm serves as a physical and symbolic space, the use of free indirect discourse and shifting focalization reinforces the sense of entanglement by weaving together the characters' inner perspectives. The book opens with Amor, the youngest daughter, being the focalizer: "No, no. It can't be true, what her aunt has just told her. Nobody is dead. It's a word, that's all" (Galgut, 2021, p. 9). Free indirect discourse is present since the beginning of the novel. Amor seems to be in a semi-unconscious state, since the loss of her mother, Ma, after whom the first chapter is titled, has deeply affected her. Some instances of first-person narration appear, creating a sense of confusion that mirrors the character's own mental state: "I had to rush out last night when it, you know, when it happened. (It did not happen.)" (Galgut, 2021, p. 10). It is interesting to note that, in this novel, direct discourse does not appear between inverted commas, which is how it is usually depicted. There seems to be a merging of direct discourse and free indirect discourse, which ultimately contributes to the seamless depiction of multiple points of view—with their corresponding words, thoughts and feelings—in the novel.

In the second chapter, after Manie's death, the family returns to the farm for his funeral. While the first chapter took place in the mid 80s, this second chapter is set a decade later. This chapter further explores the unfulfilled promise, with Amor silently remembering her mother's wish and the family continuing to neglect it: "The family has done nothing, of course, about Pa's promise to their mother. Nobody has mentioned it since Ma died, except Amor herself, and that not for a long time" (Galgut, 2021, p. 118).

In the final chapter, Amor returns to the farm after many years away, in the 2010s. This chapter focuses on Amor's attempt to finally fulfil the promise of giving Salome ownership of the house, tying the narrative back to the central conflict introduced in the first chapter, the promise Manie made to Rachel: "He did promise. I heard him. He promised Ma he would give Salome her house" (Galgut, 2021, p. 78). In this chapter in particular, the farm is a critical space for the family's unresolved conflicts and is deeply intertwined with the novel's exploration of promises, guilt, and the legacy of apartheid. Amor's character is in particular marked by those feelings: "I'll give you an account number tomorrow, I promise. I'm a lawyer. Promises don't mean a thing. I take mine seriously, Amor says. Tomorrow is the day" (Galgut, 2021, p. 251).

In conclusion, in *The Promise*, the farm is not just a rural backdrop; it is a space that materialises the entangled legacies of exploitation and belonging. It forces interactions that are shaped by historical oppression, where the land itself becomes a witness and a participant in ongoing struggles for identity, justice, and restitution in South Africa. This entangled condition is

especially visible in the novel's treatment of space. The Swart farm functions not merely as a setting but as a material archive of apartheid's legacies, embodying histories of exploitation, ownership and dispossession. It is a site where racial inequality becomes spatially organised and historically reproduced, forcing unequal forms of proximity between those who inhabit it. Even after the official end of apartheid, the farm remains marked by unresolved tensions, demonstrating how political transformation does not automatically dismantle entrenched structures of privilege. The unfulfilled promise concerning Salome's house transforms the land into a symbol of deferred justice and moral indebtedness. In this sense, the farm crystallises the paradox of post-apartheid coexistence: lives remain deeply interconnected, yet this interconnectedness is shaped by asymmetrical relations of power and historical violence.

FUNERALS AS A FRAME FOR SOLIPSISMS VERSUS ENTANGLEMENT

In *The Promise*, funerals also serve as a recurring frame for exploring themes of solipsism and entanglement among the Swart family. Each funeral in the novel—four in total, one in each of the chapters—marks the passing of a family member and represents a shifting dynamic between the characters' self-centeredness and moments of collective vulnerability. Self-centeredness is conveyed through brief uses of first-person narration. From the first chapter, the reader gets some instances of first-person narration, for instance when Amor learns about her mother's death: "If she can keep focused on the hands, the shape of them, with their short, blunt fingers, she will not have to listen to what the mouth above the hands is saying, and then it will not be true. The only thing that is true is the hands, and me looking at the hands" (Galgut, 2021, p. 11). Who is that pronoun "me" referring to? This excerpt belongs to a passage where Amor is the focalizer, so the reader can safely assume that it is Amor speaking through a first-person narration. But Galgut's innovation does not stop there. Towards the end of page 11, the narrator, now detached from any character, as a third-person indirect omniscient narrative voice, is describing the house at which the characters arrive. However, at the end of that description, there is another peek into a character's mind, who is Amor again, this time through the use of a second-person narrative voice: "Concrete birdbath, a Wendy house and a swing made from half a truck tyre. Where you, perhaps, also grew up" (Galgut, 2021, p. 12). Later on in the same chapter, there is another instance of second-person narration: "But whose are they, the voices, why can't we hear them now? Shhh, you'll hear them, if you pay attention, if you will only listen" (Galgut, 2021, p. 14).

Rachel's funeral is the novel's opening event and establishes the dynamic between the Swart family and Salome. The setting brings out deep-seated self-absorption in each family member. The teenage Amor, who overhears her mother's deathbed promise to Salome, is affected by her family's inability to take the promise seriously. Her disillusionment contrasts sharply with her father, Manie, who, preoccupied with his grief and self-pity, dismisses Rachel's wish as unimportant: "You will do it? I said I will. He takes a hanky out of his jacket pocket and blows his nose into it, then looks into the hanky to see what he's produced. Puts it away again. What are we actually talking about? he says" (Galgut, 2021, p. 30). That is also the case of Amor's brother, Anton, who even doubts the existence of that promise: "If it's so worthless, why not give it to her? Because Pa didn't want to? But Ma did. And he promised he would do it. So, you say. Nobody else heard that promise. But I did, Anton" (Galgut, 2021, p. 142).

Manie's reaction exemplifies how the family's self-centeredness stifles any sense of entanglement with Salome, despite her years of service. For the Swarts, the promise to Salome is more a point of inconvenience than a moral or ethical obligation, underscoring a racial solipsism

that resists acknowledging the humanity of others in the broader context of separateness that apartheid entailed for South African society. Yet, even in this moment, Amor becomes subtly entangled with Salome's plight, carrying the weight of this unfulfilled promise into her future. Galgut positions her as a character uniquely sensitive to the pain of others, an anomaly within the family and the Afrikaner community and a contrast to their self-absorbed worldview, as it will be further developed below.

Manie's funeral, following Rachel's, further underscores the Swarts' solipsism as well as the gradual unravelling of their familial bonds. In the passage devoted to this funeral, the reader witnesses how self-interest dominates the family members' interactions. Manie's death causes more friction and division within the family than Rachel's, as Anton and Astrid fixate on issues of inheritance and control rather than honouring his memory: "That's your choice, obviously, she says. As long as you understand, if you refuse, you will not inherit anything from your father. The instructions are very clear about it" (Galgut, 2021, p. 108). The fragmented nature of the family reflects a broader social fragmentation, mirroring South Africa's history of division and discord from the 90s, when apartheid was abolished, to the present day.

There is a point at which a new voice is introduced in the narration, that of the father in a coma: "But you will never get those words from me. Do you hear? (I do not hear.)" (Galgut, 2021, p. 92). It is unusual to introduce the point of view of a character that is not conscious, as if Galgut were delving into the very inside of the mind of the character, the inner workings of it that go beyond the nature of consciousness but explore the unconscious. This is perhaps a literary representation of what Freud (2010) exposed as the 'id', defined by Lapsley and Stey (2011) as follows: "the oldest and most primitive psychic agency, representing the biological foundations of personality" (p. 1):

No, he doesn't hear. Nothing will reach Manie again. [...] Though where he is is harder to describe. [...] Accompanied by the last flicker, the last ember, of a voice. Saying what? Saying nothing. I am, I was, nonsense like that. Occasionally a crude form surges past, half recognised, gone. My life. That time. Shadows of shadows. Down to the grainy truth of things. And in.

(Galgut, 2021, p. 93)

Then, in a conversation shared between Anton and Amor in this chapter, there is an inclusion of another voice and viewpoint, that of Salome. It is done in the form of a first-person narration, between parentheses:

[S]he isn't mourning Manie exactly. He didn't always treat her with respect, and not once in the time since Mrs Rachel died has he brought up the matter of her house, though maybe that will be different now.

(Will you help me?)

It isn't spoken aloud, but Amor hears it as if it is. The question of the Lombard place and her mother's last wish and her father's promise- really several questions, although they feel like only one.

(Galgut, 2021, p. 104)

The doubt remains about whether the statement in parentheses is truly a peek into Salome's mind or, on the contrary, it is just Amor's imagination working out a possible utterance Salome would think about or state. In this sense, it is interesting to note how most of the novel is narrated through privileged characters, and how the voices of the black family are silenced. Few passages are told from Salome's perspective, as will be further explored below.

Astrid's funeral in the third chapter marks a turning point in the novel where solipsism becomes increasingly self-destructive. Her death is violent and sudden, leaving the family to confront their accumulated guilt and resentment. As a character, Astrid embodies vanity and self-

centeredness, traits that persist up until her death. Even in her absence, her personality continues to cast a shadow over her siblings, particularly Anton, who is now left grappling with his own failures and the lingering unfulfilled promise to Salome. During Astrid's funeral, Amor's desire to honour the promise grows stronger, contrasting with Anton's defensiveness and resistance. This conflict over Salome's house becomes a symbol of the family's estrangement from both each other and the ethical obligations they owe:

I've just lost a sister. [...] Then maybe we can agree on one point, Anton. What's that? Salome. The Lombard place. He puts the sheets down slowly on the bed. Still, he says, amazed. Still on that. Yes. Still on that. Must it be the very first thing we talk about?

(Galgut, 2021, p. 189)

Anton's death in the last chapter represents the novel's climax and a final opportunity for the Swarts to confront the consequences of their self-centeredness. His suicide is the culmination of years of unresolved guilt, failures, and the pressure of living within a family that is unable to engage meaningfully with itself or the outside world. His death brings Amor back home once more, and it is through this event that she finally fulfils her mother's promise to Salome, transferring the house to her in an act of entanglement that transcends the family's historical solipsism.

In this final funeral, Amor's actions demonstrate a break from the family's pattern of isolation and detachment. She is not driven by self-interest but by a desire to right a moral wrong that her family had long ignored. By fulfilling the promise, Amor acknowledges the interconnectedness between her family's fate and Salome's, an act of restitution that symbolises her acceptance of entanglement as an ethical and human imperative in South African society.

Therefore, the funerals that structure the novel further reinforce the tension between isolation and interdependence. Each death exposes the Swart family's profound solipsism, revealing individuals unable or unwilling to recognise their ethical obligations toward others. Nevertheless, these moments of mourning also create temporary spaces of collective vulnerability. Death strips away the illusions of autonomy, demonstrating that post-apartheid entanglement is a compulsory tie bound by mortality and moral debt. Then, death interrupts routines of self-interest and forces confrontation with fragility, loss and dependency. Galgut repeatedly juxtaposes the family's emotional detachment with fleeting moments in which the barriers between selves begin to dissolve. Through these scenes, the novel suggests that vulnerability emerges most clearly not in moments of strength or control, but in experiences of grief, exposure and mortality. Such vulnerability becomes the condition through which ethical awareness may arise.

AMOR AND SALOME: ENTANGLEMENT BASED ON TRAUMA AND VULNERABILITY

In Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, the characters of Amor and Salome embody two lives shaped by apartheid's social scars and the entanglement of personal and collective trauma. It is interesting to note how the two characters who embody a relationship that inspires hope for reconciliation are women, though there are precedents in South African literature in which gender is an important dimension (Zhang et al., 2026). Amor, a white Afrikaner woman burdened by guilt, and Salome, a black domestic worker whose life is marked by systemic oppression, are linked through the dynamics of power, privilege, and restitution. By analysing Amor's choice to become a nurse and Salome's family and socio-political situation, it becomes evident how trauma and vulnerability entangle their lives.

Apartheid created a social structure in South Africa designed to segregate and dehumanise the non-white community. It institutionalised racism, dictating where people could live, work, and access basic resources. The Afrikaner identity, to which Amor belongs, was tied to the creation and enforcement of this system, granting privileges to white South Africans while oppressing non-white communities. Amor grows up in this context, but her trajectory is distinct from other Afrikaners in her family. Her relationship with Salome is shaped by this history of systemic inequity.

Salome's life reflects the persistence of structural inequalities even after the official end of apartheid in 1994. She is employed as a domestic worker for the Swart family and lives in a small house on their farm, a home that should have been hers by legal right but remains denied to her due to Amor's family's broken promise. This unresolved issue becomes a site of moral tension and personal trauma for Amor, whose identity as a nurse underscores her desire to heal, but whose position as a beneficiary of apartheid complicates her ability to address this injustice. Nurses, by their nature, are healers, tasked with tending to physical and emotional wounds. For Amor, nursing becomes a form of atonement—a way to address not only the personal trauma she carries but also the broader legacy of guilt associated with her Afrikaner heritage. She is inspired by Susan, her partner, to become a nurse: "My friend Susan stays there. She works as a nurse. After a moment, she adds, I think I might try it" (Galgut, 2021, p. 141).

Through Amor, Galgut explores the idea of bearing witness to suffering without being able to fully alleviate it. Her work as a nurse places her in proximity to pain and vulnerability: "To the ward in the hospital where you work. Where every day, literally every day, there are more and more sick and dying people, whose needs you must attend to, whose needs you cannot attend to, because the man with two facial expressions, who might or might not have wanted your sister's number, doesn't really believe they're sick" (Galgut, 2021, p. 151). Her nursing, then, becomes a metaphor for her internal struggle: the desire to heal a wound too deep and complex for any individual effort, since her attempts to address Salome's situation are repeatedly thwarted by familial resistance and legal inaction.

Amor's identity as an Afrikaner nurse also complicates her position. Some members of the Afrikaner community historically resisted the dismantling of apartheid and clung to notions of racial superiority and entitlement (Steyn, 2001; Van der Westhuizen, 2007). Amor's rejection of these ideals isolates her from her family, particularly her siblings. This isolation reinforces her trauma, as she carries the weight of her family's moral failings while striving to align her actions with her values, for she "has chosen the life of a servant" (Galgut, 2021, p. 148).

Salome's life is shaped by a different kind of trauma, one rooted in systemic oppression and generational struggle. As a black woman in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, she endures the burdens of poverty, disenfranchisement, and servitude. Even after apartheid's legal end, the promise of equality remains unrealised for Salome and her family, underscoring the persistence of racial and economic disparities. She thinks of the Lombard place as her own, but it is legally not: "Salome hears them in her house, beg your pardon, the Lombard place, and quickly closes the door" (Galgut, 2021, p. 119). Amor is shocked by this fact when she is first told about it:

Salome can't own the house. Even if Pa wanted to, he can't give it to her. Why not? She says, puzzled. Because, he says. It's against the law. The law? Why? You are not serious. But then he looks at her and sees how serious she is. Oh, dear me, he says. Do you have no idea what country you're living in? No, she doesn't. Amor is thirteen years old; history has not yet touched her. She has no idea what country she's living in.

(Galgut, 2021, p. 78)

Salome's silence in the novel is particularly striking. She speaks little, and her inner thoughts are rarely revealed, yet her presence is powerful. Her silence can be read as a form of resistance—an assertion of dignity in the face of dehumanisation—but it also highlights the ways in which systemic oppression erases individual voices.

Amor's and Salome's entanglement is marked by trauma on both sides. For Amor, the trauma is internal—a gnawing guilt that shapes her identity and decisions. Amor's trauma is deeply embedded in her family's dysfunction and the promises broken across generations. Witnessing the disregard for her mother's dying wish, Amor is burdened by a legacy of racial injustice, which is embodied in the character of Salome, who suffers that injustice. As Phiri has pointed out, this legacy is something “grounding her moral shame into a corporeal, embodied one that engages the material and ethical limits of racial reconciliation and repair topically” (2023, p. 34). For Salome, the trauma is external, manifesting in the material and social conditions of her life. This asymmetry underscores the unequal nature of their relationship, even as it challenges readers to consider the ways in which trauma can forge connections across seemingly insurmountable divides. Ultimately, Galgut demonstrates that under the conditions of post-apartheid entanglement, vulnerability cannot be overcome individually. Instead, true recognition only occurs when both characters acknowledge that their very identities are bound up in the structural wounds of the other.

Amor's eventual fulfilment of the promise—though delayed and incomplete—can be seen as an act of reconciliation. However, it comes too late to have a meaningful impact on Salome's life: “She's old now, seventy-one in August [...] She's been thinking lately that it might not be so very bad to go back to where she came from and live out her last years in her tiny village” (Galgut, 2021, p. 253). As Lukas' fury highlights, reconciliation remains elusive: “Your leftovers. That's what you're giving my mother, thirty years too late” (Galgut, 2021, p. 254). This belated gesture underscores the limitations of individual actions in addressing systemic injustices and raises questions about the nature of reparative justice. Can an act of restitution, however well-intentioned, truly address the wounds of history? Or does it merely serve to assuage the guilt of the privileged without transforming the conditions of the oppressed? However, Amor and Salome “embrace a last time. Frail basket of bones, containing its fire. Pulse beating dimly under your hand” (Galgut, 2021, p. 256), letting a door open for moral reconciliation to happen.

Ultimately, their entanglement is a reflection of South Africa's broader struggle to confront its past and envision a more just future. While their shared trauma creates a connection, it also exposes the limitations of reconciliation in the absence of structural change. It is also significant that the two characters embodying reconciliation in the novel are both women. Their position in the story suggests that reconciliation, especially in a post-apartheid context like the one in *The Promise*, is not driven by those in power but by those who have historically been marginalised. In literature and history, women have often been positioned as caretakers and moral compasses, responsible for bridging divides in fractured societies. In *The Promise*, their gender adds another layer to their entanglement, one based on vulnerability but also on endurance. As Phiri points out, *The Promise* “advances an intractable process burdened by the shame of our inexorably and mutually racialised socio-political realities” (2023, p. 37). Thus, Amor's and Salome's quiet, almost invisible suffering reflects the endurance of systemic inequities. Their connection remains profoundly unequal, shaped by the racial and economic hierarchies inherited from apartheid. However, it is precisely through this asymmetrical entanglement that the novel explores the difficult emergence of moral responsibility. Amor's guilt cannot erase historical injustice, nor can her eventual fulfilment of the promise fully repair decades of dispossession. Galgut resists any simplistic vision of redemption. The transfer of the house occurs too late to undo the damage

inflicted upon Salome's life, and Lukas's anger exposes the inadequacy of symbolic gestures that fail to transform structural realities. Reconciliation, therefore, is not presented as resolution or closure.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As can be derived from the analysis, Damon Galgut's *The Promise* presents post-apartheid South Africa as a landscape defined by unresolved histories, fractured relationships, and the lingering consequences of institutional violence. Despite this, the novel does not merely portray social collapse or moral failure. Through its formal experimentation and its sustained attention to the precarious ties binding individuals together, it also gestures toward the fragile possibility of ethical recognition and reconciliation. This article has argued that Galgut's narrative technique—particularly his fluid focalization and hyper-omniscient narration—constitutes the primary means through which the novel represents vulnerability as a shared and unavoidable condition. By reading the text through Sarah Nuttall's concept of entanglement and Judith Butler's reflections on precariousness, *The Promise* emerges not simply as a family saga or a critique of white South African privilege, but as an exploration of how lives remain inescapably implicated in one another despite histories of separation, silence and denial. The synthesis of Nuttall's socio-spatial entanglement and Butler's ethical precariousness allows this framework to move beyond the existing reading of the novel's fragmentation. Rather, it demonstrates how Galgut uses narrative form as a tool for mapping a new relational ethics for the post-apartheid landscape.

At the same time, the novel refuses complete pessimism. The final embrace between Amor and Salome acquires symbolic importance because it acknowledges a shared vulnerability that transcends the rigid separations upon which apartheid depended. Their encounter does not erase difference, nor does it eliminate historical trauma, but it gestures toward the possibility of ethical relation grounded in recognition rather than domination. Butler's understanding of precariousness becomes particularly relevant here: because human beings are constituted through their exposure to others, vulnerability is not simply a source of suffering but also the basis for responsibility and care. In *The Promise*, this shared exposure opens a narrow yet significant space for reconciliation.

Importantly, Galgut locates this possibility not within institutions of power but within marginalised forms of endurance and care. The novel repeatedly portrays patriarchal, nationalist and legal structures as incapable of producing genuine ethical transformation. Instead, moments of connection emerge through characters who occupy vulnerable positions within society, particularly women. Amor and Salome embody different forms of historical suffering, yet their entanglement reveals how vulnerability can become the basis for moral recognition rather than merely a sign of weakness. Their relationship suggests that reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa cannot depend upon grand political narratives alone but must instead arise from the difficult acknowledgement of shared implication, historical accountability and mutual dependence.

Ultimately, *The Promise* portrays vulnerability as an inescapable feature of collective existence. Galgut's novel insists that individuals and communities remain bound together through histories they cannot fully escape and responsibilities they cannot entirely evade. While the text offers no utopian resolution, it nevertheless leaves open the possibility that acknowledging this entanglement may constitute the first step toward a more ethical form of coexistence. Moreover, the novel's lack of a utopian-like resolution should not be misread as vagueness on the part of Galgut. Rather, this framework reveals that open-endedness is itself the critical contribution that

he makes. By leaving the narrative unresolved, Galgut, read through Butler and Nuttall, argues that ethical coexistence cannot be a finished political product, but must remain an ongoing process of mutual acknowledgement. Hope, in the novel, does not emerge from the erasure of conflict or the restoration of harmony, but from the recognition that even fractured communities remain connected through their shared vulnerability and their enduring obligation to one another.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the “Becas Semillero de Investigación 2024” Research Fund provided by the University of Córdoba (Spain).

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