



Review Article

# Post-Apartheid Disillusionment and the Decay of the White Farm: A Study of Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

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## Abstract

In contemporary South African fiction, the deconstruction of the plaasroman (farm novel) serves as a potent vehicle for critiquing the nation's stalled socio-political transformation. This study examines Damon Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Promise* (2021), as a seminal work of post-apartheid disillusionment. By tracing the multi-generational decline of the Swart family across four decades and four funerals, Galgut uses the physical and moral decay of the white-owned farm to allegorize the "curdling" of the Rainbow Nation's idealistic foundations. The paper argues that Galgut subverts traditional pastoral tropes by employing what can be termed the necro-pastoral—a landscape where the land no longer represents life and legacy, but becomes a site of stagnation and burial. Central to this analysis is the "promise" of land ownership made to Salome, a Black domestic worker; her decades-long wait for justice serves as a scathing indictment of white liberal complacency and the failure of the state to address structural dispossession. Furthermore, the study explores how Galgut's narrative fluidity—a restless, "cinematic" point of view—mirrors the fractured consciousness of a society unable to reconcile its past with its present. By examining the motif of the decaying homestead alongside the physical deterioration of the characters, this paper concludes that Galgut portrays white South African identity as a fading, irrelevant force.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary South African fiction, the deconstruction of the *plaasroman* (farm novel) serves as a potent vehicle for critiquing the nation's stalled socio-political transformation. This study examines Damon Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Promise* (2021), as a seminal work of post-apartheid disillusionment. By tracing the multi-generational decline of the Swart family across four decades and four funerals, the author uses the physical and moral decay of the white-owned farm to allegorize the "curdling" of the Rainbow Nation's idealistic foundations. South African literature has undergone a seismic shift since the democratic transition of 1994. While the initial years were characterized by a tentative, often hopeful engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the contemporary era is defined by a deep-seated disillusionment. Galgut acts as a pinnacle of this "literature of failure," focusing not on the spectacular violence of the apartheid regime, but on the quiet, corrosive apathy of the white middle class that followed it. He sets his narrative against a landscape that feels unchanged physically but is undergoing a legal and spiritual upheaval. Early in the novel, he captures this tension: "the countryside looks the same... the invisible, powerful laws that people make and then lay down at angles across the earth, pressing down heavily, all those laws are changing now" (TP128). This change, however, is not a liberation but a long, agonizing expiration of a colonial worldview that refuses to go quietly.

Historically, the *plaasroman* served to legitimize white Afrikaner presence on the land, portraying the farm as a site of divine stewardship and patriarchal order. Galgut systematically dismantles this myth. Instead of a fertile, ordered sanctuary, the Swart family farm is a site of entropy. Galgut describes the homestead not as a pastoral paradise but as "a big mishmash of a place... sitting out here in the middle of the veld, like a drunk wearing odd bit of clothing" (TP 12). This description evokes the necro-pastoral, where the traditional beauty of the rural landscape is infected by death and moral rot. The farm does not produce crops; it harvests the bodies of the Swart family, with the narrative structured around four funerals. This physical decay of the farm mirrors the spiritual and physical state of the white Afrikaner family itself, who cling to "useless ground, full of stones" simply because "it belongs to our family, nobody else, and there's power in that" (TP 12).

In this necro-pastoral framework, the "body politic" is represented by the physical bodies of the characters, where the Swart family members do not just die, but experience a "grotesque" end that systematically strips them of Afrikaner dignity. Manie's death following a bizarre snake-handling accident, Astrid's murder in a senseless carjacking, and Anton's eventual suicide collectively suggest that the "white body" is no longer compatible with the South African landscape. This physical deterioration serves as a visceral metaphor for the entropy of the post-apartheid state, where old structures are falling apart faster than new ones can be built. By contrasting the heavy, decaying bodies of the Swarts—who take up space only through their rot—with the "invisibility" of Salome, Galgut highlights a shift in presence. While the white family

occupies the land through a process of slow expiration, Salome's presence remains ethereal yet permanent, suggesting a resilience that outlasts the tangible decay of her employers.

This sense of decay is further emphasized by the friction between temporal stagnation and political chronology. Galgut structures the novel around four specific windows in time—1986, 1995, 2004, and 2018—allowing the reader to witness a shifting political backdrop that moves from the State of Emergency to the Rugby World Cup, through the Mbeki years, and finally to the fall of Jacob Zuma. However, while the nation undergoes these monumental shifts, the farm itself remains stuck in a "temporal cul-de-sac." The white characters are perpetually "behind the beat" of history; for instance, Anton's youthful expectations of becoming a hero or a great writer dissolve until he becomes little more than a ghost in his own life. This structural choice highlights a fatal conflict between "Clock Time"—the linear progress of the nation—and "Farm Time," the stubborn refusal of the white family to evolve. On the Swart farm, the past is never actually past; it is a recurring haunting that prevents any true entry into the future.

The inability to move forward is exacerbated by a profound religious vacuum that leaves the family without a moral compass. Throughout the novel, the Swarts drift through various religious identities—Jewish, Catholic, Dutch Reformed, and New Age charismatic Christianity—yet none of these provide a solution to the "promise" or a path toward salvation. The Dutch Reformed Church, once the "spiritual wing" of the apartheid regime, is depicted as particularly bankrupt, offering only platitudes or greed when the family seeks counsel. This suggests that the moral rot at the heart of the family is not merely political but metaphysical. The promise made to Salome is a secular debt that no amount of religious performance or shifting of faith can pay off, revealing a society where spiritual institutions have become hollow shells incapable of facilitating justice or reconciliation.

The failure of the promise is a linguistic one, rooted in the breakdown of the "language of white South Africa." As a speech act, a promise requires both the speaker and the listener to exist within a shared moral universe, yet the language used by the Swarts is broken. When Manie first makes the vow, his voice is "choked," and when the children later discuss it, they employ legalistic or dismissive rhetoric to "word-play" their way out of their moral obligations. In this environment, Salome's silence becomes her most powerful weapon; by refusing to participate in these linguistic games, she remains the only character with true moral weight. Galgut suggests that the traditional language of the *plaasroman*—a vocabulary of ownership and patriarchal titles like "ooms" and "tannies"—is no longer capable of describing the truth of the country.

To capture this complexity, Galgut employs a fluid, modernistic narrative voice that acts as a "cinematic eye," zooming in and out of characters' consciousness without warning. This technique is not merely stylistic; it is thematic. By refusing to let the reader settle comfortably into one perspective, Galgut reflects the fractured nature of South African society. The narrator is often unreliable, cynical, and intrusive, mimicking the collective gossip and denial of the white community. This

narrative instability reflects the uncertainty of the times. The narration moves from the high-minded to the grotesque, stripping the characters of their dignity and revealing their prejudices. By refusing to let the reader settle comfortably into one perspective, Galgut forces a confrontation with the uncomfortable realities of the characters' moral decay.

Despite Salome being the pivot upon which the entire plot turns, she remains a largely silent and marginalized figure. This narrative choice reflects the structural racism of the post-apartheid era, where Black labor and suffering remain invisible to those in power. The narrator explicitly notes this erasure during the first funeral: "She was with Ma when she died, right there next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible. And whatever Salome feels is invisible too" (TP 19). By the time the promise is finally fulfilled in the novel's final section, the world has moved on. The gesture is too late to be transformative. Salome's son, Lukas, serves as the voice of a radicalized younger generation that has no interest in white benevolence or "delayed" justice. He rejects Amor's attempt at reconciliation, telling her: "It is nothing... It's what you don't need any more, what you don't mind throwing away. Your leftovers" (TP 286). This final confrontation underscores the novel's conclusion: the time for promises has passed. The white family has rotted away, and their land—now a collection of stones and "leftovers"—is all that remains to be inherited.

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