



Unfulfilled Promises: Anton as a Mirror of Afrikaners Identity in *The Promise*

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Abstract. *The Promise* is Damon Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel from 2021. Renowned for its Woolf-like fluid perspective shifts and elegant, powerful prose, the novel unfolds over four funerals within a white South African family, depicting nearly forty years of social change and racial issues in the country. This paper analyzes the character of Anton, the eldest son, using the novel's timeline structure to trace his state and development across different periods. Through the microcosm of Anton's fate, the paper examines the impact of racial and land systems on a generation of South Africans, summarizing the representative fate of that era.

Keywords: The Promise; Anton; South Africa.

1 Introduction

The Promise by Damon Galgut, which won the Booker Prize in 2021, focuses on the four funerals of the Swart family and an unfulfilled promise that spans nearly forty years. Through these funerals, the novel reflects the changes in racial relations and social conditions in South Africa over the past forty years. As Lin pointed out, "While satirizing the unfinished promise of 'New South Africa,' Galgut reiterates the ideas of racial reconciliation, mutual assistance, and progress, correcting the blindness of early classical liberal farm novels toward the black community and confronting the antagonism and harm caused by racial and class factors" (55)^[7]. Galgut uses these four funerals to show the unfulfilled promises of South Africa to its people, the harm caused to society by racial issues, and the distortion and oppression experienced by individuals within families.

In the Swart family, Anton, the eldest son, is both the protagonist of the final funeral and a key figure in the novel. His self-destruction is accompanied by the eventual fulfillment of the family's promise to the black domestic worker Salome. Anton's fate—moving from enthusiasm and hope to despair and numbness—mirrors the experience of a generation of South Africans whose youth was consumed by survival and avoidance. As Galgut laments, "but all his promise gets used up in the wretched struggle to survive" (209)^[3]. Anton's character is both symbolic and allegorical, and through his

analysis, we can gain insight into the unique experiences and spiritual world of this generation of South Africans.

Moreover, analyzing the subtle relationships between the eldest son and other characters helps us gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of South African society. As Hang says, "South Africa belongs to all the people who live here, and South African nationalism is the foundation for building the nation-state of South Africa" (52)^[5]. Although *The Promise* does not explicitly address racial conflict, the tension between black and white South Africans remains a central theme throughout.

In Galgut's previous works, a significant amount of South Africa's tumultuous history was depicted. Through the portrayal of specific groups of white South Africans, the local racial conflicts and the resulting traumas were expressed. In *The Promise*, the rise and fall of a family was utilized for a microcosmic expression. In the core contradiction of the entire story, the black maid, Salome, was nearly silent. Facing the loss of her rights, she made no direct demands throughout the novel. It was only when Amor came to fulfill the belated promise at the end that she stepped onto the core stage of the story. Amor is a classic silent black figure in African literature, deliberately set by Galgut.

Since the book was published recently, research on *The Promise* is relatively scarce. However, over the past two years, high-quality and innovative articles have emerged in both domestic and international academia. Currently, research on *The Promise* in China is limited, and systematic character analysis is almost non-existent, highlighting a gap in scholarly exploration of the novel. Therefore, further analysis of Anton's character is particularly essential to understanding the broader socio-political and racial undertones embedded in the text.

2 From Promise to Despair: The Character of Anton

2.1 The Great Soldier or the Broken Fugitive: The Turning Point in Anton's Life

At the beginning of the novel, Anton is merely a nineteen-year-old soldier. Despite the whole family considering him a troubled and broken young man with serious flaws, he is supposed to be a hopeful and ambitious young man, just like the main character in his own novel. As Galgut writes, "He is a strong and happy youth, full of promise and ambition" (208)^[3]. Here, "promise" refers to the unfulfilled promises made by the South African government to the youth. Young people like Anton have been deceived by these empty promises from the South African government. The concept of promise has multiple meanings in this novel. "Because it's not just a promise about one family, it's a promise about South Africa, and it's a promise about humanity" (van der Vlies et al. 2)^[1]. In the novel, the Swart family breaks the promise of the hostess to the black maid, and the South African government breaks the promise it made to the people when it came to power.

Anton's humanity gradually distorts and becomes confused within the military, leading him into a predicament. In later interviews, Galgut directly discusses how Anton is a "damaged," "confused," "angry," yet "self-aware" person. As the eldest son of the

family, after learning of his mother's death, Anton recalls that he shot a woman with a rifle the day before, believing himself to be the actual murderer of his mother, with the bloodshed seen as his mother's. When he talks to Payne, he explains that he shot his mother to protect the country, which reveals his underlying fear and guilt about killing. He tries to find suitable reasons to convince himself and alleviate the pain and discomfort of killing.

In the first chapter, Anton is referred to as the "Rifleman," and the rifle he brings home has no bullets. "My rifle has no bullets. Without bullets, my rifle is nothing, a shell. It is there only to send out the bullets, like the one I put into her without thinking yesterday, the instant at which she began to fall, a fracture line through my life" (Galgut 36)^[3]. The rifle without bullets is like Anton himself, dangerous but merely an empty shell. Anton has always felt insecure, thus arming himself with a rifle. But once he crossed the point of no return, he could not accept reality, and began to collapse gradually. He threw away his military clothes and rifle, symbolizing a state of life torn apart and full of chaos, and exiled himself in the forests for nine years.

In the first chapter, Anton's identity shifts from a soldier protecting his country to a broken fugitive. Anton was supposed to "grab hold of everything," but even in his best moments, he still felt "a tiny sourness at the back of his throat seems always to have been there" (Galgut 54)^[3]. Anton perceives a lie at the heart of his life and realizes that life at this moment is not right at all. The promises of success and the desire of "eating the world" (Galgut 53)^[3] in his youth have become empty talk, lost with the nine years of fleeing. "At the heart of every South African story is the Fugitive" (Galgut 209)^[3].

2.2 A Second Chance or Another Trap: Return of the Prodigal Son

The second chapter begins with Anton receiving news that his father is seriously ill, but he has an intuition that "he can see a bright, tiny picture of the future" (Galgut 73)^[3]. This represents an opportunity for him to return to his home and end his nine years of exile. As the eldest son of the family, Anton's return signifies the inheritance of the family's headship and is a legitimate chance to reclaim power and property. The past years have been challenging for him, and his enthusiasm and ambition have been eroded during his flight, leading him to a state of numbness. The process of inheritance has also been fraught with difficulties. In the third chapter, Anton's storyline is not detailed, but readers can still see fragments of his numbed life, including his indifference towards Salome and his disdain for the "promise."

Anton's attitude towards Salome reflects the attitude of many Afrikaners towards blacks. "Galgut is good at observing and describing the tense and subtle relationships between people" (Guo 43)^[4]. Although Salome raised him, he remains distant and indifferent towards her. Anton repeatedly obstructs Amor's "promise" to Salome. The first obstruction was due to legal reasons. He told Amor that even if their mother had made such a promise before her death, and even if they were willing to give the house to Salome, it would still be against law. By the time of the next funeral, South African society had changed, and blacks had this right under the law, but Anton still fails to honor their parents' promises and even tries to negotiate a deal. Anton shows no respect for Salome. This kind of discrimination is not a strong conflict but is always present,

dominating interactions and causing mutual harm, as many Afrikaners like Anton do. They do not believe in their hearts that they have equal rights with blacks.

The apartheid system in South Africa separated the two races, and for decades, the contradictions and conflicts between them never ceased. Amor is the only one in the family who genuinely regards Salome as an equal. Although she is a detached traveler in the Swart family, she always remembers the promise made by her parents. However, as the eldest son and only male heir, Anton returns to the farm, marries Desirée, the woman he loved in his youth, but still ignores the promise.

In the middle section of the novel, Galgut focuses on how Anton gradually transforms from a vibrant young man into a disillusioned and numb individual. At the two funerals, nearly two decades of setbacks have caused this once-promising family star to lose his positive yearning for life. He has neither fulfilled the promises he was supposed to keep nor received the promises made to him by South Africa. Although he is no longer fleeing, his soul remains exiled in the wilderness, never having truly left. He remains a victim of the capricious changes of the South African government, an outcast forced to go astray.

2.3 Rifle with a Bullet: The Death of the Ancien Régime and the Birth of the New World

In the final funeral scene of the novel, Anton reaches the end of his life. For him, the last stage of life is marked by chaos. He has turned to excessive drinking, becoming numb and hopeless. "I've wasted my life. Fifty years old, half a century, and he's never going to do any of the things he was once certain he would do. Not read the classics at a famous university or learn a foreign language or travel the world or marry a woman he loves. Not hold real power in his hands. Not going to bend fate to his will. Not even going to finish his novel, because, let's continue to be honest, after nearly twenty years he hasn't really started it. Not ever going to do much of anything" (Galgut 186)^[3]. His grand plans for the future have been shattered by reality. Later, he has a nightmare in which he dreams of stealing money that doesn't belong to him. After hearing a knock on the door, he wakes up with a start. From that moment, he senses a foreboding, knowing that something is about to happen.

At the end of his life, everything becomes chaotic. His body is ravaged by alcohol, and his spirit is shattered. He can no longer endure the hopeless days. For him, picking up life again feels like picking up a dirty shirt from the ground; his life is already tainted and foul. "Cancel the shirt, cancel the house. Cancel the pylons. Make it all stop" (Galgut 188)^[3]. Continuing to persist has become meaningless, so he decides to make everything stop, permanently.

Anton commits suicide with a shotgun, and now the rifle indeed has a bullet. Anton himself is like the rifle, and when everything becomes too much for him, the gun explodes, and the bullet is meant for himself all along.

Anton's death signifies that the Swart family land will no longer be inherited and also marks the end of the South African generation he represented. The former symbolizes that the land of the South African continent will eventually return to rightful hands,

thus Amor fulfills the promise at the end of the story; the latter indicates the death of the old world and the Ancien Régime and the arrival of a new world.

Anton represents a generation of empty promises from the South African government, and the government's promise is also one of the promises in the novel's title, which ends with the death of a generation. As for the Swart family's promise, Amor eventually fulfills it by giving Salome ownership of the house, but it is too late and no longer significant for Salome and her son. "That's what you're giving my mother, thirty years too late. As good as nothing" (Galgut 215)^[3].

The house is described as the remnants of the Swart family, something they no longer need, but it holds great significance for Salome as it is the first time the land and house truly belong to her. "In South Africa, the loss of land means the eventual loss of political and civil rights" (Jiang 203)^[6]. The recovery of land rights is an important symbol and basis for Salome to officially become the owner of her home. However, the damage has already been done, and it seems insufficient to make up for it. This is also a problem in South Africa's history that needs to be addressed now. Amor, as an exile in her family, bears the guilt of Afrikaners by leaving home to become a nurse for AIDS patients, while Anton continually obstructs her from fulfilling her promise. In a sense, she has been atoning for Anton's behavior.

After a heavy rain falls on the living and the dead, Amor, following Anton's last wish, scatters his ashes on the roof, as Anton liked to rule the family from a high place. However, unexpectedly, the wind stops, and most of the ashes will be washed into the sewer by the next rain, signifying the end of the old era. At the same time, rain itself symbolizes rebirth (Foster 86)^[2]. Rain falls fairly on everyone, with a purifying and restorative effect, making the world a new place. In the baptism of rain, a soul, a family, and a nation are reborn. "It is the possibility of seeking a common solution in a new community" (Zheng 70)^[9]. The end of the novel not only presents an objective portrayal of history but also expresses Galgut's hopes for South Africa. "For a long time, South African English literature was regarded as an imaginative survey of real political forces and historical circumstances, and was strictly required to have a political function and to play the role of a historical supplement" (Wu 131)^[8]. The painful experience of South Africa being torn into two parts is co-written by newspapers, literature and film and television works, which unfold this broken picture from different angles and forms. In Galgut's works, this broken history is integrated into the experience of a family for 40 years, and the experience of family members shows the injustice of society and the trauma of the nation.

Through the analysis of a single significant character's life, we glimpse the fate of a generation of South African youth crushed by the wheels of history. By the end of the novel, Amor, Salome, and all of South Africa will have a new beginning. Even though the promise was delayed for 40 years and experienced many setbacks, it was still fulfilled. Anton, as both victim and perpetrator, is also gone with the wind, disappearing under the wheels of history, and this plot confirms historical reality, and the difficulty and inevitability of the era change that the author wants to express.

3 Conclusion

Galgut's *The Promise* not only addresses the Swart family's promise to the black maid but also reflects the South African government's promises regarding the lives of its citizens and the fate of national racial relations, all of which were unfulfilled. The delay in fulfilling promises has always caused irreparable harm and trauma, and belated promises often hold no practical value for individuals. However, this marks a new beginning for both the Swart family and South Africa. Anton's fate is intertwined with his family and country, and through his life, we glimpse the story of a generation in South Africa, as well as the general attitudes and views of Afrikaners towards blacks. The black community's loss of land rights, political justice, and even voice makes them silent victims like Salome, while Anton, as a South African white, also falls victim to the crushing force of his era, becoming both perpetrator and victim after the gunshot. Anton's life is like his unloaded rifle, his lifelong ambition cannot be realized, experienced setbacks but no substantial return and promotion, in the face of the national policy changes, he can only obey and cannot resist, all these factors make him unbearable, and eventually lead to self-destruction.

Through the comprehensive analysis of a single character, Anton's life provides insight into South Africa's social history from 1986 to 2018. From various interviews with the author, it is clear that Anton is a central and beloved character, whose metaphors and symbols represent the reality of a generation in South Africa. This paper focuses on analyzing the story arc of the eldest son Anton, contributing positively to the interpretation of the novel and laying the groundwork for understanding other characters within it. There is no doubt that Amor, another obvious heroine in the novel, the youngest daughter in her family, is also a role worthy of analysis. This is also an important breakthrough in the later analysis of commitment. Amor also spent her life in guilt and uneasiness. She heard her mother's commitment but had no power to fulfill it. The strong guilt affected her life and made her a nurse in the AIDS room. These are the oppression and coercion brought to her by the family and society. Her interaction with Anton also shows the power relationship in the South African family, which is of great analytical significance. With the increasing international attention to African literature and its growing popularity among Chinese readers, it is essential to delve deeper into the analysis and exploration of *The Promise*, a rising star that has won the Booker Prize.

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