

The Politics of Emotion in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

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Abstract: The “affective turn” of Western literary criticism arose at the beginning of the 21st century as a result of new discoveries in neuroscience, cognitive science, and other disciplines. As one of the main fields of Affect Studies, discourses of the emotion pry into the emotional dimensions of literary texts to reveal the embodiment, sociality, and politics of emotions. South African writer Damon Galgut constructs a series of affective scenes with both individuality and representativeness in his 2021 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Promise* and thus turns the fictional world into an affective field. The novelist focuses on the titular event “promise” and takes it as the thread running through four funerals of the white Swart family. Through the lens of Affect Studies, the author attempts to interpret shame, anger and compassion behind the Swarts’ making, breaching, and honouring of the promise and examines how those emotions are dictated by South Africa’s gender, racial and class politics. The author concludes that the compassion-based African Ubuntu philosophy may lead South Africa to the promised land of national reconciliation.

Keywords: South African literature, The Booker Prize, Affect Studies, Damon Galgut, *The Promise*

1. Introduction

As one of the most acclaimed contemporary South African writers, Damon Galgut (1963-) was shortlisted for and eventually won the Booker Prize in 2021 with his ninth novel *The Promise*. Given its literature-as-criticism undertone, the work has exhibited distinctive political genes of South African writing and thus added lustre to the post-apartheid new South African literary landscape. Although the novel is classified as a saga, “all that is and has been written by South Africans is profoundly influenced, at the deepest and least controllable level of consciousness, by the politics of race” [1]. *The Promise* reflects the social reality that contemporary white South Africans’ emotion, attitude and propensity have been manipulated by all kinds of political powers.

The novel is a four-chapter story, featuring the white Swart family, with each part revolving around a family funeral on the Swart farm. The matriarch Rachel’s funeral is the very first of this series and her plea to her husband Manie is the genesis of the titular “promise”. On her deathbed, Rachel makes Manie promise to pass the house where their African maid Salome lives on to Salome as per her will. This very promise serves as the core affective event that drives the development of the novel, and thus this paper intends to dissect the emotional attribution behind the two generations of Swart’s making, breaking, and keeping of the promise, i.e., shame, anger, and compassion. And the argument is that white South Africans’ racial emotions and attitudes have been moderated and manipulated by gender politics, racial politics and class politics, and compassion-based African Ubuntu philosophy promises to lay the emotional foundation for new South Africa’s racial reconciliation and future prosperity.

2. Shame: Making Promise as a Way of Salvation

“Promise”, as the core affective event of the novel, is not only a matter of morality on the personal level, but also the emotional manifestation of the subject’s attitude towards and value judgments about gender and class, especially racial issues. Therefore, the making, breaking, and honouring of the promise is nothing less than the diagnosis of contemporary South African social, racial, and political realities. According to Affect Studies, human nature is defined as the production of dynamic emotional activities and human actions are affective adjustments to their surroundings. Correspondingly, one’s emotional state has innate cognitive dimensions which may reveal their “Being-in-the-world”. In *The Promise*, Galgut makes the reader ascertain how affect determines Rachel’s “Being-in-the-world” by asking how she is prompted to make such a promise. The answer may just as well lie in the original

scene of the promise:

Do you promise me, Manie?

Holding on to him, skeleton hands grabbing, like in a horror film.

Ja, I'll do it.

Because I really want her to have something. After everything she's done.

I understand, he says.

Promise me you'll do it. Say the words.

I promise, Pa says, choked-sounding ^[2].

The Swart family's daughter Amor incidentally witnessed her dying mother making her father promise to give their African maid Salome the homestead the maid and her son Lukas have lived in. This scene is not only the genesis of the story and the moral compass of the novel, but also the key to unlock the emotional motivation behind the promise. On the one hand, the promise is the "source time" and moral guideline the narrator has referred to time and again. The original scene of the promise is what has been haunting Amor for over thirty years, and it is under the guidance of this scene that Amor can keep to the moral true north and eventually keep the Swarts' promise to their African maid; on the other hand, readers can discern, from the sharp contrast between Rachel's frail body and strong determination shown by her words and deeds, the promise is powered by very poignant emotion.

Rachel's plea to her husband "Promise me you'll do it. Say the word" comes so strong as to border on orders. From this we can infer that to some extent, the bond between madam and maid is stronger than that between wife and husband. Being controlled by gender politics, "wife and servant are the same, but only differ in the name" ^[3]. Both Rachel and Salome are victims of South African sexism. Both their gendered body and motherhood have reduced them to the position of "the female other", open to exploitation and humiliation to various degrees. The entanglement between madam and maid on account of their common embodied female shame is key to our understanding of Rachel's promise and the ensuing disputes.

Embodied female shame is the sense of shame women feel about themselves and their bodies, which is the result of male supremacy and its objectification and depreciation of women in terms of gender and race in public and domestic spheres ^[4]. Although their social identities are worlds apart, Rachel and Salome have both been used and abused by the patriarchy as mothers with reproductive worth. If Rachel's body is exploited to reproduce the white ruling class, then Salome's labour is not only reproducing the white ruling class per se, but also the South African hierarchy and her own abject condition as an African maid and a shamed existence; if Rachel's body is confined in her role as a mother and wife in the Swart farmhouse, then her inmate Salome is all the more bound by her black female body.

From her shotgun marriage at twenty till her premature death of tumour at forty, Rachel has never set her foot outside the farmhouse the novelist wittily calls "hearse/house" (11). In contrast, Salome has seen even worse exploitation given her occupation as an African maid, because "lowly" domestic workers tend to be highly dependable on their employers and thus more exploitable and dispensable. When Rachel falls heavily ill and becomes bedridden, her blood family are so disgusted by her bodily fluids that they do not want to tend to her. All the dirty work is dumped unto Salome and the Swarts take her for granted and declare "that's what she's paid for" (14). The abjectness of the sick body is part of Rachel which cannot be completely exorcized or rejected; Salome's nursing of the sick is also considered filthy by association and hence the abjectness of her labour is part of Salome. In conclusion, embodied female shame is Salome's "Being-in-the-world" too and it is the affective foundation upon which Salome can be called Rachel's "alter ego". The madam and maid are of the same age and the Swart children's relationship with Salome, especially Anton's mistakenly calling Salome mom in boyhood and Amor's unbreakable bond with her, are further proof of this point.

In her final days, Rachel has become a different person and her new life begins after learning about her imminent death with tumour. And the promise is both the result and the embodiment of Rachel's rebirth; it is her way of overcoming the embodied female shame, redeeming herself and freeing her alter ego, Salome. In addition, the promise also symbolizes for the possibility of reducing national shame and reshaping the ideal for the entire white Swart family and even the South African society at large in the 1980s. "For there is nothing unusual or remarkable about the Swart family, oh no, they resemble the family from the next farm and the one beyond that, just an ordinary bunch of white South

Africans” (162-63). It is precisely because of the ordinariness of the Swarts that has made them the perfect representative of the white South Africans and the political intention of this novel is made all the more obvious. One could envisage a scenario when thousands of common white families acknowledge the shame apartheid had brought upon the entire nation as well as upon each individual, when shame would become the affective power, strong and transformative enough to shake up or even uproot the repressive system.

In the 1980s, with the ease of the Cold War tension, anti-apartheid had gradually become the mainstream in the world. The year when Rachel made Manie promise to give Salome the house is 1986, which also happens to be the time when anti-apartheid sentiment worldwide was gaining momentum. The U.S. and the U.K. took a stronger stance on South African issues—the Comprehensive Anti-Racism Act was passed in U.S. Congress in autumn 1986, and the Margaret Thatcher government swiftly legislated limited economic sanctions against South Africa. Apartheid was eventually officially abolished eighteen years after Rachel’s passing. The promise is like a pebble thrown into the dead water of racial issues and has thus set off a chain reaction in the Swart family, leading to different responses from the two generations of the Swart family. The final pages offer the reader an eventual albeit partial reconciliation between the white and the black families and a hopefully more peaceful and prosperous future, thanks to the transformative power of shame.

3. Anger: Betraying Promise as a Means of Domination

Like shame, anger is also a prescriptive, disciplinary, and social emotion. The difference between the two is that shame is an experience the subject tries hard to hide and conceal, whereas anger is an uncontrollable outpour of emotion. As the narrator of *The Promise* explains, Manie likes to model himself on the Old Testament God when he lectures his son Anton, in hope of reining the latter in. Manie’s paternalism is shown in his setting himself up as the absolute authority in the family, a god to be feared even by his own son. Anger is Manie’s violent manifestation of will to power, and he is determined to crush others’ interest in favour of his own. In the Swart family, all disobedience is met with Manie’s disciplinary or even retaliatory anger. This patriarch is so angry with his rebellious son that the lingering resentment does not even relent after nine years. Subsequently, Manie dictates it in his will that his son shall be disinherited unless the latter apologises.

Manie’s anger is his shameless emotional outpour, because he shows total disregard to his late wife’s last wish and refuses to even acknowledge the promise he made himself. Nonetheless, he talks about God, sin, and punishment all the time. Nothing can be more ironic than this. His words and deeds only bring irrevocable damage to his interpersonal relationships and at the same time give rise to more anger and violence, condemning the Swart family into the vicious cycle of negative affect. Manie’s relationship with his son is damaged beyond repair and his youngest daughter Amor has been in voluntary exile around the world since adulthood. It is safe to say, to a great extent, the malfunction of this family and the tension amongst family members are the result of the Swarts patriarch’s unjust anger and his betrayal of the promise.

Moreover, when delving into the root cause of Manie’s breach of the promise, it is essential to pry into the connotations of the promise itself. To Manie, what lies behind the promise is the Africans’ need or demand for land, which is not only a threat to his economic interest as a land-owning Boer farmer, but also a challenge to his identity as the white minority ruling class. After Rachel’s death, although Manie does remember his promise, he unequivocally continues to deny he had ever done so. “I never did, I never promised anything!” (53) To reinforce this message Manie even warns his son to “Choose your side, it’s up to you” (67). Unquestionably, anger is prevailing emotion permeating through Manie’s denial. He uses this noisy emotion to draw all attention upon himself, to bend his late wife and children’s will, and to distract people’s attention from the crux of the problem, i.e., whether he did make the promise or not.

Manie’s warning his son to pick side is notably meaningful because it reveals his in-group vs out-group mentality. In the 1986 South African context, “the side” to white supremacists like Manie is the colour bar setting the whites against the blacks and their feud over land and other resources. Consequently, the land to Manie is not merely natural resources or means of production, but his self-identification as the white minority ruler and landowner. When land is modified by the adjective “our”, this ownership “strengthened the inner sense of identity by offering external evidence of who a person really was”^[5]. Manie’s sister Marina’s rumination over their family farm is very telling. It is “useless ground, full of stones, you can do nothing with it. But it belongs to our family, nobody else, and there’s power in that” (9). Correspondingly, when the “black others” make demands on land,

Manie takes it as a challenge against himself and his anger naturally rises and explodes.

The vicious cycle of anger is steadily passed down from one generation to the next in the Swart family. When Manie exploits anger as the socialising tool to discipline his children, particularly his eldest son Anton, Anton has learnt to internalise this white anger as his own “Being-in-the-world”. In the end, Anton becomes the spitting image of his father in as much as he inherits not only his father’s anger-based racial attitude but also the former’s rejection to honour the promise. In the second chapter, by 1995 when Manie passed away, the democratic government of South Africa had already been established. Nevertheless, the “rule vs ruled” pattern still haunts people, and it is deeply burned into the collective unconsciousness of some white South Africans, including Anton. This is apparent in Anton’s conversation with his sister Amor when he reminisces his chance encounter with Lucas, Salome’s son. Anton’s negative comments about Lucas and his snarky tone give us a glimpse into his emotional state and provide a likely reason for his postponing to honour the Swart family’s promise. Simply put, Anton shares his father Manie’s anger-based radical attitude but takes a softer stance on the promise by passively delaying its fulfilment rather than downright denying it.

And even if we do all that, no guarantee it’ll make any difference. I saw that son of hers, Lukas, the other day. You know Pa paid for his schooling, because he’s supposedly so bright, but it turns out he still didn’t finish matric. Got into trouble somehow and dropped out. He’s working as a labourer on the farm. (116)

Anton’s rejection to honour the promise is seemingly just and well-grounded, and he even brings up one of the reasons his father used as further evidence to rationalize his breach of the promise, to show that it will be a total waste of time for the whites to show kindness and generosity to the Black South Africans. Lukas, in the eyes of Anton, did not cherish the hardly won opportunity of education, and by default he is unworthy of land ownership now. Nevertheless, the very fact that Lukas needed Manie’s financial aid to go to school speaks volumes about the disadvantageous position and the disfranchisement the Black South Africans under apartheid.

What’s written behind the lines is the fact that the white minority rule disproportionately distributed educational resources along the colour bar and made sure that when entering the labour market, the Blacks would not pose any threat to the whites in terms of educational levels and professional skills. As a result, hordes of African labour were driven to mines or farms to do labour-intensive work lacking both upward mobility and job security ^[6]. This is exactly the reason why Lukas, a high school dropout, could only go back to the farm to seek employment; this is also why Lukas’ father died in a gold mine when he was little. Meanwhile Anton dismisses the deprivation Lukas suffers at the hand of the racist education and employment systems, the destruction apartheid has brought upon traditional African family structures, and the continuous reproduction of unequal race relations that discriminatory policies have proliferated. Anton chooses to sneer at the underprivileged on his moral high ground as the ruling class and legitimises his betrayal of the promise and belittles the frustrations and struggles in life of the disadvantaged Blacks.

Manie and Anton’s emotional attribution behind their breach of the promise shows that anger is the emotional foundation of contemporary white racial attitude ^[7]. Starting from the rule of the National Party of South Africa in 1948 till the abolition of the apartheid in 1994, Christian National Education and white family education had indoctrinated white adolescents for over four decades. On the one hand, these institutions employ anger as an important socialising tool to discipline the white minors to learn to accept their designated roles in the hierarchy; on the other hand, they usurp anger as the basis for white racial attitude to justify the legitimacy of racism and safeguard their position as the ruling class. In the generational spread of the vicious cycle of anger, the white subjects tend to get angrier for a longer period and thus more violent, and all that simmering anger and violence are likely to eventually explode and backfire onto the subjects themselves. In *The Promise*, the Swarts’ family tragedy, especially Anton’s personal tragedy, is undoubtedly a living example of the destructive effects of the negative affect anger. Anger kills. Anger’s pent-up anger keeps intensifying until he feels utterly disillusioned and shoots himself dead after getting in a physical fight with his wife’s yoga instructor/lover. Amor’s comment on her brother’s suicide is, “All the force and fury of him, turned in and poured white-hot down that metal tube, aimed at the very centre of his life” (196).

4. Compassion: Keeping Promise as a Possibility of Reconciliation

The eighth century Indian Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva argues, “The aim of ethics is to end suffering. Anger is caused by ego and aims at revenge or to pass pain, that is, to cause suffering”,

whereas compassion shares the same objective of ethics, i.e., “to end suffering for all sentient beings”^[8]. In the Swart family, Anton and his youngest sister Amor are situated at the two affective poles: Anton represents vested interests of old South Africa and their use of anger, the negative affect, to sustain white minority rule, whereas Amor symbolises the force of the new South Africa and the possibility of partial racial reconciliation through compassion, the positive affect. The allegorical name Amor is of Latin origin meaning “love”. According to Dr Stephen G. Post, the founder of The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, “It is easy to think of love as an energy, the sum total of which defines the goodness of any society. The total love energy of a society is, for the most part, a measure of the everyday compassion and helping behaviours of ordinary people”^[9]. In other words, compassion is an important manifestation of love.

The word “compassion” comes from Latin, and it means “to suffer together”. It is a kind of generous, selfless, and altruistic love with positive affective energy, as it intends to realise one’s own worth and to help others alleviate their physical pain and mental anguish. In the novel, compassion is the emotion that has run through the process of Amor’s witnessing, spreading, and honouring of the promise, shaping the heroine along her life journey from an innocent 13-year-old girl to a determined 44-year-old woman. The four family funerals have documented her growing determination to keep the Swarts’ promise to Salome: At her mother’s funeral, the teenage girl Amor is sheepishly shy and easily shushed; nine years later at her father’s funeral, Amor bides her time as a grown woman to bring up the taboo subject of the promise and makes clear her resolve to see it through; again at her elder sister Astrid’s funeral, Amor cuts the chase and goes directly after her brother about the promise; in the end, at her brother’s funeral, Amor strikes a deal with her widowed daughter-in-law and finally puts Salome’s name on the deeds and makes the latter the de facto owner of the land, at the expense of her own inheritance. Amor’s compassionate and altruistic gesture, to some extent, has rebuilt the connection between the Black South Africans and the land, and enabled this disfranchised community to reclaim some sense of belonging to the South African society.

The meaning and worth of Amor’s compassion consists in acknowledging the other as equally important as the self. It transfers all of people’s interest in life from themselves to another, and it marks the shifting of the very centre of one’s personal life^[10]. Even Anton has noticed that his little sister has something in her unchanged but hard to pin down throughout the years, and kindness is her thing. Amor as a compassionate subject has strong intention to ease the pain, ameliorate or even end the suffering of the other. This complex other-regarding affect is characterized as carefully imagining the condition of the other, taking the other as one’s own, actively improving the other’s wellbeing, and having strong emotional reaction. The latter two features combined make compassion morally prescriptive and action-oriented vis-à-vis other altruistic emotions like pity or kindness. The highly charged emotional response of compassion forces the ethical subject to reconstruct and dissect the other’s suffering via vicarious imagination and then to transfer her burning desire to end the other’s misery into action. Furthermore, seeing the other as one’s own is the triggering point of compassion in the subject, and the springboard upon which the ethical subject jumps on to interfere with the problem at hand and share the other’s suffering.

The other’s suffering can be transmitted and felt via sight, hearing, and touch, which means the compassionate self needs to adopt the perspective of “co-seeing”, to listen attentively to the other’s suffering and to touch the wounded other to maximise her compassion within. “Co-seeing” means “I see the other, a foreign sensing living body. This seeing composes the beginning of the empathic connection, serving as a dual introduction, of the self to the self and of the other to the self”^[11]. This co-seeing is connecting the other with oneself and exposing each other’s vulnerability under the two-way gaze, and naturally a sense of benevolence shared by the self and the other is born. Nonetheless, in *The Promise*, the majority of white South Africans perceive themselves as racially superior and thus unwilling to take the Black South Africans as equals with emotions as raw as theirs. As a result, the white minority rulers cannot or will not imagine the pain and suffering of the oppressed in their mind’s eye. That’s why Galgut intentionally hides the African characters’ emotions away from readers, to reconstruct the African image in the whites’ “coloured” eye through literary means. However, Amor can see Salome and other fellow sufferers like herself because Amor has long been at the receiving end of neglect. “She’s used to being treated as a blur, a smudge at the edge of everybody’s vision” (48).

What’s more, listening attentively to others is another manifestation of Amor’s compassion. Nonjudgmental deep listening reflects not only the subject’s humility and tolerance, but also her understanding of and opening to the other. The act of listening can be therapeutic as it allows speakers to release their pressure and let out negative emotions. Many characters in *The Promise* are impressed

by Amor's deep listening and cannot help but confiding in her. Lastly, compassion will be completely activated through touch, for it brings the other's suffering and vulnerability directly in front of the self. This temporal and spatial proximity makes it impossible for the ethical self to turn away from others' pain and suffering. Amor's job as a nurse has extremely high affective value, in that she eases the pain of AIDS patients and brings solace to the weak. Judging from this, co-seeing, deep listening and touch are both the foundation for and the manifestation of compassion, which also shows the compassionate self can affect and be affected.

Compassion in the post-apartheid South Africa has political and social significance, since together with other virtues like kindness, forgiveness, and understanding, it constitutes the very core of the traditional South African Ubuntu philosophy, and Ubuntu is not only a traditional African value but also one of the founding principles of the democratic republic of South Africa [12]. No wonder from religious to secular leaders, from Archbishop Desmond Tutu to former President Thabo Mbeki, they all spare no effort to promote Ubuntu and try to make it the spiritual sustenance for the new South Africans. Ubuntu comes from the Nguni maxim "A person depends on other people to be a person" [13].

Unlike perceived Western individualism, Africans maintain that men are not born human, but instead gain humanity and become human in the process of socialisation and in the interaction between the self and the other and in their interaction with the community at large. Therefore, it is safe to say Ubuntu, in essence, is a philosophy of compassion and interdependency. As a champion for Ubuntu, Tutu argues that individuals are incomplete in nature unless they can actively gain and maintain compassionate ties with their society and culture. Respectively, in his autobiography, Tutu pleads with the South Africans to embrace Ubuntu and become the ideal citizens of the rainbow nation [14]. There has been extensive media coverage of the South Africa democratic government's effort to establish this traditional African philosophy as its political ideal, in place of the old order of apartheid and to expedite racial reconciliation and nation rebuilding. By the same token, compassion, at the root of the Ubuntu philosophy, is bound to exert positive affective energy in people's interracial and cross-cultural communications, and to facilitate peace and understanding among communities.

5. Conclusion

Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Promise* is an emotionally charged saga and poignant allegory of contemporary South Africa. The affective intensity it releases can not only strike a chord with readers and motivate us to have genuine feelings for South Africa and its people, but also teach us to reflect on the power we possess to affect and be affected in face of the many challenges in our postcolonial condition, and this power to change is where the politics of affect truly lies. Behind the white Swart family's making, breaking, and honouring of the promise are the hidden emotional codes written by South Africa's gender, racial and class politics. Consequently, decoding the Swarts' shame, anger and compassion can navigate readers through the dark continent we call emotion and bring us back in line with our ideals.

Galgut takes the moral bankruptcy, deprivation, and salvation of one white South African family as a metaphor to critique the nation's complex racial relations and knotted historical and political issues. The long overdue fulfilment of the white Swart family's promise to their African maid after thirty years is synonymous with the many problems confronted by the democratic republic of South Africa on its thorny road of reparation and reconciliation. Moreover, the denouement of the novel, Amor's use of the positive affect compassion to bring unto herself and others a sense of closure, promises a possibility of change and hope for all, as compassion-based African Ubuntu philosophy has the potential to be the political capital and cultural totem for the new South Africa.

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