

**THE PERSISTENCE OF MODERNISM IN DAMON GALGUT'S *IN A STRANGE
ROOM, ARCTIC SUMMER AND THE PROMISE.***

Bronwen Caryl Rees

Supervised by Dr Sofia Kostelac

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



Bronwen Caryl Rees (Student number: 455949)

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the persistence and evolution of modernist aesthetics in contemporary South African literature through Damon Galgut's *In a Strange Room*, *Arctic Summer*, and *The Promise*. I argue that Galgut's novels exemplify a global modernism that transcends its historical and geographical origins, embodying a cosmopolitan spirit of critique. By employing modernist techniques like fragmented narratives, shifting perspectives, and self-reflexive narration, Galgut's work engages with the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa while contributing to a broader, transnational literary discourse.

Through his exploration of subjectivity, alienation, and the tension between personal and collective histories, Galgut's fiction reveals the ongoing relevance of modernism in addressing questions of identity and belonging. *Arctic Summer*'s meditation on E.M. Forster's life situates Galgut within a broader modernist tradition, while interrogating the limitations of that tradition in representing marginalised identities. In doing so, Galgut's novels enact a dual movement: they acknowledge modernism's historical constraints while demonstrating its potential to amplify voices from previously peripheral literary spaces.

Drawing on classical modernist theories (Lukács, Williams, Jameson) and new modernist studies (Detloff, Friedman, Walkowitz), this study examines how Galgut's work critiques and reanimates modernism as a dynamic, living aesthetic. His novels invite readers to reconsider how expanding modernism beyond a narrow canonical framework creates space for ongoing reflection and reformation. I argue that the modernist ethos of questioning fixed meaning remains vital in contemporary global literature as a tool for exploring existential tensions - between self and society, hope and futility, connection and isolation.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the redefinition of modernism as a global and evolving aesthetic. By examining Galgut's work, I demonstrate how contemporary literature can both extend and critique modernist traditions, addressing historical trauma, shifting identities, and the search for belonging. This study affirms the continued relevance of modernist aesthetics as a flexible, dynamic framework that enables contemporary literature to confront the legacies of history and the possibilities of a more inclusive, cosmopolitan future.

Key words: South African literature, Damon Galgut, modernism, cosmopolitanism, post-apartheid, historical trauma, subjectivity, self-representation

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INTRODUCTION

South African Fatigue

In a 2010 interview, Damon Galgut described experiencing “South African fatigue”, a weariness with the persistent focus on politics, history, and national identity in the country’s literary landscape (Armitstead). He suggested that this fatigue stems from a continual engagement with the same set of questions—a cycle that can stifle creative exploration. Galgut’s sentiment echoes a broader critical discourse on the limitations of the national framework in South African literature.

Helena van Urk critiques the notion of ‘good’ South African literature as narrowly defined by its engagement with themes of land, racism, and national identity. She argues that white characters in such narratives “have not made an inch of socio-cultural, economic or political progress over decades of democracy, and yet continue to define what South African literature ‘should be about’ today” (van Urk 12). While these concerns remain vital, van Urk warns that the emphasis on these thematic preoccupations risks reinforcing a prescriptive approach, leaving little space for formal or aesthetic experimentation. This scholarly tendency to equate ‘South Africanness’ with fixed social and political concerns can inadvertently foreclose alternative modes of storytelling and ways of conceptualising identity.

While Galgut’s remarks reflect a genuine frustration with prescriptive themes, it is important not to overstate the rigidity of the South African literary landscape. Writers such as Ivan Vladislavic, Imraan Coovadia, Nthikeng Mohlele, and Michiel Heyns have consistently experimented with form, voice, and genre. The burgeoning interest in speculative and genre fiction likewise points to a field more diverse than Galgut’s characterisation may suggest. Rather than attributing ‘fatigue’ solely to local thematic constraints, it may be more accurate—

following scholars like Kostelac—to view such fatigue as shaped by international publishing expectations, which often reward familiar narratives of race, trauma, and nationhood.

By starting with Galgut's articulation of fatigue and van Urk's recognition of the pressures placed on South African literature, my study explores how contemporary authors, through formal innovation, challenge and expand the boundaries of national storytelling. This approach not only affirms the evolving nature of South African literature but also reveals how experimentation itself can become a mode of political and ideological inquiry.

Modernism, as it appears in this study, refers to a literary mode characterised by formal experimentation, fragmentation, heightened subjectivity, and a self-conscious response to modernity's dislocations. Global modernism, a more recent theoretical extension, expands this framework beyond its Euro-American roots to encompass diverse temporal, geographic, and cultural experiences. In Galgut's work, both traditions converge—recasting South African identity through a modernist lens that transcends national boundaries.

Much like the modernists of the early twentieth century, who rejected rigid cultural assumptions in favour of experimentation and subjective experience, Galgut's work offers a way to engage with South African literature beyond the constraints of the national framework. The prevailing critical paradigms, while necessary, often seemed to impose order on something inherently fluid. Galgut's use of modernist techniques—fragmentation, unreliable narration, and temporal dislocation—confronts the uncertainties of post-apartheid South Africa. His novels demonstrate how modernism persists as a vital critical framework, offering tools to explore identity, alienation, and the lingering impact of historical trauma in contemporary South African literature.

At the heart of this investigation lies the question of belonging—both in terms of South Africa’s literary identity and the individuals within its narratives. Post-apartheid, post-transition, and navigating decolonial currents, South African literature resists easy categorisation. While often framed as being beyond transition, the country remains in a state of negotiation, suspended between past and future. This liminal position demands a critical and self-aware engagement with literary production. Modernist ambiguity and irony provide a means to view South African literature not only in national and local contexts but also within a broader global framework.

In Galgut’s novels, characters often find themselves caught in the tension between subjective experience and external reality. Whether examining the fractured attachment to post-apartheid South Africa or the individual crisis of self in the face of historical and social constraints, his characters grapple with the contradictions between their inner lives and the world around them. This tension, inherent in modernism, reflects the broader human condition—one defined by the fluid, multiple, and evolving nature of identity. Through modernist formal experimentation, Galgut’s work provides a critical lens for understanding how the subjective self confronts an often disorienting and alienating external reality, whether in the context of post-apartheid South Africa or a more universal exploration of selfhood under societal pressures.

One of the key texts in my studies is *In a Strange Room*, which exemplifies how literature can tenderly explore the ephemerality of human existence. Galgut delves into one of the fundamental challenges of identity formation: understanding oneself in relation to anyone or anything. In *In a Strange Room*, the protagonist’s journey reveals the difficulty of navigating a fragmented sense of self in a post-transitional society. Rather than adhering to a notion of a unified identity, Galgut advocates for an exploration of the self as a mosaic—fluid, evolving, and always in flux. This concept extends beyond the South African context, offering valuable insights into the universal struggle for self-definition in the face of historical, social, and political constraints. Through the genre of biofiction, as seen in *Arctic Summer*, Galgut pushes

the boundaries between fiction and history, questioning the extent to which an author can capture the truth of both the self and the past. In *The Promise*, while his stylistic experimentation shifts, the novel continues to unravel multiple, highly subjective accounts of reality, exploring the ambivalence of belonging and alienation. These novels collectively interrogate what it means to be human—an inquiry that lies at the heart of my exploration of identity formation and the tension between belonging and alienation. The persistence of modernism in Galgut's work underscores the necessity of self-awareness in navigating modernity—responding to and engaging with the complexities of contemporary existence (Walkowitz 6).

Modernism persists in contemporary South African literature because its themes—such as the tension between subjective experience and external reality—offer essential tools for exploring the complexities of identity, historical trauma, and alienation in post-apartheid South Africa. Through formal experimentation, Galgut's work exemplifies how modernist techniques remain relevant in navigating the nation's evolving socio-cultural dynamics and unresolved struggles with its past. However, his engagement with modernism also extends beyond the South African context, as seen in *Arctic Summer*, which examines the life of E.M. Forster. This dissertation investigates how modernism provides a critical framework for understanding the post-apartheid condition, offering insight into the ways South African literature grapples with identity, belonging, and the lingering scars of historical trauma. By focusing on Galgut's novels, this study seeks to illuminate the persistence of modernism in contemporary South African literary discourse, expanding its boundaries within a context of decolonisation and transition.

Madelyn Detloff argues that many features of canonical modernism persist in the work of contemporary writers wrestling with the problem of representing historical trauma, necessitating exploration into how the past continues to shape the present. The connection

between modernism and the South African context lies in navigating the liminal space we find ourselves in post-apartheid, post-colonial, and post-transitional South Africa. The trauma of apartheid may have passed, but its remnants continue to permeate the present, and this is where modernist aesthetics offer the tools to grapple with world-shaping and world-shattering events. Grounded in modernist theory, this study investigates the pervasive use of modernist ideas, techniques, and philosophies within contemporary South African writing, particularly in Damon Galgut's work. Galgut's novels serve as a lens for examining the persistence of modernism within South Africa's complex socio-political landscape, where the challenges of transition, difference, and newness remain central concerns.

The role of modernism in South African literature has been explored by scholars such as Neil Lazarus, Rick de Villiers, and Derek Attridge. Lazarus emphasises the multiplicity of perspectives within postcolonial literature, advocating a nuanced understanding of South African modernism and its distinct contributions. De Villiers expands this discussion by tracing modernism's global reach, highlighting the importance of transculturation in understanding South African modernism in a broader context (de Villiers, *Introduction 2*). Attridge focuses on the ethical engagement required in reading modernist novels, a concept mirrored in Galgut's work, where formal experimentation compels active reader participation in navigating the intellectual and ethical dimensions of the text. This dissertation extends these discussions by examining the specific ways in which Galgut's modernist techniques challenge conventional literary frameworks, offering new insights into the evolving nature of post-apartheid literature. In doing so, it positions South African writing within broader transnational conversations about identity, form, and the afterlives of modernism.

Damon Galgut

Damon Galgut's literary journey began at a young age, but his path to recognition as a credible South African author was not without challenges. His third novel, *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, marked a turning point, earning him credibility within the literary community. The novel, featuring the alienated protagonist Patrick Winter, explores themes of societal reintegration after military service. Galgut himself stated that the novel was written with a conscious sense of moral responsibility, as he sought to engage in literary redress for his country (Kostelac, *Damon Galgut and the Critical Reception* 56).

Twelve years later, *The Good Doctor* further solidified Galgut's reputation, earning a place on the shortlist for the 2003 Man Booker Prize. Described as a "parable of indolence and enthusiasm under the African sun", *The Good Doctor* is praised for its authenticity, avoiding clichés while offering a stark portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa through the lens of a rural hospital (Hope). While Galgut's body of work spans diverse themes and settings, these novels situate him as a prominent figure in contemporary South African literature, engaging with the nation's literary tradition and aligning with the criteria for 'good' South African literature, as identified by scholars like van Urk.

However, navigating both local literary expectations and global readerships contributed to a pivotal shift in Galgut's writing. With the publication of *In a Strange Room* and *Arctic Summer*, he moved away from overtly South African contexts, embracing a more experimental approach to writing the self. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Galgut reflected on this shift, noting that local writers felt constrained by a rigid set of moral expectations that imposed repetitive themes upon them (Tepper). Travel, for Galgut, provided a temporary escape from these constraints, allowing him to remain connected to his South African roots while avoiding the "usual set of South African questions" that often feel "tedious" in a literary sense (Tepper).

These novels allowed Galgut to move beyond direct engagement with South Africa's historical and socio-political struggles, instead exploring broader questions of identity and selfhood. Yet, with the publication of *The Promise* in 2021, and his subsequent Man Booker Prize win, Galgut's return to South African themes resonated with both local and international audiences. While widely celebrated, the novel's reception among South African academics has prompted critical discussions about the cultural authority of the Booker Prize and its influence on South African literature. In *English Studies in Africa* (Vol. 66, Issue 2), Sofia Kostelac highlights that while the essays in the issue are intellectually diverse, they share concerns about how *The Promise* engages with—and subverts—the expectations of metropolitan readers, using the very tropes it critiques to establish its South African identity (2).

Although *The Promise* draws upon familiar themes such as racial injustice, land claims, and the *plaasroman*, it distinguishes itself through its experimental narrative style and its focus on the heightened interiority of its characters. These formal qualities disrupt traditional novelistic conventions and contribute to what Rick de Villiers and others have identified as a resurgence of modernist impulses in contemporary South African fiction. As I will demonstrate in my analysis, *The Promise* both reflects and critiques the expectations of the Western literary canon, positioning itself as an innovative work that engages with South Africa's complex historical and socio-political landscape in new and meaningful ways—and perhaps with an ironic twist, given the very structures it challenges.

All three novels, as I will argue, embody the heightened self-consciousness central to modernism and its cosmopolitan 'spirit of critique', a term explored by Walkowitz in her analysis of modernist literature's global dimensions. Each novel cultivates a critical awareness of the tension between belonging and alienation, a pivotal dynamic in identity formation. I demonstrate that Galgut's departure from the hegemonic framework of South African

literature, particularly in these novels, offers a compelling lens through which to study the persistence of modernism. His redeployment of modernist formal experimentation becomes a way to interrogate selfhood, authorship, and aesthetic tradition, both within and beyond the national frame.

The conceptual framework of this study approaches Galgut's work through two interconnected avenues: first, by positioning him as a persistent modernist whose writing retains and reworks key formal and philosophical tenets of the tradition; and second, by examining how his aesthetic is inflected by a cosmopolitan ethos, one that aligns with modernism's critical disposition and resistance to essentialist identity frameworks. These inquiries are grounded in both global and local scholarly conversations, including recent work by Neil Lazarus, Michael Chapman, Rick de Villiers, and Derek Attridge. Their insights form part of a growing body of research into the place of modernism within South African literary discourse, a context this study actively engages with and seeks to extend.

Galgut as a Persistent Modernist

Damon Galgut can be considered a persistent modernist in South African literature due to his continued use of modernist aesthetic principles beyond their conventional Euro-American context. Despite the historical and geographical disparities, his novels uphold modernist themes of formal experimentation, heightened self-consciousness, and the fragmentation of identity. These elements challenge reductive understandings of modernism as historically and geographically bounded, illustrating instead its enduring adaptability across diverse literary terrains—including the shifting socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa.

The first key facet of Galgut's aesthetic is the ambivalence present in both modernist literature and his work. Modernist writers, grappling with historical trauma, questioned whether anything

could truly be remade. Similarly, Galgut's novels engage with the complexities of writing about the 'new' South Africa, often suggesting a degree of futility in the possibility of redemption through aesthetic forms. His desire to escape rigid moral gestures reflects the modernist rebellion against traditional narrative forms and formulaic structures.

In the wake of the Great War, modernist writers sought to capture a world marked by chaos and violence, leading them to experiment with form as a means of expressing the fragmented and chaotic nature of modern existence. This impulse for formal innovation resonates in Galgut's *In a Strange Room*, *Arctic Summer*, and *The Promise*, where fragmented narratives and the disintegration of the self mirror the disillusionment and historical trauma of post-apartheid South Africa.

Galgut's work embodies modernist aesthetics through a self-conscious exploration of the 'self', a concept that modernist writers aimed to deconstruct. Whereas pre-modernist literature often depicted identity as stable and continuous, modernism shattered this perception, presenting the self as fluid and fragmented. In his exploration of apartheid's historical traumas, Galgut extends this modernist tradition, using experimental techniques to navigate fractured subjectivities. His work thus exemplifies the persistence of modernism in post-apartheid South African literature.

This persistence of modernism in Galgut's work finds resonance with a growing body of South African literary criticism that seeks to trace the influence of modernism within local traditions. Scholars such as Michael Chapman and David Attwell have examined how modernist forms re-emerge in South African literature as a response to crises of representation, especially in the aftermath of apartheid. Stefan Helgesson, in his work on transnationalism and Southern African literature, emphasises the need to understand modernism not as a fixed canon but as a mobile and uneven structure shaped by local print cultures and global flows. Rick de Villiers similarly

argues for a reassessment of South African modernism's place in the global literary economy, suggesting that authors like Galgut demonstrate how modernist techniques can be redeployed to engage with both national trauma and global literary networks. By situating Galgut within this scholarly framework, this study argues that his work participates in, rather than merely inherits, the modernist tradition—transforming its formal logics to meet the representational challenges of post-transitional South Africa.

Formal Experimentation

I have positioned Galgut's engagement in formal experimentation as a core part of his persistent modernist aesthetic. This experimentation manifests in his exploration of autobiography and biofiction (a genre blending fictional elements with real-life figures or events), expanding the genre to accommodate diverse voices and fluid senses of self. Like modernist predecessors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, Galgut challenges the stability of self-representation, treating identity not as fixed but as a fragmented, recursive, and evolving construct. Just as language can be revisited and reformed, so too does the formulation of self become a process that requires navigation and dialogue.

In *In a Strange Room* and *Arctic Summer*, self-representation is inherently retrospective, dealing with the complexities of capturing an accurate reflection of oneself and one's experiences. The narrative voice becomes a complicated, contradictory feature in these experiments with self-representation, as the self is continually reshaped across different stages of life. This dynamic process produces a fragmented subjectivity—what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have described in life-writing theory as a “postmodern self”: a self that is performative, decentred, and shaped by narrative context. While this framework is useful for understanding Galgut's experiments with autobiographical form, the fractured self in his work is more convincingly situated within a modernist aesthetic, where fragmentation emerges not

as playful relativism but as a response to dislocation, trauma, and historical rupture. In this regard, Leigh Gilmore's figure of the '*metic*'—a subject caught between belonging and estrangement—offers a particularly resonant metaphor. The *metic*, as Gilmore describes, occupies a liminal space shaped by personal and collective histories, yet exists within the constructed realm of narrative. Similarly, Galgut's narrators inhabit interstitial spaces between past and present, self and other, author and character—staging identity as an ongoing negotiation between intimacy and alienation, rooted in the legacy of modernist self-consciousness.

The formal experimentation in *The Promise*, while distinct in genre, continues modernist engagements with subjectivity seen in Galgut's previous two novels. It is a story of a South African farm across four decades, and the novel enacts a form of historical recursion, not merely repeating history but actively reshaping its representation. Through fluid narrative consciousness, hyper-omniscience, and ironic commentary directly addressed to the active reader, Galgut captures both the Swart family's historical trauma and the broader process of reinterpreting the past.

As the author of *The Promise*, Galgut himself operates as a *metic* figure—not just in the personal sense of belonging yet remaining at a distance, but also in his role as an intermediary between history and fiction. While he remains rooted in the South African contexts he portrays, his narrative strategies transcend national and genre boundaries. The merging of formal experimentation with a cosmopolitan ethos allows Galgut to cross not only geopolitical but also epistemological borders—reimagining what South African fiction can do and how it can engage with both local and global histories of trauma, identity, and transformation.

The Spirit of Critique

Galgut's aesthetic aligns with a cosmopolitan strain of modernism, which emerged in reaction to the inward-looking traditions of the Victorian era. Modernist writers sought, as Walkowitz puts it, "to measure various experiences of thinking and feeling globally, especially in the contexts of imperialism, patriotism, and world war" (Walkowitz 5). This cosmopolitan 'spirit of critique' extends modernism beyond its European origins, interrogating national belonging and fostering new configurations of selfhood across personal and transnational contexts. Galgut's novels embody this ethos, offering forms of introspection and estrangement that enable readers to reimagine identity and history through a global lens.

Cosmopolitanism demands an ongoing re-evaluation of the self in relation to the world, aligning with Foucault's view of critique as a dynamic exploration of man's historical mode of being and the autonomy of the self (Foucault 8). I use Walkowitz's concept of cosmopolitanism to demonstrate how Galgut's work resists narrow national boundaries, embracing fluid, dynamic identities that transcend localised contexts. This recursive cosmopolitanism allows for a complex and ambivalent sense of self, vital in resisting the inertia of 'South African Fatigue'.

In my analysis of Galgut's novels, I pair Detloff's insights on modernism's persistence into the twentieth century (Detloff 8) with Walkowitz's claims about the cosmopolitan ethos that underscores modernist experimentation (Walkowitz 5). When read through this dual lens, Galgut's work does not assert the global 'relevance' of South African literature in any singular sense, but instead positions it within overlapping terrains of mutuality and exchange, as Sarah Nuttall describes (Nuttall 11). These terrains offer a "complex temporality of past, present and future", where forms of literary experimentation become tools for reckoning with fractured histories and mutable identities (Nuttall 11).

At the same time, as Rick de Villiers cautions, the uncritical application of Western theoretical frameworks to South African texts risks perpetuating a “wilful historical blindness” (de Villiers 2). Such approaches may overlook the cultural and political specificities of non-Western contexts, inadvertently reinforcing colonial assumptions or marginalising indigenous epistemologies. The aesthetics of modernist fragmentation and abstraction—while powerful—may not always align with decolonial imperatives of cultural reclamation, linguistic revitalisation, or narrative clarity (de Villiers 3). These tensions are crucial to acknowledge when positioning Galgut’s work in transnational frameworks.

I argue, however, that Galgut’s novels are themselves deeply reflexive about these tensions. Rather than presenting stable or singular accounts of selfhood, his fiction foregrounds the contradictions, frictions, and ambiguities inherent in identity formation. His narrative strategies invite the reader to participate in this interpretive instability, allowing for a reading experience that mirrors the ethical complexity of living within and across histories. In this way, Galgut’s work contributes to a literary space that remains open to paradox, rupture, and renewal—qualities that reflect not only the spirit of modernist critique but also the evolving demands of a postcolonial, transnational literary imagination.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 examines modernism’s influence on South African literature through the theoretical frameworks of Georg Lukács, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson. These scholars provide insights into modernism’s ideological roots, its socio-political engagement, and its response to global economic structures. Modernism, as defined by these theorists, represents a radical break from traditional forms and values, responding to the dislocations of modern life—an essential lens for understanding its role in South African literature.

Building on these theories, I explore the persistence of modernism in Damon Galgut's writing. While Galgut embraces modernist aesthetics, his writing departs from canonical norms, especially as it navigates the challenges of newness, difference, and ongoing transition in the South African context. Galgut's post-apartheid novels offer a nuanced modernism that addresses apartheid's legacy and South Africa's ongoing socio-political transformation, blending modernist experimentation with the complexities of national identity formation.

To expand the modernist discourse, I incorporate Madelyn Detloff's concept of *The Persistence of Modernism* and Susan Stanford Friedman's theory of "Periodizing Modernism", both of which suggest that modernism is not a finite historical period but an ongoing project. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, in her advocacy for a cosmopolitan modernist literary style in *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, further emphasises the potential for modernism to transcend national borders and engage with global contexts. These perspectives support the reading of Galgut's fiction as both cosmopolitan and rooted—embedded in South African realities while engaging broader questions of identity and representation.

At this point, I introduce Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, which addresses the tension between universal human rights and cultural diversity. While Appiah provides a useful ethical foundation, his framework is supplemented by Chielozona Eze's concept of "empathic cosmopolitanism" which privileges shared vulnerability and affective engagement (Eze 01). Eze's emphasis on empathy and shared experience provides a richer framework for understanding Galgut's narrative strategies and his engagement with both the self and the other in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theme of belonging and alienation in *In a Strange Room*, examining how Galgut's narrative confronts the complexities of identity and place in post-apartheid South Africa, even as the novel unfolds largely outside the country. The protagonist, Damon, embarks

on three journeys that serve as a profound exploration of the fragmented self and its attempts to establish connections, both with others and within the broader socio-political context that remains influenced by South Africa's past. Damon's experiences reflect the alienation many South Africans face as they attempt to reconcile their past with the demands of the present and the uncertainties of the future, regardless of geographical location.

Drawing from modernist themes of subjectivity and alienation, I analyse how *In a Strange Room* manifests contemporary modernist concerns. The novel's fragmented narrative structure mirrors Damon's internal conflict as he wrestles with the tension between national belonging and personal detachment. Using Leigh Gilmore's and Philippe Lejeune's study of autobiography, I explore how Galgut's blending of memoir and fiction destabilises the self, reflecting the modernist preoccupation with the instability of identity.

Building on Gilmore and Lejeune, I argue that Galgut constructs a space where identity is fluid rather than fixed. Damon's placelessness—his disconnection from both physical surroundings and emotional self—becomes a metaphor for South Africa's broader existential crisis. The novel's formal experimentation mirrors the subjective experience of crossing both internal and external borders in a society still reckoning with its fractured past.

By focusing on Damon's internal struggles alongside the geographical borders he traverses, this chapter situates his journey within the larger discourse of self-formation in post-apartheid South Africa. In a landscape where identity remains in flux, Galgut presents selfhood as an ongoing negotiation—one shaped by historical traumas, personal shortcomings, and the continual search for belonging.

In Chapter 3, I turn to *Arctic Summer*, a novel that portrays the complex interplay of belonging and alienation through the experiences of E.M. Forster's protagonist, Morgan. Set against a

rapidly changing cultural landscape, the novel highlights Morgan's struggle to reconcile his identity with the expectations and limitations imposed by both society and his personal desires. Galgut's portrayal of Forster's character in his fictionalised biography uses modernist aesthetics to address issues of subjectivity and the self-formation that comes with self-awareness and cultural engagement. Rather than presenting identity as a fixed construct, *Arctic Summer* frames self-formation as an ongoing process, shaped by both personal introspection and external cultural forces.

The formal experimentation that Galgut employs in *Arctic Summer* further underscores the persistent influence of modernism in his work. This chapter draws upon the theories of Detloff, Friedman, and Walkowitz, whose work on modernist aesthetics helps frame the text within a cosmopolitan modernist tradition—one that moves beyond national boundaries to explore transnational subjectivities and shifting modes of identity. Through this lens, *Arctic Summer* reveals the extent to which Forster's selfhood is shaped by cross-cultural encounters and the broader historical forces at play.

Building on this, I explore the homosexual ethos in the novel, as articulated by Trengove-Jones, particularly in relation to how Galgut engages with Forster's queerness within the constraints of his historical moment. Rather than presenting sexuality as a stable identity, Galgut's modernist techniques emphasise the fluid, often contradictory nature of desire and self-expression. This is reinforced through Galgut's nuanced narrative voice, which carefully navigates the tensions between Morgan's outward conformity and his inner desires, highlighting the psychological depth of his repression and self-awareness.

These theoretical insights reveal the ethical dimensions of modernism in Galgut's work, as well as its limitations in fully representing marginalised experiences. While modernist aesthetics offer a means to explore individual subjectivity, they also raise questions about how queer

identity is framed within a predominantly Eurocentric literary tradition. By engaging with Forster's personal and artistic struggles, *Arctic Summer* interrogates the boundaries of representation, challenging both historical and literary conventions that have long constrained non-normative identities.

Chapter 4 focuses on *The Promise*, Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel, and examines how it continues his exploration of modernist aesthetics while introducing the powerful tool of humour to unpack the contradictions inherent in post-apartheid South African identity and history. Unlike the introspective and melancholic tone of *In a Strange Room* or the formal restraint of *Arctic Summer*, *The Promise* employs irony and dark humour to expose both personal and societal failures, particularly in the post-apartheid context.

Through the lens of Kierkegaard's theory of humour and irony as existential attitudes, I argue that Galgut uses these devices not just for comic relief but as a critical mechanism for unmasking the absurdity of human existence. The shifting, omniscient narration, often intrusive and irreverent, deepens this effect by destabilising reader expectations, aligning with modernist techniques of defamiliarisation and scepticism toward fixed meaning. This shift in tone also mirrors a South African reality in which cycles of political disillusionment, fractured relationships, and existential isolation persist despite promises of change.

The novel's exploration of irony and humour, alongside its meditation on meaning, faith, and existence, ties directly to the ideas of critical cosmopolitanism. By questioning the boundaries of representation and exposing the limits of national mythologies—particularly the fragile ideals of reconciliation and progress in post-apartheid South Africa—*The Promise* reflects a cosmopolitan impulse to interrogate whose perspectives shape historical narratives and how identity is continually reconstituted in a fractured society.

Taken together, these chapters argue that Galgut's fiction reinterprets modernist aesthetics within a South African and postcolonial context. His novels reflect an evolving, contextually grounded form of modernism that, as Rick de Villiers suggests, functions not merely as an aesthetic mode but as a critical engagement with South Africa's complex cultural and historical landscape (de Villiers, *Introduction* 2). Rather than asserting a universal 'relevance' for South African literature, this study positions Galgut's work within intersecting local and global conversations—what Sarah Nuttall describes as “terrains of mutuality”—where subjectivity is continuously negotiated and literary form becomes a space for ethical and imaginative exploration.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to a growing body of scholarship exploring how modernism persists and transforms in post-transitional South African writing. Galgut's fiction exemplifies the possibilities of a reflexive, cosmopolitan modernism—one that foregrounds uncertainty, resists closure, and challenges literary traditions through formal experimentation. By employing modernist strategies alongside a cosmopolitan ethos, Galgut interrogates the entanglement of personal and collective histories, offering literature as a space for ethical reflection and imaginative transformation in an increasingly fragmented world.

CHAPTER 1: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 The Ideology of Modernism

I will map the foundational theories of modernism from scholars such as Georg Lukács, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson which are essential for understanding the pervasive influence of modernist tendencies in South African literature and their reflections of complex socio-political landscapes.

In his essay, “The Ideology of Modernism”, Georg Lukács critiques the dominance of modernist anti-realism in contemporary literature (for Lukács, the early to mid-20th century), advocating a reconsideration of bourgeois realism. He warns that an overemphasis on “formal matters can lead to serious misunderstanding of the character of an artist’s work.” (Lukács 19) Lukács uses James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar* as examples, arguing that although both use similar stylistic techniques like stream-of-consciousness, their works diverge fundamentally due to their different worldviews—Joyce’s dynamic and developmental perspective contrasts with Mann’s more static, sensational outlook (19). For Lukács, style is inseparable from content: the artist’s ideological worldview shapes both their intentions and their style (19).

Lukács distinguishes between the realist belief in man as “*zoon politikon*, a social animal” and the modernist conception of man as solitary and asocial (19-20). He contrasts traditional realism, which portrays characters interacting meaningfully with their surroundings, with modernism’s focus on ontological solitariness. Modernist literature often portrays a hero lacking personal history, emphasising a negation of history and a static view of human existence. Man is a hero, “strictly confined within the limits of his own experience” and the hero “himself is without personal history” (21). This means that man “does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it” (21).

This ontological solitariness links to Lukács' notion of potentiality in modernist writing. He differentiates between abstract and concrete potentiality—opposing yet interdependent forces “rooted in life itself” (21). Modernist subjectivism, often oscillating between melancholy and fascination, reflects an ambivalent engagement with reality. This theme of existential tension is central to my analysis of modernism's persistence in Galgut's novels.

Lukács acknowledges that realistic literature, aiming to reflect reality truthfully, must explore “both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings”, especially in extreme situations (23). However, modernism challenges this principle: if modernist literature views the ““human condition”” is one of solitariness, incapable of meaningful relationships, the boundaries between abstract and concrete potentiality blur (24). The disintegration of personality in modernist literature is mirrored by a disintegration of the outer world, with a recurring theme of the “negation of outward reality” (25). He identifies the use of stream-of-consciousness techniques in Joyce, Faulkner, and Beckett to illustrate the intensified attenuation of reality in modernist literature. Lukács points out that attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality “are thus interdependent: the stronger the one, the stronger the other” (26).

Lukács critiques modernist literature's fixation on psychopathology, linking it to “a desire to escape from the reality of capitalism” (36). He argues that modernist ideology “asserts the unalterability of outward reality”, rendering human activity impotent and devoid of meaning (36). His analysis of Franz Kafka's work as embodying this impotence - particularly Kafka's portrayal of characters paralysed “in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances”—demonstrates how modernism evokes “primitive awe” through its engagement with hostile realities (36). Lukács identifies this disintegration of personality in modernist literature as an ideological goal, reflecting the broader societal disintegration at its emotional core (37).

The essay expands by incorporating Walter Benjamin's philosophical insights into allegory as a means of transcendence, suggesting that modernist allegory's failure to achieve transcendence exposes its paradoxical nature. Allegory becomes a means of highlighting the corruption of the world, contributing to the dissolution of aesthetics and, ultimately, the destruction of traditional literary forms (40-43). Lukács concludes that modernist literature, rather than enriching art, leads to its negation (45).

Lukács perspective, I would argue, deepens the study of modernism by contextualising it historically, emphasising economic, political, and cultural influences. Lukács highlights the limitations of modernist anti-realism by advocating for a return to bourgeois realism, which he believes is essential for portraying concrete human experiences and social contexts in literature, thus critiquing modernism's tendency to negate realism. Furthermore, Lukács contends that modernist literature's portrayal of humanity as solitary and isolated, its disintegration of external reality, and its obsession with psychopathology reflect a broader ideological limitation, as they hinder the exploration of meaningful human relationships, socio-political contexts, and the communication of significant themes within literary works. Lukács lays a strong foundation for understanding Williams' call to move beyond a narrow view of modernism. Jameson extends this idea by stressing the need to explore how modernist works from diverse contexts intersect. Lukács's call for critical engagement that transcends formal analysis, prompts an exploration of ideological and philosophical dimensions which are inherent within texts. He underscores the role of ideology in shaping modernist works, providing insights into their political and social dimensions during upheaval.

What is useful for my study from Lukács's essay is his insistence that writing as an ideology presents the writer's conscious views about life and the problems of his time. He argues that modernist writers are not able to reply to the question of ideology because their writing glorifies form and style and does not trace the roots of distortion as originate in society. In a South

African context, it is essential to critically evaluate whether Galgut's formal experimentation effectively captures and addresses the lived experiences and societal realities unique to South Africa, ensuring that it contributes meaningfully to the broader discourse on the country's socio-political landscape. I suggest that while Lukács criticises modernism, he highlights a key feature of modernist writing, which is the inability to realistically portray the world-shattering and world-shaping events that contemporary writers (in the present day) face. I will demonstrate that perhaps the modernist response to the question of ideology lies in their focus on form and style, a possibility that Jameson outlines in more detail. With the dissolution of coherent universal beliefs within society, there is understandably a shift inward as a means of trying to make sense of the self in relation to anyone or anything.

Williams builds on Lukács's critique of modernism's fixation on form by challenging the narrow, elitist construction of the modernist canon. In his essay, "When Was Modernism?", first presented as a lecture in March 1987, Williams critiques the tendency to enshrine a selective group of writers and qualities as the definitive markers of modernism. Williams, a prominent cultural critic, and theorist, argues against what he terms "the new conformists" who, in his view, have oversimplified and sanitised the complexity of modernist literature. He sought to expose modernism's definitional influence on the present as a "dominant and misleading ideology" (Williams 32). The term 'modern', as highlighted by Williams, begins to appear as "more or less synonymous with 'now' in the late sixteenth century" yet by the 1980's modernism no longer referred to the contemporary (32). Modernism became fixed on "the machinery of selective tradition" which prioritises an "'absolute modern'" period between 1890-1940 in which a set of writers, phenomena, and qualities form the characteristic that define that moment (32). Williams argues that this "highly selected version of the modern... offers to appropriate the whole of modernity" (34). He goes on to argue that we "have only to review the names in the real history to see the open ideologizing which permits the selection"

(34) The likes of Joyce, Apollinaire and Beckett were preferred over Gogol, Flaubert, and Dickens in this context¹.

Like Lukács, Williams resists the idea that modernism is purely a formalist or experimental exercise, detached from social and political concerns. He argues that understanding modernism requires grappling with the material realities of the early 20th century—including the impact of World War I, economic disruptions, and shifting social structures. Williams highlights the importance of considering “the relations of production of the artists themselves in the centres of metropolitan dominance,” urging scholars to explore the political dimensions of modernist works beyond their stylistic innovations (35). He draws attention to the voices of marginalised or overlooked artists, suggesting that their works offer valuable insights into the cultural and political turbulence of the time (36).

Williams’s critique widens the scope of modernist studies by pushing for a more inclusive and historically grounded approach. Rather than accepting modernism as a self-contained, apolitical aesthetic movement, he encourages a re-examination of how modernist texts engage with the ideological forces of their era. This perspective becomes especially relevant in a South African context, where literature often intertwines with resistance and the negotiation of identity. Williams’s emphasis on the political stakes of modernist literature offers a framework for assessing whether works like Galgut’s not only experiment with form but also meaningfully interrogate the socio-political realities of their context.

Williams challenges the notion of a highly selective modernism, stating that it “cannot be seen and grasped in a unified way” because it inherently divides “not just between specific movements” but also the works found within them (36). He highlights the diversity of modernist expressions, portraying the movement not as a singular, monolithic entity but as a

¹ Williams was concerned that the work of what he deemed the great social realists and romantics was overlooked and excluded in favour of the writing of émigrés and exiles from cosmopolitan metropolises.

complex network of various and often conflicting tendencies. Williams underscores modernism's rejection of fixed forms and bourgeois cultural authority, noting how it resists market popularity—the kind that elevated figures like Dickens or Manet (34). Yet he complicates the idea of rupture, asserting that modernism is not a total break from tradition: “without Dickens, no Joyce” (33). Instead, modernism negotiates between innovation and continuity, evolving through its entanglement with the past.

Williams's work invites readers to approach modernism with a critical awareness of its political and historical dimensions, resisting the temptation to reduce it to an isolated aesthetic experiment. What I find most useful from his work is his call to “search out” for an “alternative tradition” to address “a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again” (38). However, this tradition is not found by means of ‘counterposing’ modernism through a search of “the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century” (37), but rather as Václav Paris² observes, it is a tradition that can be found “in an expanded conception of modernism that includes in itself, but no longer as a defining or exceptional part, the expressions that once were exclusively called modernism” (Paris 21). As Paris points out, Williams's critique of modernism allows him to be viewed as “a champion of a modernist project that was always there” and as such allows us to “begin again, no less radically... more critically and more generously” (Paris 21).

This political and historical sensitivity connects Williams to Lukács, as both theorists resist reducing modernism to pure formal experimentation. They foreground literature's entanglement with global socio-political transformation—a thread that Fredric Jameson extends in his 1988 essay “Modernism and Imperialism”. Writing within a Marxist framework, Jameson argues that modernism's formal innovations are not just reflective of historical shifts

² His article “When wasn't modernism? Reflections on the stone age” addresses the exclusivity of modernism and the formulation of an untimely conception of modernism: a conception that is meaningful and useful beyond the limited scope of conventional constructions of the field.

but are structurally shaped by imperialism itself. The rise of modernist literature coincides with the peak of European imperialism, and Jameson contends that “the structure of imperialism makes its mark on the inner forms and structures” of modernist works (Jameson 152).

While Lukács and Williams ground their analyses in ideological and historical contexts, Jameson pushes further, exploring how late capitalism influences both the form and content of literature. He positions economic structures as a driving force behind cultural production, illustrating how modernist experimentation is inseparable from the material conditions of imperialist expansion. In this way, Jameson bridges the gap between formalism and historical materialism, showing how modernism’s aesthetic ruptures are themselves shaped by global systems of exploitation and domination.

Jameson acknowledges the stereotype of modernism’s apolitical nature—the idea that it turned away from social realities to focus on subjective introspection (Jameson 153). He argues that while this view is no longer persuasive, it remains useful as a starting point to uncover the “informing presence of the extraliterary, of the political and the economic within it” (153). For Jameson, modernism’s formal innovations—fragmentation, allusiveness, and narrative dislocation—are not aesthetic flourishes but structural responses to the fragmented and disorienting realities of imperialism.

He links modernism’s perceived loss of meaning to the systemic displacement inherent in colonialism, where crucial segments of the economic system exist “beyond the metropolis” (157). Writers confronted an unbridgeable gap: the impossibility of grasping the imperial system as a whole. In contrast to the classical stage of national capitalism, where the economic totality could still be imagined, imperialism created an irreparable absence: “pieces of the puzzle are missing; it can never be fully reconstructed” (157). There was no form that would ever “be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and

exploitation, let alone the structural connections between that and this, between daily life in the metropolis and the absent space of the colony” (157). Jameson argues that modernist art bears the trace of this absence—“artistic content will now henceforth always have something missing about it... which can never be made up or made good” (157).

This structural absence manifests in modernist experimentation with narrative techniques and spatial representation. Novelists like Forster, Woolf, and Joyce grapple with the changing nature of space and time in an imperialist world, adopting innovative (and often obfuscatory) forms to express the disjointed realities of imperial dominance. The colonial experience, Jameson contends, is not just a thematic undercurrent but a force that shapes modernist aesthetics at their core.

What stands out to me from Jameson’s essay is his vision of “an exceptional situation” from which to view and understand modernism (164). A modernism that arises from the “overlap and coexistence between these two incommensurable realities which are those of the lord and of the bondsman altogether, those of the metropolis and of the colony simultaneously” (64). He imagines a national situation that mimics First World social realities on the surface, “but whose underlying structure is in fact much closer to that of the Third World or of colonized daily life” (164). Much like Williams’s suggestion of a modern future, Jameson proposes the potential and value of finding ways to challenge the idea of modernism as a singular Western phenomenon. This global perspective, he argues, is essential for anyone seeking to understand modernity as a “supranational force with the world in its grip” (Jameson, reviewed by Bulson).

The ideas put forward by Lukács, Williams, and Jameson tie directly into my exploration of Galgut’s novels. Lukács’s argument about the modernist conception of man as a hero confined within the limits of his own experience is particularly relevant. He suggests that this figure “does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it” (Lukács 21). This is embodied in the protagonist of *In a Strange Room*, where each of Damon’s journeys

highlights the tenuous connection between subjectivity and place. As Damon relentlessly pursues new terrain, he struggles to form a stable sense of self, his constant movement preventing him from truly developing through contact with his surroundings. His inability to sustain meaningful relationships blurs the line between abstract and concrete potentiality, echoing Lukács's notion that the disintegration of personality in modernist literature mirrors the disintegration of the outer world.

In *The Promise*, characters like Astrid and Lindile exemplify this “negation of outward reality” (Lukács 25). Both are haunted by trauma, their human activity rendered impotent and devoid of meaning in the face of historical and social forces beyond their control (Lukács 36). This extends to Anton and Amor, who repeatedly fail to enact meaningful change, paralysed in the face of the unintelligible power of their circumstances. Lukács's claim that modernism is the negation of art captures Galgut's own ambivalence—the sense that literature, in the aftermath of historical trauma, can never be wholly redemptive.

I would like to make the connection between Williams, Jameson and Galgut. Williams's challenge to the narrowness of canonical modernism helps position South African literature—often overlooked or marginalised—as a vital site for expanding conceptions of modernity (Williams 36). Galgut's work, in this sense, complicates the idea of modernism as purely Western. To bring Jameson in here, requires the focus on the idea of the missing puzzle piece. I would like to argue that modernism has so much purchase when applied to contemporary South African literature because, as Jameson points out, our writers are the ambivalent heirs of the reality of colonialism and have always been a part of the economic system that has been located elsewhere, “beyond the metropolis” (Jameson 157). Writers from South Africa are trying to find accurate ways of writing from “the absent space of the colony” and putting into words what “can never be fully reconstructed” (Jameson 157). The gap in knowledge that the writers of canonical modernism encountered is patched onto the contemporary writers of South

African literature who are also trying to find ways of coming to terms with and representing their own radical otherness and that of the postcolonial reality they inhabit.

I would like to argue that Galgut's novels (in both form and content) demonstrate a 'spirit of critique' as a means of grappling with Jameson's missing puzzle piece (or gap in knowledge). In *In a Strange Room*, Damon wrestles with the elite forms of cosmopolitanism associated with travel. In *Arctic Summer*, Morgan's colonial perspective fractures as he confronts his limited understanding of himself and the world. The silence of Salome in *The Promise* reproduces the modernist failure to adequately represent the perspective of colonial suffering and exploitation, underscoring the limits of narrative agency. Galgut, as an author, contends with his own peripheral perspective, struggling to locate his work within the broader landscape of modernism when literary belonging itself is "bound up in the production, classification and reception of literary narratives" (Walkowitz 4). I believe that Galgut's narratives of "attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition" allow him to imagine the connections between the national and transnational and to be perceived as a contemporary modernist because his work embodies an attitude or consciousness of modernity (Walkowitz 6).

While Lukács, Williams, and Jameson provide crucial frameworks for understanding Galgut's modernist engagement, it is equally important to ground this study within the specific contours of South African modernism. The global conversations about modernism these theorists provoke are complicated and enriched when viewed through the lens of South Africa's unique socio-political and cultural realities. Fully grasping Galgut's place in literary history requires engagement with scholarship that maps how modernism has been adapted, contested, and transformed in South Africa, including the rich critical interventions featured in *English Studies in Africa's* special issues on South African modernism (vols. 65 no. 1 and 66 no. 2). This local scholarship reveals a vibrant and politically charged tradition that dialogues with both South

Africa's history and broader transnational currents providing a crucial context for this dissertation.

1.1.1 Mapping South African Modernism

This section outlines key contributions to the study of South African modernism, highlighting how local literary forms negotiate political history, aesthetic innovation, and global influence. These studies establish the intellectual and historical context in which this project on Damon Galgut is situated.

In *Literary Transactions in South Africa: A Politics of Interpretation*, Michael Chapman frames South African modernism as a politically engaged and formally experimental mode. He emphasises the ethical dimensions embedded in the aesthetic choices of South African writers, arguing that their hybridisation of genre and form is a deliberate response to the moral and historical complexities of apartheid and its aftermath. Chapman's concept of transactions reframes literary analysis to account for the dynamic interplay between texts and their socio-political contexts, illuminating how formal innovation becomes an ethical act in literature shaped by trauma and transformation (Prasetyo 1).

David Attwell's contributions are foundational for theorising the ethical and formal tensions that underlie South African literary modernism. In works such as *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and *J.M. Coetzee and The Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (2015), Attwell advances a concept of literary modernism that is distinctively self-reflexive, ethically inflected, and politically engaged. Central to Attwell's approach is the idea of self-authorising discourse—a mode of writing that simultaneously asserts and interrogates its own authority within an unstable or transitional political landscape. While his primary focus is on Coetzee, Attwell's theoretical insights—particularly on temporality, authorship, and narrative ethics—offer a valuable framework for understanding how South African writers

navigate modernist aesthetics under the pressures of history (Attwell, *Politics* 125). In particular, he highlights how the euphoric period culminating in South Africa's 1994 democratic elections gave way to complex institutional and political struggles, especially within universities where transformation agendas shifted and were often intertwined with neoliberal economic policies (Attwell, *Life* 190). Coetzee's *Disgrace* confronts these changes, exploring the psychic and social residues of colonial history that lingered despite the country's new democratic constitution (Attwell, *Life* 190). This dissertation draws on Attwell's account of literature's internal politics to consider how Galgut, like Coetzee, stages narrative self-consciousness as a response to national and global historical crises, positioning Galgut's work within a lineage of South African modernism that is at once local and transnational.

Stefan Helgesson's *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature* complicates the field by highlighting the influence of print cultures, transnational literary flows, and uneven access to literary capital on modernist practices in the region. His analysis foregrounds the material conditions and infrastructures of circulation that shape both the production and reception of literary modernism in Southern Africa. Helgesson's concept of the inequality of print culture is especially relevant for understanding Galgut's trajectory as a writer whose cosmopolitan visibility is enabled by, but also in tension with, these asymmetries of literary capital. This focus on material and transnational conditions complements Sofia Kostelac's insight that *The Promise* engages with—and subverts—metropolitan literary expectations, using those very tropes to assert a distinct South African identity.

Rick de Villiers' editorial introduction to *English Studies in Africa* (vol. 65, no. 1, 2022) offers a critical reconfiguration of South African modernism, which he terms critical modernism. De Villiers challenges nationalist and formalist readings that have historically marginalised the complexity and diversity of South African literary modernism. Instead, he situates the field

within a transcultural framework, emphasising modernism as a dynamic process shaped by overlapping local and global influences. His essay underscores the multiplicity of modernist practices in South African literature, which include formal experimentation, political engagement, and narrative strategies that contest hegemonic histories. This reframing aligns with the aims of this dissertation to position Damon Galgut's work within a broader terrain of mutuality, as articulated by Sarah Nuttall, which resists parochial definitions and instead highlights the porous boundaries between the local and the global in contemporary literary modernism. Engaging not only with de Villiers' introduction but also with other essays, this study enters into a sustained dialogue with recent scholarship that enriches understanding of modernism's multiplicity in South Africa.

This dissertation positions Damon Galgut's work as a persistent modernist mode that both aligns with and challenges South African literary conventions. By situating Galgut within a cosmopolitan modernist framework — while remaining attuned to the local literary-historical field mapped by Attwell, Chapman, Helgesson, and others — this study fills a significant gap by foregrounding a writer whose work exemplifies a dialogic relationship between national literary forms and global modernist aesthetics. Rather than simply asserting the 'relevance' of Galgut's work beyond national borders, this project approaches his writing as negotiating the tensions between local specificity and global modernist practices, emphasising mutual influence over moral valuation.

Building on the foundational and localised understandings of South African modernism, this study now shifts focus to how modernist forms have evolved and resurfaced in new literary contexts. Rather than treating modernism as a closed historical moment, critics have explored its transformation across periods and geographies. The next section engages with this

reconfiguration, turning to New Modernist Studies to explore how modernist modes endure and transform within today's global literary landscape.

1.2 The Persistence of Modernism

Modernism's influence has long outlived its early twentieth-century origins. Scholars associated with New Modernist Studies—such as Madelyn Detloff, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz—have redefined modernism as a flexible and evolving aesthetic mode. Their work expands the field beyond traditional periodisations, framing modernism as a global and ongoing phenomenon. This perspective offers valuable tools for analysing Galgut's fiction, which reanimates and reconfigures modernist strategies in a contemporary literary landscape.

Detloff, in particular, addresses the lingering presence of modernism through her concept of “patching” in her monograph *The Persistence of Modernism*. Borrowing a metaphor from information technology, she explains that the old is never overwritten by the new but rather coexists with and informs it (Detloff 2). In this way, the present is always shaped by the past, and understanding that relationship is key to comprehending how individuals and societies navigate contemporary realities. The crucial point to take away from her relational view of past and present is to understand that the past goes beyond simply knowing “what came before” and enables an understanding of how “one comes to function in the present” (2).

Detloff applies the concept of “patching” to collective and personal memory, framing it as a tool for understanding the ongoing impact of historical trauma (3). She focuses on modernism's persistence in “contemporary responses to war, terror, and trauma”, noting that identifying these connections can help twenty-first-century readers grapple with the ethical and political complexities of their time (3). By examining the resilience of early modernist writers like Stein, Woolf, and H.D., who contended with loss, violence, and imperial collapse, Detloff argues that

contemporary writers like Susan Sontag, Pat Barker, and Hanif Kureishi inherit and rework these modernist strategies to confront present-day crises (12).

In this way, Detloff's work bridges the historical and the contemporary, highlighting the cyclical nature of cultural production. Modernist responses to the trauma and instability of the early twentieth century, rather than fading into historical irrelevance, resurface as a means of processing the ongoing ruptures of the present. This persistent modernist impulse invites a re-evaluation of contemporary literature not as separate from modernism, but as an extension of its restless experimentation and its relentless interrogation of what it means to live through history's violence and uncertainty.

The concept of "patching" can be directly applied to Damon Galgut's *In a Strange Room*, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Galgut's protagonist cannot escape past versions of himself, instead, his identity is continually reshaped as these past selves are patched onto one another. This mirrors Detloff's notion of living in a present shaped by past events, where identity is an evolving dialogue with history. Damon's classification as a "a fucked-up South African" underscores this process, as his personal trauma is entangled with the collective trauma of his nation (Galgut, *ISR* 15). The persistence of modernism surfaces here, highlighting the constant interplay between the individual and their socio-political context.

This dynamic is also evident in *The Promise*, discussed in Chapter 4, where the Swart family's struggles encapsulate the lingering trauma of apartheid. As South Africa transitions into democracy, the past refuses to stay confined to history—it permeates each chapter, shaping the characters' attempts to grapple with loss, unfulfilled promises, and fractured identities. The Swarts' repeated confrontation with their history exemplifies Detloff's argument that understanding the past is not just about chronology but about recognising how historical trauma continues to structure present realities (Detloff 2).

Modernism was called into question because of figures such as “The Leavises and *Scrutiny* group” who presented modernism as “alienating and excessively highbrow” (Detloff 5). The Leavises and their followers were critical of modernism, which they viewed as elitist, intellectually obscure, and divorced from the moral and social concerns of ordinary people. They argued that modernist literature was inaccessible to the general public and failed to address the pressing social issues of the time. Detloff counters this view of modernism by identifying three positions on modernism as understood by Jed Etsy, Raymond Williams and herself. Detloff’s position suggests that modernism should be considered as “dynamic” and not “absolute” (6). She recognises that Woolf manages dynamism in her writing that is both inherited from the “English cultural hegemony” but is also “infused with her anti-establishment political thought.” (6) Thus she comes to the proposal that “Woolf was both a cosmopolitan and a *metic*” (6).

Detloff’s notion of “interconnectedness” between cosmopolitanism and the *metic* figure is crucial to understanding the persistence of modernism (6). The concept of cosmopolitanism deals with the idea of being a citizen of the world. It involves experiencing a sense of “full belonging” to the community of the “global *polis*” (7). However, as Detloff indicates, not everyone is able to “move from metropolis to metropolis” without concern (6). She points out that “one person’s *belonging to the world* might be another person’s *exile*” (7). Detloff moves on to define the idea of the *metic*—as signified by Antigone—as a figure who remains an outsider but is able to operate within the *polis* (7). This dual position reflects the tension in modernist and contemporary literature, where characters and authors alike navigate the fractures of belonging, shaped by personal and collective histories that persist across time.

The term *metic* is illustrated when the protagonist of *In a Strange Room*, Damon, reflects on how he exists outside of his country but remains tethered to his South African identity. In this instance Damon is “more privileged than the subaltern or the dispossessed”, yet he is not

exempt from the consequences of living in the polis (17). In this way, Damon embodies a modern *metic* who is “situated precariously between belonging and unbelonging” (17). Similarly, in *The Promise*, the narrator operates as a *metic* figure—an outsider chronicling the Swart family’s history. While Galgut shares a connection to South Africa’s historical landscape, his narration moves fluidly within and beyond the boundaries of fiction. Galgut can be considered as a resilient writer because he is able to capture the delicate balance between “the particularity of suffering and the temporality of living” (15). This is particularly evident in the way that the “narration darts between characters, mid-paragraph or even mid-sentence” (Cummins).

The third term to consider from Detloff’s discussion is “articulation”. As used by Detloff, articulation refers to “a theory of how contexts are made, unmade and remade” (Felski qtd. in Detloff 10). It examines how disparate elements of “the social field” converge to create “temporary unities” with value placed on the persistence of fragmentation (10). According to Detloff, “modernist articulations... are still with us,” with modernist trauma, violence, and imperial loss continuing to shape the present as a “patched” structure of feeling (10). Rather than leading to a mass melancholia, this patching offers more dynamic, “less destructive” ways to articulate loss (11). Resilient writing, as Detloff frames it, “respects the dynamic relationship between the particularity of suffering and the temporality of living” (15), allowing the past to be integrated into the ever-emerging present.

I suggest that articulation helps to explain Damon’s evolving selfhood in *In a Strange Room*. His identity is constantly made, unmade, and remade as past experiences are patched onto present ones, creating a fluid, dynamic self. In *Arctic Summer*, Morgan’s self-reformation and experiments with self-representation allow him to more accurately depict his province, his people, and the broader human experience. By relinquishing an isolated sense of self in favour

of an overlapping, integrated one, Morgan gains the capacity to articulate collective and individual stories of loss. This ability for articulation is what keeps the self and others alive and values their intricacies. In *The Promise*, articulation underpins the silence surrounding Salome and the other silenced voices³ that she symbolises. Galgut uses articulation to reveal how fragments of historical trauma persist within the present, forming temporary unities that refuse to be neatly resolved. Through his use of patching, his position as a *metic* figure, and his engagement with articulation, Galgut exemplifies Detloff's notion of a resilient writer, capturing the complex interplay between suffering and survival across time (15).

The persistence of modernism is further illuminated through Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of spatialising modernity in "Periodizing Modernism". Friedman challenges the 'nominal' definition of modernity, which confines it to "a specific moment in history with a particular societal design" (Friedman 426). She critiques the privileging of certain locations over others in periodising history, arguing that to fully understand modernism, we must view it as spatial as well as temporal (426). Spatialising modernity, according to Friedman, disrupts the traditional canon, allowing for the recognition of modernist expressions across diverse global contexts (426).

This argument aligns with Detloff's assertion that modernist aesthetics persist in contemporary literature as "constellations of troubling social formations" (3). By framing modernity as a rupture rather than a neatly contained historical era, Friedman opens up space for acknowledging multiple, coexisting modernisms that emerge at different times and places (426). Friedman explains that the relational definition that spatialises the conventional periodisation of modernism creates a shift that opens up pluralities and global linkages that

³ Salome's silence must be foregrounded here as crucial to understanding the connection between the characters who are given a voice in *The Promise* and Jameson's missing puzzle piece—the "radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation"—that can never be fully reconstructed.

were never focused on before. This redefinition of modernity is crucial for understanding how Galgut's work engages with modernist legacies within the specificities of South African history.

Friedman's emphasis on emerging modernities is particularly relevant to postcolonial literature. She acknowledges that "colonialism is constitutive of Western modernity" and claims that declaring an end date to modernism closes "the curtain on modernism before the creative agencies in the colonies and newly emergent nations have had a chance to perform" (427). This, according to Friedman, is why calling "their postliberation arts 'postmodern' ... is to miss the point entirely" (427). This resonates with Williams's critique that limiting modernism to a narrow set of characteristics "stops history dead" and casts everything afterward as merely "stuck in the post" (36). Friedman identifies that she sees the "boundaries between multiple modernisms as porous and permeable, fostering self/other confrontations and minglings as mutually constitutive both *between* different societies and *within* them" (428).

Friedman highlights how concepts of modernist internationalism "typically operate within an unexamined center/periphery framework" and because of this "the creative agencies of colonial and postcolonial subjects as producers of modernism have been largely ignored" (428). She argues for dismantling this hierarchy, proposing instead a cosmopolitan model of cultural exchange that echoes Édouard Glissant's "poetics of relation," where every periphery becomes a center, dissolving the binary entirely (qtd. in Friedman 429). This spatial shift opens up what Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel call "geomodernisms" (qtd. in Friedman 430). The benefit of this approach is that it "unveils both unsuspected 'modernist' experiments in 'marginal' texts and unsuspected correlations between those texts and others..." (430). This aligns with Williams's vision of a modern future and Jameson's call to challenge the confinement of modernism as a strictly Western phenomenon.

Friedman frames modernism as “the *expressive dimension of modernity*”, allowing for overlapping, asynchronous modernisms across the globe (432). This “planetary” approach highlights the transformative nature of cultural exchange, a dynamic Edward Said captures in his theory of travel: as ideas migrate, they are inevitably altered by new contexts, often reinvigorated and radicalised (qtd. in Friedman 430). In this way, modernism persists not as a static phenomenon but as a continually evolving aesthetic, reshaped by its interactions with new cultural landscapes (430).

Crucially, Friedman introduces the concept of “indigenization”, where transplanted ideas are adapted to local contexts, becoming native through processes of friction and hybridisation (430–431). She draws on Anna Tsing’s notion of friction to illustrate how cultural forms are co-produced through unequal, unstable encounters, reminding us that modernity often obscures the history of its travels (qtd. in Friedman 431). Yet these non-Western modernisms are not derivative but distinct, bearing the marks of traveling ideas that have rooted themselves in new soils (432).

Friedman’s rethinking of modernism is invaluable for understanding the persistence of modernism in Galgut’s *Arctic Summer*. By immersing himself in E.M. Forster’s life, Galgut enacts a kind of literary indigenisation, claiming Forster’s cultural practices as his own while exploring the tensions between modernity and tradition. The novel bridges temporal and spatial gaps, reinforcing Friedman’s argument that modernism’s end points are not fixed but fluid (435). Just as Friedman disrupts the West/Rest binary, Galgut’s work collapses the distance between Forster’s era and contemporary South African literature, tracing the enduring resonances of modernist aesthetics in unexpected places.

Detloff and Friedman share a common interest in the persistence of the past within the present. Detloff highlights that the past becomes a part of “the continuously emerging present” (15),

just as Friedmann emphasises that “the past that is repressed, that will not be remembered, comes back to haunt and trouble the present” (434). Both theorists underscore the significance of the “hidden continuities” of the past (434). They both call “for modernist studies to expand the horizons of time” (Friedman 439). Friedman concludes that spatialising, and in doing so re-periodising, modernism requires “the recognition that the ‘periods’ of modernism are multiple and that modernism is alive and thriving wherever the historical convergence of radical rupture takes place” (439).

Walkowitz builds on this notion, arguing “for the persistence of modernist concerns and techniques in late-twentieth-century writing” (8). In *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, she contends that modernist practices should not be confined to “a single historical period (the early twentieth century) or to a single global orientation (‘Europe’ or ‘the West’)” (5). Instead, advocates for a modernist literary style as a vehicle for exploring “new ways of thinking and acting beyond the nation”, establishing a clear link between modernist writers and cosmopolitanism (8).

Walkowitz focuses on writers like Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Rushdie and Sebald, who use “salient features of modernist narrative” to cultivate what she terms “a critical cosmopolitanism” (2). She broadens the concept of style to encompass “attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness”, framing this consciousness as essential for practicing critical cosmopolitanism (2). The term “critical” denotes “a new reflection on reflection”, involving double consciousness, comparison, and persistent self-reflection (3). These writers develop and critique new forms of cosmopolitanism, reflecting “both a desire for and an ambivalence about collective social projects” (4). This tension parallels Lukács’s view of modern subjectivism, which oscillates “between melancholy and fascination” (21). Walkowitz’s argument reinforces the idea that modernist experimentation remains a vital tool for navigating complex global and historical

dynamics, extending the reach of modernism far beyond its conventional temporal and geographic boundaries.

Interestingly, the twentieth-and twenty-first century writers Walkowitz examines investigate “conditions of limited or suspended agency” and question “how conceptions of belonging are bound up in the production, classification and reception of literary narratives” (4). By analysing novels from both the early and late twentieth century, Walkowitz challenges the notion that modernist practices belong to a fixed historical period. She argues that the writers she examines are not cosmopolitan in themselves, but instead cultivate a ‘spirit of critique’ that enables them to imagine connections between the national and transnational. These connections, Walkowitz suggests, rely on “narrative patterns of attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition” (6). These writers, much like Galgut, highlight the “often-invisible connections between personal and international experiences” (6).

Walkowitz adopts Foucault’s definition of modernism, framing it as “‘an attitude’ or ‘consciousness’ of modernity” (6). For her, modernism is a critical interrogation of “man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject” (6). In *Cosmopolitan Style*, she explores how cosmopolitan attitudes intersect with modernist literary style to produce new ways of thinking about political critique (8). Walkowitz examines novelists that share a scepticism about notions of the national—collective agency, national culture, national characteristics etc. She notes that while these writers “have engaged in ‘thinking and acting beyond the local,’” and have “conceived of the center from the perspective of the margins”, they have not completely rejected all local affiliations (8).

Walkowitz clarifies that her argument centres on “persistent efforts to reimagine the center in terms of peripheries, within and without, by writers in the first and last decades of the century”

(10). These novels test and re-define “what can count as international politics” by highlighting “incidents that seem to be trivial in order to reject wartime values of order and proportion, or they may emphasize what seem to be only personal experiences in order to expand what we know of global processes” (10). She connects cosmopolitan and modernist styles through their shared attention to “the limits of perception and the waning of a confident epistemology, the conflict between the exhaustive and the ineffable, the appeal of the trivial, the political consequences of uniformity and variousness in meaning, the fragmentation of perspectives, and the disruption of social categories” (20).

According to Walkowitz, critical cosmopolitanism emerges through the contrast between everyday private events and broader international experiences; a hallmark of modernist literature. Critical cosmopolitanism emphasises that “an effective politics may need to be specific and purposeful, but it need not be local” (30). She advocates for a connection between modernism and cosmopolitanism because both highlight the necessity to embrace more flexible, dynamic models of “migration, entanglement and mix-up”, which are central to modernity and cosmopolitan thought (6). I argue that Galgut fits neatly into Walkowitz’s category of writer, as his novels foreground questions of belonging and explore the challenges faced by South African writers experiencing ‘South African Fatigue’. In *Arctic Summer*, Galgut reimagines the centre through the periphery by bringing Foster to life with detailed attention and research, all while positioning himself as a semi-peripheral writer.

Detloff, building upon Williams’s call for an “alternative tradition”, underscores the persistence of modernist elements, arguing that modernism is not a fixed historical period but rather an ongoing process of aesthetic evolution (Williams, 38). Friedman, aligning with Jameson’s exploration of imperialism, emphasises the global relevance of modernism, challenging the idea that it is exclusive to the Western experience (Jameson, 164). Walkowitz

complements Lukács's focus on ideology by highlighting how modernist literature engages with various forms of resistance and negotiation within cultural and political contexts.

Detloff, Friedman and Walkowitz all share the belief that modernist literary tradition and style offer significant insights into how the world can be perceived and represented. The periods of modernity they explore include numerous writers who were deeply concerned with notions of belonging, as well as the interplay of difference and boundary-crossing—whether between past and present, the West and the Rest, or modernism and cosmopolitanism. These theorists integrate cosmopolitanism into their discussions of modernism, making it necessary to explore the concept of cosmopolitanism in more detail.

1.3 The Cosmopolitan Spirit of Critique

The concept of the 'spirit of critique' is rooted in the cosmopolitan ethos. Kwame Anthony Appiah is a British-born Ghanaian-American philosopher and author, provides key insight into what it means to be a cosmopolitan. He emphasises the interconnectedness of the world, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities that arise from a "single web of trade and a global network of information" (Appiah x). Appiah argues that this interconnectedness should foster tolerance for our differences and appreciation for what we share in common.

With global connections, Appiah notes that "the possibilities of good and ill are multiplied beyond all measure" particularly considering the power of governments to carry out policies "in our name" (x-xi). While we can develop tolerance for differences and an appreciation for commonalities, we also face the harsh realities of economic disruptions and the creation of destructive weapons (xi). He stresses the need for a moral framework to navigate this globalised world, advocating for ideas and institutions that can help humanity coexist as a global community. The challenge, he claims, is equipping humanity with "ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become" (xi).

Tracing the history of the term, Appiah identifies “two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism” (xiii). The first is the notion that “we have obligations to others” that extend beyond direct relations, such as the “ties of a shared citizenship” or “kith and kin” (xiii). The second is the recognition of “the value not just of human life but of particular human lives” paired with the need to take an “interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (xiii). A cosmopolitan must, therefore, acknowledge that “people are different... and there is much to learn from our differences” (xiii). The diversity of humanity requires that we “neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life” (xiii). These two strands— “universal concern and respect for legitimate difference”—often clash. As a result, Appiah encourages readers to view cosmopolitanism not as the solution, but as the challenge (xiii).

In light of this challenge, Appiah questions whether the idea of being a citizen of the world is truly applicable. Does being a citizen of the world require completely denying “all local allegiances and partialities in the name of...humanity?” (xiv) He contends that no version of cosmopolitanism can overlook the fact that “each human being has responsibilities to every other” (xiv). To address this, Appiah introduces the concept of “partial cosmopolitanism,” illustrated through the story of Daniel Deronda, a character in George Eliot's novel (xv). Deronda discovers his Jewish ancestry as an adult, an event that is described as him finding “an added soul” that allows him to escape “the mazes of impartial sympathy” and choose to align with “men of like inheritance” (xv). Deronda values the ability to have “as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible” (xv). Appiah acknowledges Deronda's cosmopolitan ethos, as he chooses to study abroad to broaden his understanding of perspectives beyond those of an Englishman. This notion encapsulates what Appiah calls partial cosmopolitanism, where sympathy and kindness begin “with those with whom we are most closely associated” (xvi). It

is through our partiality that we practice sympathy first with our kinfolk, and then extend it to the broader global community.

Appiah reflects on the final piece of advice his father gave him and his sister, reminding them that they “are citizens of the world” (xvi). For Appiah’s parents, belonging to both one’s home community and “the broader human community” was not a concern but a natural condition (xvi). Raised in an environment where family and tribe were “multiple and overlapping,” Appiah identifies an inherent human “urge” to migrate and settle (xvi). People learn the languages and customs of other places not merely out of curiosity, but because communication is essential for survival. This necessity drives the expansion of understanding beyond familiar borders. Appiah emphasises that cosmopolitanism should not be seen as an “exalted attainment” but as the development of coexistence—a dialogue across differences (xvii). However, Galgut’s narratives reveal a modernist ambivalence towards this ideal, highlighting the complexities and limitations of such a worldview, which will be explored further.

As I turn to the analysis of Damon Galgut’s work, this conceptual framework offers a multifaceted lens through which to examine the persistent relevance and adaptability of modernism in contemporary literature, specifically within the context of Damon Galgut’s work. By engaging with the theoretical insights of Lukács, Williams, Jameson, Detloff, Friedman, Walkowitz, Appiah, and Eze, this dissertation not only traces modernism’s historical roots but also highlights its evolving nature, transcending national boundaries and resonating with global contexts. This intersection of theories provides a nuanced approach to understanding how Galgut’s writing engages with the socio-political constructs of post-apartheid South Africa while contributing to broader, transnational literary conversations.

Through the lens of modernism, I will analyse Galgut’s works to uncover how his narratives navigate the tensions between personal and collective histories, identity, and belonging.

Galgut's novels, while rooted in the legacy of apartheid, expand modernist aesthetics, offering new perspectives on the complexities of national identity formation and global citizenship. His work critiques and reanimates modernism as a living, adaptable aesthetic, revealing the potential for contemporary literature to address the historical trauma and cultural fragmentation inherent in South Africa's ongoing transformation.

By applying this conceptual framework, the subsequent chapters will explore the intricate interplay between literature, modernism, and the socio-cultural fabric of South Africa. This approach remains critically alert to the contested dimensions of cosmopolitan thought, particularly the tensions between universal ethical commitments and local historical specificities that emerge in postcolonial contexts. In doing so, this study aims to demonstrate that modernism's relevance endures not as a static historical period, but as a dynamic, evolving force capable of responding to the pressing issues of our time, including questions of identity, belonging, and the negotiation of cultural boundaries.

CHAPTER 2: NEGOTIATING BELONGING AND ALIENATION IN *IN A STRANGE ROOM*

In *In a Strange Room*, Damon Galgut engages with the modernist tradition, exploring the fragmented self as it confronts a chaotic, unstable reality. Damon Galgut's novel experiments with autobiographical writing, as seen in the shifting narrative perspectives and the blurring of identities between the protagonist and the author. This self-reflexivity aligns with modernist concerns about identity, alienation, and self-representation in a world shaped by historical trauma. The novel's preoccupation with transience and estrangement reflects the tension between detachment and connection, underscoring the persistence of modernist aesthetics in contemporary literature.

Building on Lukács' concept of the alienated protagonist, *In a Strange Room* portrays Damon as dislocated, existing both as observer and outsider—suspended between past and present, self and other. At the same time, the moments of recognition and fleeting intimacy align with Detloff's insights into the fragile possibilities of belonging. By negotiating these opposing forces, Galgut's novel reinforces the enduring relevance of modernist techniques in articulating the complexities of identity in an uncertain world.

The autobiographical nature of the novel plays a crucial role in its exploration of self-representation. Galgut's admission that the protagonist's experiences closely mirror his own complicates the relationship between fact and fiction, reflecting the fractured, alienated self that is characteristic of modernist protagonists. As Galgut explains, his aim was "to recall, as honestly and truthfully as I could, three journeys that I've taken at different points in my life" (qtd. in Armitstead). Galgut's blending of personal history and narrative fiction engages with a key modernist concern: the instability of identity and memory.

I draw on Leigh Gilmore's notion of the unstable **I** in autobiography to underscore Galgut's fragmented narrative structure (6). Gilmore highlights the challenge of capturing personal experience in a genre that is both "insufficiently objective" and "insufficiently subjective" (6). This resonates with Galgut's fluid use of first- and third-person perspectives, which mirrors the tension between past and present, self and other.

Phillipe Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact further supports this interpretation by emphasising how the third-person voice allows the author to engage with his own experiences from a distanced perspective. The doubling of identity that Lejeune describes—where the "I" of the past becomes the "he" of the narrative—enables Galgut to explore Damon's identity as both individual and collective, reflecting modernism's broader concerns with alienation (29).

While Damon's experiences are deeply personal, they are embedded within a broader cultural and historical framework that amplifies his sense of dislocation. I argue that Galgut employs modernist techniques in *In a Strange Room* to navigate the complexities of individual identity, illustrating how personal narratives intersect with unresolved historical trauma.

The interplay between belonging and alienation, central to modernist aesthetics, is illuminated by Detloff's examination of persistent modernism and Lukács's critique of modernism. While Detloff champions modernist aesthetics as ethically productive, offering a means of interrogating contemporary problems, Lukács critiques modernism for fostering alienation by detaching the protagonist from their socio-historical context

Through my analysis of Galgut's formal experimentation, *In a Strange Room* extends beyond a portrayal of alienated subjectivity. It affirms the ongoing relevance of modernist aesthetics in addressing contemporary concerns, particularly in contexts where identity is shaped by historical trauma. I suggest that Galgut's persistent engagement with the fragmented self and

the ambivalence of belonging reveals how modernist aesthetics continue to provide a framework for examining personal crises and the enduring impact of the past on the present.

By focusing on instances where Damon must navigate the self, this chapter explores the tension between ethically productive opportunities for connection and the ways in which they are thwarted by the intense introversion of the alienated protagonist. Detloff's concept of persistent modernism positions modernist aesthetics as a means of meaningfully engaging with socio-political realities, offering a framework for interrogating difficult contemporary problems. In contrast, Lukács critiques modernism for its inward focus, arguing that it produces protagonists who are detached from any concrete historical or social context.

This opposition is central to understanding *In a Strange Room*, which simultaneously enacts both perspectives. The novel demonstrates how modernist techniques capture the fragmentation and uncertainty of identity, reflecting the alienation Lukács describes. Yet, through moments of recognition and fleeting intimacy, it also reveals how modernism can illuminate the fragile possibilities of belonging, aligning with Detloff's perspective. Ultimately, this chapter argues that *In a Strange Room* highlights both the limitations and potential of the modernist approach in negotiating the relationship between the subject's interiority and the complexities of social reality.

Galgut's formal experimentation in *In a Strange Room* deals with the complex notion of the subjective experience of each journey (indicated with 'him') and the way in which it is recalled in hindsight (indicated with 'I'). Galgut has highlighted that he believes memory is fiction because it "is a way of reconstructing the past"; it involves raising particular things to significance where others are left to fall by the wayside (qtd. in Armitstead). For Galgut, "the act of narrating a memory is an act of creating a fiction" (qtd. in Armitstead). The novel's

structure mirrors this, reinforcing the idea that selfhood is continually reshaped through narrative.

The three journeys in the novel reflect Damon's persistent self-reflection, not just as a character but as an authorial presence. Galgut's narrative form offers "a new reflection on reflection" (Walkowitz 3), inviting readers to examine the complexities of selfhood and the interplay between experience and narration. By foregrounding memory as an act of reconstruction, *In a Strange Room* explores the tensions between belonging and alienation, between the self as it is lived and as it is remembered.

2.1 The Dark Angel of Alienation

The first journey is captured in the first chapter of the novel, titled "The Follower" which begins with Damon in transition, "intensely happy...walking and alone" on a dusty, rural road in Greece (Galgut 3). However, he is not alone for very long as he soon encounters a figure "dressed entirely in black" and Galgut immediately establishes the narrative structure of the novel (4). He continues, "What the first man is wearing I don't know, I forget" (4) for the moments in the novel where memory of the lived experience fails the author, his voice is heard as 'I' and there is no eclipsing the fact that the narrator is also the protagonist (Lejeune 31). Galgut highlights these moments of the "experiential category of 'the self' and the limits of its representation" (Gilmore 5). For instance, Damon reflects on the ruins he explores but cannot recall, he claims "I can't even remember now what they are..." (6) Reflecting on memory, Damon claims that, "What you don't remember never happened" (18). Although Damon and Reiner (the figure from the road) exchange words and spend some time together, forming a true connection is a "gesture that neither of them will make" (16). After he has had this brief but disconcerting encounter with Reiner, Damon finds himself watching images of war in the

Gulf on the television but due to his constant travelling “what he sees isn’t real to him” (17). He admits that he is suffering from a sense of “placelessness” (17).

This “placelessness” reflects an inability to identify oneself in a firm location as an integrated, social individual. Damon feels “outside [of] everything” believing that “history happens elsewhere and has nothing to do with him” (17). This aligns with Lukács’s definition of the modernist protagonist, where Damon becomes a figure who is disconnected from any stable personal history. His detachment signals a negation of history, resulting in a fragmented sense of self and an inability to integrate with the world around him. Despite constant travel and exposure to change, Damon remains unable to root himself in any fixed location. His “placelessness” further prevents him from forming meaningful connections, which is why the images of war do not resonate with him - he is “only passing through” (17). He exists “strictly confined within the limits of his own experience” (Lukács 21).

Damon’s condition suggests a profound ambivalence: his vagrancy “is both a redemption and an affliction” (17). He escapes moral obligations yet loses a clear sense of self. The “featureless rooms” he inhabits, “always chang[ing] but somehow always [remaining] the same room”, reinforce his existential stasis (17). Here, the potential for ethical growth that scholars like Detloff identify in the work of several ‘late’ modernist writers is thwarted because Damon does not engage with the past in a way that informs his present. His “condition” (18) of constant travel prevents him from appreciating “what came before,” thus hindering his ability to navigate the present (Detloff 2).

Damon’s constant traversal of external borders symbolises the modernist impulse to break free from traditional constraints and explore new territories. While he successfully crosses many external borders by visiting places like, “...England. France, Italy, Greece, Turkey...” he fails to navigate the differences between himself and others (12). Damon finds that he is living in a

state of “acute anxiety” with “no connection to anything around him” (18). His inability to reconcile the various versions of his identity leads to a profound sense of disconnection from the world around him, epitomising the modernist theme of alienation. As Lukács argues, modernist literature that emphasises man as a solitary being highlights the idea that the individual cannot intervene in social reality, preventing him from exploring aspects of his world that lie just beyond his reach. What escapes Damon is the ability to understand “the complexity of his relations with his own past, present, and even future experience” (Lukács 18). In order to experience life in combination with others, he must first enter into the process of self-recursion.

We get a strong sense of Damon’s “placelessness” when he goes back to South Africa after a year and a half of travel (17). He arrives at the bus station “and stands in the middle of the moving crowds” he tries to tell himself “I am home now” but feels that he is “only passing through” (19). He embraces a friend upon his return and realises “how much of a stranger he’s become...to himself” (19). Damon’s sense of “placelessness” signals his dislocation, not just from others, but from any former version of himself (17). His failure to reconcile his identity with his ‘home’ reflects a personal alienation. According to critical cosmopolitanism, acknowledging the differences between various versions of oneself is essential for building connections with others. However, Damon is unable to reconcile who he is in relation to his ‘home’, and thus he withdraws from the possibility of forming connections with it. He fails to embody the dynamic version of modernism, rather he perceives himself as ““an individual lonely and isolated within the crowd’ of ‘strangers”” (qtd. in Detloff 6). He opts to overlook his difference, hence concluding that “...at the level on which life is lived nothing looks very different” (19). Damon’s struggle is emblematic of the modernist protagonist’s alienation, exemplifying the isolation that comes with a fractured sense of self. Through modernist techniques, Galgut captures this disconnection.

Once home, Damon feels rootless: “He can’t seem to settle anywhere”, shifting between places and people alike (20). His inability to connect with those around him is mirrored by his constant need to move. Every new place offers excuses for his detachment - he feels like “an intrusion, an imposition” or is disturbed by discomforts like “the place is dirty and full of fleas” (20). His landlady, the one person willing to connect with him, enters his flat frequently to talk. However, consumed by his own “unhappiness”, Damon cannot truly listen to her (21). His unwillingness to engage demonstrates his failure to undertake the necessary navigation of the self (Jacobs 100), a process that critical cosmopolitanism suggests is crucial for meaningful coexistence with others. By failing to connect with her, Damon neglects his fundamental responsibility to engage with the human being before him (Appiah xvii). Instead, he reaches out to the one other person in his life, Reiner, who remains largely a stranger to him. Damon invites Reiner to South Africa to take him on “a long walk somewhere”, and, to his surprise, Reiner accepts, leading to their eventual reunion (21).

For Damon, every person or event emerges momentarily from the stream of encounters before vanishing again, and, as Lukács warns, they are not given a specific weight or a definite position in the pattern of his whole (18). His relationship with Reiner remains shallow and Reiner chooses to keep it that way. On their trip to Lesotho the narrator reflects that “I become aware of certain differences between them” (26). It is on this journey with Reiner that Damon becomes acutely aware of how travel induces a heightened form of self-consciousness for him. Galgut has created a protagonist that, in this instance, exemplifies Lukács’s view of the afflicted modernist individual because Damon relishes in the view of the world that is “static and sensational” (Lukács 19). According to Damon “one of the most compelling elements in travel” is that “it makes sensations heightened and acute, the world is charged with a power it doesn’t have in ordinary life” (46). Damon’s heightened self-consciousness during travel mirrors the alienation of the modernist individual, as he seeks clarity in foreign landscapes only

to encounter the same dislocation that defines his experience at home; in contemporary South Africa, travel seems to offer a means of escaping historical burdens, yet simultaneously intensifies the confrontation with unresolved social and political realities that persist both abroad and at home.

Upon realising another difference between himself and Reiner, Damon reflects that it seems that “for Reiner this country is only a concept, some abstract idea that can be subjugated to the will” (29). Reiner’s detachment from people and history mirrors a colonial mindset that views land “in terms of distances and altitudes, spatial dimensions that can be collapsed into formulas” (29). There is “no mention of people or history” with Reiner, who ignores the lived reality of a nation’s past, for him “nothing matters except himself and the empty place he’s projecting himself into” (29). Reiner’s approach recalls Lukács’s critique of the alienated, fragmented individual and he becomes the physical manifestation of Damon’s isolated sense of self. He is the “dark attendant angel”, always present, yet someone with whom Damon is never able to connect (26). Reiner embodies the existential void both men inhabit.

Though travel seems to offer Damon the potential for progress, freedom and connection, he ultimately experiences only spiritual emptiness and disconnection, underscoring modernism’s theme of alienation. It is the egotistical and vacuous nature within himself and Reiner that causes him to feel alone on this journey. Reiner’s callous disregard for customs and people, “Why should we... [it’s] Their custom, not mine” (46), embodies an identity locked in perpetual alienation with a “desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life” (Appiah xiii) - the very antithesis of cosmopolitanism. Damon, by contrast, acknowledges the dangers of such detachment stating, “If your own pain is interesting to you, how much more detached will you be from somebody else’s pain” (28). He fears the loss of empathy and connection, which places him in the middle ground between modernist alienation

and a more hopeful resilience. Damon embodies Detloff's concept of resilience by expressing a desire to "intervene in rather than repeat" the menacing solitude he sees in Reiner (18). His sensitivity to others, despite his loneliness, reveals the potential for re-engagement with identity, even if his journey ultimately leaves him disillusioned. Damon's attitude of self-awareness evidences his potential to escape the void of perpetual modernist alienation.

For Damon, the journey is over when he realises that, though "On that lonely road [in Greece] they looked like mirror images of each other", this sense of unity is illusory (48). Damon reflects that perhaps "real communication" between them seemed unnecessary, as "words divide by multiplying", but ultimately, it was their lack of genuine connection that revealed "how dangerously unlike one another they are" (48). Reiner becomes an external manifestation of Damon's isolated inner self. This mirrors Lukács's modernist aesthetic where abstract and concrete potentiality are blurred because the modernist view of the "human condition" is one of solitariness and one incapable of meaningful relationships (Lukács 24). Damon's realisation that, "An image in a mirror is a reversal, the reflection and the original are joined but might cancel each other out" (48) underscores the danger of a fragmented self which lead to a profound existential disconnection.

Lukács argues that the modernist condition, as described by Heidegger, is one of "thrownness-into-being", where individuals struggle to form meaningful relationships and experience the impossibility of understanding the origins and goals of their existence (Lukács 20-21). This solitariness is central to Damon's journey, as he grapples with the isolation Reiner reflects back at him. Damon's struggle is not solely about external relationships; it also involves navigating the internal divisions within his own identity. His recognition of the need to shed his isolated self in favour of a more fluid, transitive identity marks the beginning of a deeper personal transformation. In this chapter, Damon's experience epitomises the modernist theme of

alienation: he is caught between a desire for connection and an overwhelming sense of detachment. His paradoxical position—heightened isolation paired with a longing for connection—highlights the modernist tension between belonging and alienation. Damon’s journey, like that of many modernist protagonists, navigates external borders while remaining trapped in an internal landscape of disconnection. His failure to forge meaningful bonds underscores the persistence of alienation in both personal and societal contexts.

I have demonstrated that “The Follower” exemplifies the limitations Lukács diagnoses in modernist characterisation. Damon’s experiences reflect the modernist struggle to reconcile fractured identities and form genuine connections. His journey encapsulates the tension between alienation and belonging, a central theme in modernist literature. Damon’s oscillation between a disintegrated sense of self and the desire for connection mirrors the modernist subject’s fragmented identity, as highlighted by Lukács. His inability to bridge these opposing states ultimately reflects the critique of modernist alienation and the existential angst it entails. Damon’s recognition of his former identity at the end of the chapter sets the stage for his transition from “The Follower” to “The Lover”, marking his attempt to transcend isolation. In this way, his journey underscores the enduring relevance of modernist subjectivity, revealing the complexities of identity and the ongoing tension between isolation and belonging.

2.2 Pursuing Love in the Blank Space Beyond

In the second chapter of the novel, “The Lover”, Damon is “wandering in Zimbabwe” a few years later, still grappling with heightened self-consciousness as he transitions between versions of himself (79). Damon’s internal journey is revealed through a split narrative, showcasing his struggle to connect with both his inner self and the world around him. This sense of restlessness can be linked to the historical and socio-political dislocation experienced by many expatriate South Africans, as they confront the complexities of their identities while

living beyond their homeland. He begins to recognise the differences within himself, reflecting a growing desire for connection. It is in the paragraph that we witness one of Galgut's captivating moments of the self in dialogue.

What is he looking for, he himself doesn't know. At this remove, his thoughts are lost to me now, and yet I can explain him better than my present self, he is buried under my skin. His life is unweighted and centreless, so that he feels he could blow away at any time. (79)

This moment clearly demonstrates Lejeune's argument that there is power in the blending of first and third-person narration. Lejeune notes that this narrative choice does not diminish the immediacy of first-person perspectives; instead, it creates a "doubling" effect that, I argue, deepens our understanding of Damon's internal conflict (Lejeune 29). The shift in narrative perspective captures the restlessness Damon feels, a lesson learned from his previous journey as "The Follower", where he faced the dangers of perpetual isolation. Now he yearns to form a connection with another person, which is evident in his reflection that:

Something in him has changed, he can't seem to properly connect with the world. He feels this not as a failure of the world but as a massive failing in himself, he would like to change it but doesn't know how. In his clearest moments he thinks that he has lost the ability to love, people or places or things, most of all the person and place and thing that he is. (79-80)

His previous isolated sense of self has made him unable to form meaningful connections with others. As Lukács notes the "only 'development in this [modernist] literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition" (Lukács 21). Damon puts his isolation down to the fact that he has lost "the ability to love" or as Kostelac identifies, he is in a state of "lovelessness" (*Damon Galgut and the Critical Reception* 176). For Damon, travel becomes "a kind of

mourning”, a reflection of his aimless movement, not driven by curiosity, but by “bored anguish” and his inability to settle (80). His yearning for a loving relationship becomes evident when he laments that only with “somebody I loved, then I could love” the places he finds himself in (80). He continuously finds his self in dialogue with former and future versions of himself which encourage the development of a more transitive identity, he yearns to connect with “the blank space beyond”—another human being (101).

Damon’s relentless desire to move on underscores his failure to connect with who and what is beyond himself, illustrated in his observation: “This part of him, the part that watches... never goes away...” (81). Despite appearing content and engaging with others, a deeper part of him remains unfulfilled and aware of his need to escape. Damon’s struggle captures the tension between belonging and alienation. Lukács attributes this alienation to a focus on “exalting man’s subjectivity, at the expense of the objective reality of his environment” and as such “man’s subjectivity itself is impoverished” (Lukács 24). For Damon, the psychological impact of South Africa’s history exacerbates his internal discord; he is acutely aware of his disconnection not only from others but also from the socio-political realities that shape his identity. The consequence of this disjunction is a pervasive alienation and “the lack of a consistent view of human nature” (Lukács 26). As we witness Damon “looking down... on himself there, among the crowds” (81), it is clear to see how he “is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself.” (Lukács 26) Damon’s perpetual restlessness and inability to forge meaningful connections serve as a powerful commentary on the human condition, reinforcing the central theme of alienation in modernist literature. Ultimately, his journey reflects a deeper existential crisis rooted in a historical context that complicates the search for identity, connection, and belonging.

An overriding mood of lamentation permeates the second chapter of the novel as Damon desperately tries to become “The Lover”. His journey in this chapter can be separated into two parts. The first part begins after he swims in the hotel pool and encounters a group of young travellers who invite him to join their trip to Malawi. Driven by his burning desire to “be somewhere else”, he accepts (81). However, the journey is arduous, culminating in a harrowing train ride followed by an eight-hour bus trip to the Malawian border. Despite successfully crossing these external borders, Damon struggles to navigate the more profound boundaries of human connection. He finds himself “irritated with the other travellers in the group” who embody a very privileged version of cosmopolitanism (86). Their disdain for their African experience manifests in complaints about “their terrible trip through Zambia” lamenting the “horrible” rocks, and the “dirty” bus-station as if the “shortcomings and squalor of the continent have let them down personally...” (87).

Damon shows a sensitivity to the place he travels to as he comments that “it never seems to occur to [the travellers] that the conditions they found horrible and disgusting are not part of a set that will be struck when they have gone offstage” (87). This moment reveals Damon’s ironic awareness of the travellers’ views of Africa, serving as a pivotal reflection of his internal struggle. This irony encapsulates modernist aesthetics, highlighting how it functions as a form of self-defence against his own alienation. Rather than aligning himself with the travellers’ disdain, Damon critiques their privileged perspectives, which allows him to maintain a distance from their superficiality and critique his own position within this hierarchy. Here Damon reflects a modernist concern “about the slippery relationship between the collective and the individual” as well as the “permeable boundary between spectatorship and participation” (Detloff 12). These travellers fail to “take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives” which goes hand in hand with the necessity to take an “interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (Appiah xiii). This failure echoes Damon’s

own struggle with alienation, particularly in his acknowledgment of losing the “ability to love” (79). This ironic self-awareness becomes pivotal in Damon’s journey, as it leads him to confront his own solipsism—an awareness that challenges his previous sense of isolation, as seen in “The Follower”. It signals his movement toward a more self-critical position, acknowledging the limitations of his earlier perspective and the need for deeper engagement with both the world and his own humanity.

Things shift when the group begins to “escape time” and enjoy the “inertia” offered by a lake in Malawi which they perceive as the true embodiment of “Africa” because of the “religious experience” it offers them (89). These travellers embody a cosmopolitanism that signifies elite belonging to the global *polis* (Detloff 7). Damon’s awareness of the places he travels is narrated with an air of sarcasm as Galgut writes:

Even the local people take up their appointed place in this version of paradise, they are happy to drop everything when called... When they’re not needed they simply fade into the background, going back to their natural tasks, supplying peaceful lines of smoke from the picturesque huts they live in, or heading across your line of vision at an appropriate moment in the distance. (88)

This ironic awareness reveals the missing puzzle piece that Jameson identifies in modernist literature. Jameson argues that the formal innovations of modernist literature aim to depict the fragmented, disorienting, and contradictory imperialist world. The loss of meaning in these texts mirrors the broader context of colonialism, characterised by a structural displacement of economic power beyond the metropolis. While the details are described as they may appear to the Swedish and Danish travellers, there is an underlying recognition that the “local people” in their “appointed place” who are “happy to drop everything when called” are a significant structural segment of the economic system that is located elsewhere (88). The travellers’

inability to grasp that the locals' livelihoods largely depend on tourism reveals their "inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole" (Jameson 157). Galgut reconstructs the "radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation" through Damon's ironic awareness (Jameson 157). He demonstrates the large gap that remains in "the structural connections between that and this, between daily life in the metropolis and the absent space of the colony" (Jameson 157). Galgut experiments with the "exceptional situation" of "overlap and coexistence between these two incommensurable realities" that Jameson suggests as necessary for a more productive exploration of modernism (Jameson 157). I argue that this aspect of Galgut's writing positions him as a resilient writer and persistent modernist who wishes to "intervene in rather than repeat" limiting modes of modernist representation (Detloff 18). Through Damon's ironic lens, we see not only his critique of his privileged position but also the broader implications of a society struggling with its historical legacy, emphasising how modernist aesthetics can illuminate the complexities of identity, belonging, and alienation in a post-colonial context.

Yet, it is not long before Damon is again consumed by the "blue thread of uneasiness in him", growing weary of the hedonistic group (89). Despite the beauty of his surroundings, he cannot appreciate it due to a profound lack of connection with anyone around him. He keenly observes the romantic connection blossoming between two travellers, where it is "all touching and happy," but he feels like the "odd one out" (90). Galgut employs the same narrative irony as Damon listens to "a conversation behind him" on the beach (90). When a Danish man describes South Africa as beautiful but laments that "all the South Africans [are] so fucked-up", the group falls silent, suddenly aware of Damon's presence (90). Galgut writes, "of all of them he is the only one smiling, but inwardly" (90). Here Damon embodies an ambivalent condition, where he is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to his nation.

Damon comes to realise the extreme frivolity of the group, who would classify him as “a fucked-up South African” (91). The ambivalence in Galgut’s work suggests that a dynamic relationship between the self and the nation must be found. Damon understands that “individuality and subjectivity cannot be separated from the social [context]” yet he recognises that this does not mean that the individual’s subjectivity is favoured over the nation (Gaylard 66). Rather, the relationship between the two becomes more dynamic, allowing the individual to exist alongside the nation without subsumed by it (Gaylard 66). This dialogue facilitates a “new form of subjectivity” (Gaylard 73), foregrounding the importance of the “patch” and existing alongside your past and present social, global economic, political context (Detloff 2). Galgut’s exploration of Damon’s condition resonates with modernist critiques of elite detachment, revealing the weight of local history and context against the desire for belonging within a global community. Galgut suggests that we are so much more than just “fucked-up South African[s]” (91). The question that persists is: despite the dialogue between self and nation and the potential it presents to shape a more transitive identity, how can the solitary subject of modernism become an active agent of change, both within the polis and on a global scale?

Galgut uses Damon’s heightened self-consciousness to highlight that Damon has become caught up in the same privilege of cosmopolitanism that he critiques. Damon is “conscious of a division within himself that he cannot overcome, failing to connect others but aware of the possibilities of connection” (Jacobs 98). While he is aware of this double bind, he does not know how to resolve it. From the perspective that *In a Strange Room* offers us, Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism and connecting with others despite difference starts to emerge as quite idealistic and not so easily attainable. The novel suggests that, while it is not possible to escape the privilege of travel, having an awareness of that privilege is crucial to the process of navigating the self or of forming meaningful connections with others. It is this self-awareness

in both Damon the protagonist and Galgut the author that inform the ‘spirit of critique’—to recall Walkowitz—employed throughout the novel. I argue that the ‘spirit of critique’ employed as an attitude of self-awareness, allows Galgut to move from a solipsistic perspective (embodied by Damon in “The Follower”) to one that is more capable of ethical action.

The second part of his journey begins with a group of three travellers with whom he becomes fascinated. Christian, an older man from France, and Jerome and Alice, a younger man and woman from Switzerland. Christian, the only one fluent in English, serves as a translator, which complicates Damon’s attempts to connect. Damon is immediately drawn to the younger man with “a beauty that is almost shocking, red lips and high cheek-bones and a long fringe of hair” (86). Yet every interaction feels constrained by “a weird formality, through which no personal quality can break” (96). Despite feeling more comfortable with these three, he acknowledges that even “if he could speak French he could never close up the gap” (99). The language barrier further obstructs his desire for genuine connection, amplifying his loneliness until it resonates in him like “the lingering sound of a bell” (99).

Damon experiences what Julia Kristeva refers to in “Scorched Happiness”: the deep ambivalence of the foreigner who delights in the thrill of departure while haunted by what they leave behind (4). This happiness is “scorched” because it is fleeting, and the foreigner learns that to maintain a sense of temporary happiness, one must keep moving (Kristeva 4). While he briefly enjoys the happiness of following the group around spontaneously, the happiness is scorched as he comes to realise that he is still “The Follower”. He is being haunted by a former version of himself and he knows that he cannot afford to stop the process of self-formation by stagnating. His previous sense of belonging acquired from not needing a visa to enter Malawi has now turned to a sense of alienation. He proceeds to pay his way across the border and is seen off by the two officials who wave “like a pair of friendly relatives” (110).

With an overwhelming sense of lovelessness comes a restlessness that Damon cannot shake, and he finds himself travelling around London and Europe. Travelling gives him a clearer idea of who he is, as he reflects:

...he sees the lights of a ferris wheel go round and round and round. He doesn't know why, but this scene is like a mirror in which he sees himself. Not his face, or his past, but who he is. He feels a melancholy as soft and colourless as wind, and for the first time since he started travelling he thinks that he would like to stop. Stay in one place, never move again. (139)

Damon has gone through self-transformation because at the beginning of the chapter he feels he has lost his ability to love “people or places or things, most of all the person and place and thing that he is” and that his inability to connect with the world is “a massive failing in himself” (79). However, after his encounters described above, he is able to identify a clearer version of who he is. He is able to find himself as “The Lover”—not of others, but of himself. He returns to Cape Town, living in a friend's house, where he begins to dispel the feeling of “rootlessness” and foster “a sort of intimacy develops between him and the place” (143-144). The process of self-renewal only deepens as Damon tends to the garden and finds new life as “old dead branches begin to sprout buds and leaves, and then bursts of colour” but more significantly he feels this growth and transformation “as if it's happening inside himself” (144). He finally feels rooted and connected to a place as “there is no interruption between him and the world, he isn't separate anymore from what he sees”, which is a feeling that he previously thought only travel could give him (145).

Damon's joy and newfound rootedness is short lived as he receives news of Jerome's tragic passing in a motorbike accident, and the grief he experiences acts as a catalyst that sends him out “walking into the world” once more (146). He has a revelation that encapsulates the nature

of self-evolution, which is that it is a process that can never be complete. Rather it must be viewed as a journey—ephemeral and incomplete. He says,

A journey is a gesture inscribed in space, it vanishes even as it is made. You go from one place to another place, and on to somewhere else again, and already behind you there is no trace that you were ever there... Things happen once only and are never repeated, never return. Except in memory. (146)

Damon's realisation that the journey of self-discovery is ephemeral speaks to the heart of human experience—each step forward is imbued with the weight of memory and the spectre of past selves. The tragedy of Jerome's passing propels Damon into a renewed exploration of the world, reinforcing that true connection often emerges from the interplay of joy and grief. Galgut leaves readers with an evocative message: to navigate the complexities of identity is to embrace the transience of existence, to find meaning in the stories of loss, and to acknowledge that our identities are continually shaped by the relationships we forge and the places we inhabit. In the end, Damon's quest to become "The Lover", underscores the necessity of both rootedness and fluidity in the pursuit of self, illuminating the profound beauty of human resilience in the face of an ever-evolving landscape.

2.3 Articulating Loss - Guardianship and Turmoil

The third and final chapter in the novel is titled "The Guardian" and Damon's heightened self-consciousness shifts to an external concern for a friend—Anna. Damon and Anna have "a good friendship, she is like a sister to him, somebody he loves and who makes him laugh. Somebody he wants to protect" (154). He invites her on a trip to India out of concern for her mental stability in the capacity of being "her guardian" (154). Damon believes that a break from the norms of life will aid her recovery, yet upon first seeing her he admits, "he knows he's in trouble" (149). Anna's unpredictable nature and her reliance on "a small pharmacy" that she

carries reveal the precariousness of their relationship, further complicating his sense of responsibility (150).

Damon points out that “his travelling habits have changed” and that he “has become more sedentary, staying in one place for longer periods of times, with less of that youthful rushing around” (153). This shift indicates a nascent connection to the people and places he inhabits; for instance, he begins to engage with his surroundings by “giving money to a sick man... [and] calling the vet to attend to a stray dog” but flags this as problematic (153). “The Lover” has taken to establishing roots in a place as he finds himself “setting up a web of habits and social reflexes that he usually travels to escape” (153). His new approach is evidence of the process of self-formation rooted in the lessons of his past experiences. Here, I draw on Lukács’s theory of the alienated modernist subject, which posits that true self-awareness often arises from grappling with one’s environment and relationships. Damon’s attempts to connect with the world around him, while still bearing the weight of his past, embody this struggle.

As Detloff emphasises, the causes of past events “continue to exist” in our present (Detloff 1), indicating that Damon’s journey is inextricably linked to his prior experiences. I suggest that Detloff’s argument about the ethically productive potential of persistent modernism becomes evident in Damon’s growth and his capacity to confront Anna’s trauma. His newfound love for himself allows him to engage authentically with the places he visits, illustrated by his comfort at the hotel, “where he usually stays” and the warm welcome from “familiar faces” (154). This evolution suggests a move away from the profound alienation that characterised his earlier journeys. However, the focus on his own journey and the navigations of himself is soon superseded as he faces his responsibility as Anna’s guardian on this trip. This tension between his self-exploration and the ethical imperative to care for others echoes Lukács’s notion of the modernist individual navigating the complexities of identity and relationships in an alienating

world. Thus, while Damon experiences moments of belonging, the limits of his alienated modernist identity persist, illustrating the ongoing struggle to reconcile his past with his present.

Damon's journey reveals a "different form of loneliness, stemming this time from the loss of an established connection with someone he loves and esteems" (Kostelac, *Damon Galgut and the Critical Reception* 187). As their journey continues, he becomes increasingly aware of "a thing taken up station inside of her, driving along with so much fury and power" (155). He is unnerved by the idea that someone he was so familiar with, who has "always listened to him" has suddenly "changed allegiances" (154). Damon perceives her illness as "a person separate to Anna", a new version of herself, someone he is unable to understand (155). As he spends more time with her, Damon recognises how profoundly out of touch Anna is with any semblance of her former self.

Damon faces immense difficulty navigating the contrasting selves of both him and Anna. Their dynamic is fraught with tension leading him to express that "Under the actual words they speak another dialogue is in progress, in which she is somehow a victim and I the nagging bully" (160). Anna has drawn an internal line and crossing it to find common ground proves nearly impossible. Damon's generosity as "The Lover" and now "The Guardian" manifests in his attempts to breach his own boundaries to establish or rekindle a connection with Anna. However, he feels that "a stranger has taken up residence in her, somebody dark and reckless that he doesn't trust, who wants to consume Anna completely" (161). I propose that Galgut's characterisation of Anna's suffering embodies Lukács's notion of the modernist character of "*terminus ad quem*"⁴ (Lukács 30). Anna's retreat into her mental illness, as Lukács emphasises, will not provide her any sense of direction as it signals a sense of disillusionment with her past,

⁴ The escape into psychopathology.

present, and future sense of self (Lukács 30). Her disillusionment aligns with Detloff's assertion that modernist narratives persistently confront trauma, reflecting the ongoing challenges individuals face in reconciling their identities with their experiences. Her self-destructive behaviour can be seen as a protest that is "an empty gesture, expressing nausea, or discomfort, or longing" (Lukács 30). The lack of content in her actions illustrates how alienation manifests in modernist literature, reinforcing the idea that without meaningful connections, characters are left adrift (Lukács 30). In this sense, Anna's struggle highlights the tragic consequences of a life steeped in isolation, while simultaneously reflecting the broader existential dilemmas faced by contemporary individuals navigating their identities in a fragmented world.

When Anna attempts suicide, Damon is confronted with the emotional and financial implications of her act. Damon's actions are described through the lens of the theatre of the absurd, where the absence of meaningful action highlights the futility of existence. In this context, Damon's frantic movements serve to underscore his existential dread: "Now I'm watching myself move, like somebody who isn't me. See him run around the bed and grab her by the arm. Hear him calling out her name..." (173) The shift to the first-person narrator emphasises his disembodiment; he notes, "His body is working by itself... while his mind and spirit are elsewhere, having a high, disconnected dialogue" (173). As he attempts to rescue what little remains of Anna's self, he becomes increasingly isolated, expressing that he "has never felt so alone" (175). The stark contrast between his earlier tranquillity—"walking on the beach"—and the subsequent chaos of having to "clean his dying friend's shit" encapsulates the overwhelming nature of his experience (179). The situation proves too much for Damon and he finds solace in the presence of Caroline, a woman he hardly knows, "bar a few conversations" from previous visits who has experience as a nurse (175). Anna has drawn Damon into her isolated world of neurosis, and in doing so—to cite Lukács—has reduced

“reality to a nightmare” where everything is distorted (Lukács 31). Damon, who was once connected and rooted, now feels alienated from himself and his surroundings.

In this moment of crisis, Damon’s gratitude towards a small group of near-strangers—Caroline, Sjeff, and Paula—becomes pivotal. Their willingness to keep vigil over Anna’s corpse-like body exemplifies Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism: “each human being has responsibilities to every other” (Appiah xiv). This act of collective care underscores the value of individual lives and reinforces the idea that, even in his isolation, Damon is part of a broader human community that values life in its particularity (Appiah xiii). Although the cosmopolitan ethos remains elusive, Damon finds moments where he can connect with others, however fleetingly. After reading Anna’s journal he discovers that “she was already dreaming up this other scenario, in which she needed him as the helpless bystander, the custodian of her remains” (187). Attempted suicide is a crime in India which means he faces bureaucratic repercussions too. His frustration and disappointment in Anna are evident when he reflects that if Anna recovers, “he doesn’t know how he will ever be able to speak to her again” (187). In this chapter, the interplay between Damon’s struggle with his past selves and his evolving relationships underscores the broader themes of modernist alienation and the search for connection. Detloff’s notion of confronting trauma echoes throughout, suggesting that Damon’s attempts to reconcile his experiences ultimately lead him to a tentative acknowledgment of interconnectedness, even amidst the disillusionment and chaos of modern life.

In this chapter, Damon grapples with his retrospective recognition of failure—specifically, his inability to uphold his promise to ensure Anna’s well-being, captured in his painful admission that “the truth that will hurt me forever” (194). He reflects on her relentless pursuit of “toxic, terminal rapture”, acknowledging his role as one of the “walk-on parts in a drama centred only on her” (195). Damon is acutely aware of the need for moments of self-centredness in the

journey toward self-discovery and reform. In the previous chapter he acknowledges "...in every story of obsession there is only one character, only one plot. I am writing about myself alone" (126). In this context, I argue that Galgut manages to use elements of the alienated protagonist productively. In "The Guardian" Damon recognises when to retreat into "the limits of his own experience" (Lukács 21). These self-reflexive moments allow him to establish a more compassionate relationship with himself, whereas Anna loses herself entirely to the dark stranger within her. Unlike Damon, who evolves from his previous identity as the "dark attendant angel", Anna is unable to engage in the necessary processes of recursion or live alongside past versions of herself (26). This recognition of Anna's stagnation underscores Damon's self-transformation.

When Anna finally recovers and is sent home Damon describes her as a "translucent husk of a woman who nearly resembles his old friend. But not quite" (203). After saying goodbye, he slowly reengages himself and his surroundings. Despite the burdens and responsibilities brought about by Anna's actions, Damon makes a significant connection with Caroline. Typically, Damon seeks to move on, to travel, especially in uncomfortable situations. This experience with Anna is no different as he desires to "leave this whole experience behind, to erase every trace of it" but this time he cannot escape, largely due to his connection with Caroline (205). She is there "every day to remind him" of the past, intensifying his fear that he will fail her just as he failed Anna (206). As their relationship develops, Damon's heightened self-consciousness resurfaces and he recognises his need for "leave-taking, as a climax and conclusion" (206). During dinner, Caroline expresses her wish to recount the story of how she lost her husband. One day they meet on the beach, Damon listens intently as she begins to speak:

Almost as soon as she begins to speak, she's quaking and trembling. It happened thirty years ago, but it's as if she's living it again in this moment, and it becomes like that for

him too. Her story travels into him, his skin is very thin, there's no barrier between him and the world, he takes it all in. (207)

In this moment of self-navigation, Damon encounters empathy for Caroline's experience, realising the necessity of connecting with others to remain tethered to the world. He finally establishes an emotional bond, feeling a deep sense of empathy for her suffering, yet he struggles with how to carry the weight of her story: "...what can you do with a story like this...lightning can strike from a clear sky one morning and take away everything you've built, everything you've counted on, leaving wreckage and no meaning behind" (207). Damon's empathetic response ties in with a more productive form of empathetic cosmopolitanism as outlined by Eze, emphasising that "the cosmopolitan spirit of interrelatedness and the concept of multiple belongings" is crucial in contemporary society (Eze 7). The empathy present in this interaction serves to mitigate the elitism and aloofness that characterised Damon's earlier encounters, fostering a sense of connection that is deeply rooted in the shared human experience (Eze 7). This transformative encounter with Caroline marks a pivotal moment in Damon's journey, illustrating how authentic connection can anchor individuals in their tumultuous realities and promote a collective understanding of shared suffering and resilience.

Moving forward from this experience is "like an endless running away", but Damon is never able to "lose himself" in travel as he did before (208). He finds "he is stuck in one place, in the past" highlighting that despite the potential for growth and progress, he still suffers from moments of isolation (208). Damon's final instance of self-reflection offers an opportunity to uncover a deeper meaning in existence through an effective combination of modalities of the self. This moment arises in the grief associated with Anna's inevitable death (210). The closest he comes to her again is "a silent confrontation with a bag of ash and bones, all that's left of her... It seems bizarre... that a human being can be reduced to this" (211). He realises that he

cannot escape any past version of himself, rather, he must continuously form and reform these versions of himself, which are patched onto one another. Years later, while visiting the grave site Caroline spoke of in Morocco that Damon “finds himself suddenly, unexpectedly, sobbing” as Caroline’s story returns to him and this time the “memory and words [are] inseparable from each other” (212-213). He realises that “Lives leak into each other, the past lays claim to the present” (213). Through revisiting “all the mess and anguish and disaster” of his past he allows himself to connect with a place and grieve the loss of a significant relationship (213). Damon’s act of revisitation resonates with Detloff’s assertion that the past and present can form a relational dynamic, enabling an understanding of “how one comes to function in the present” (Detloff 2). I argue that Galgut embodies what Detloff describes as a resilient writer, one who “respects the dynamic relationship between the particularity of suffering and the temporality of living” (Detloff 15). In *In a Strange Room*, Galgut articulates the past in Detloff’s terms – an integral part “of the continuously emerging present.” (Detloff 15). The evolution of self that Damon undergoes is representative of this continuous emergence, emphasising how past versions of oneself shape the present.

While memory plays a pivotal role in Galgut’s narrative, facilitating self-representation and formal experimentation with autobiography, it also underscores the tensions explored by scholars like Lukács and Detloff. Damon’s journey of self-discovery reflects the alienation central to modernist subjectivity: an internal fragmentation that mirrors the broader uncertainty of existence. His struggle to reconcile the desire for connection with the isolation inherent in his self-awareness exemplifies the contradictions that define modernist protagonists.

Galgut’s exploration of identity through Damon’s introspective journey emphasises the enduring relevance of modernist aesthetics in capturing the complexities of modern alienation. In focusing on Damon’s experience, Galgut demonstrates the persistent tension between the

individual's search for meaning and the impossibility of fully realising that meaning in a fractured world. Damon's navigation of his internal and external landscapes reflects a modernist engagement with subjectivity that does not offer resolution, but instead, an invitation to confront the continual process of self-formation amid personal and social dislocation.

Galgut's novel, when viewed through this lens, reinforces the significance of the modernist exploration of alienation as both a thematic concern and a formal strategy. By situating his protagonist within a context of introspective fragmentation and unresolved conflict, Galgut elevates the modernist critique of identity. His work suggests that the search for self-understanding, though fraught with difficulty, remains essential in navigating the complexities of modern existence.

Thus, by positioning Galgut within the broader modernist tradition, I argue that his exploration of alienation is not just a narrative technique but an engagement with the fundamental tensions of human subjectivity. His novel highlights how the quest for identity is inextricably linked to the alienation that defines the modernist condition, offering a nuanced contribution to contemporary literary discourse on modernism's lasting impact.

CHAPTER 3: FRAGMENTED SELVES - THE STRUGGLES OF BELONGING IN *ARCTIC SUMMER*

In *Arctic Summer*, Damon Galgut traces E.M. Forster's period of creative and personal stasis before the publication of *A Passage to India*. The novel's title encapsulates the tension central to modernist aesthetics, reflecting Forster's internal condition of being simultaneously "frozen and unable to move" yet "open to summer, warmth, light, and human interaction" (Galgut). Galgut, in a 2014 interview for *Polari Magazine*, explains his fascination with Forster's "inability to really be who he was," noting parallels with *In a Strange Room*, where both protagonists navigate being outsiders "searching for moments of intimacy and also deflecting them when they become available" (Galgut).

In this chapter I will examine how Galgut's formal experimentation with biofiction engages with modernist representations of subjectivity in contemporary literature. I argue that Galgut's ability to reimagine history and recreate Forster's inner turmoil exemplifies the oscillation between alienation and belonging that characterises modernist aesthetics. By exploring the protagonist Morgan's journey of self-discovery, I highlight the tension between his longing for freedom and connection and the persistent threat of alienation. In doing so, I situate Galgut as a critical cosmopolitan writer whose work interrogates the complexities of individual subjectivity in a fractured world.

3.1 Exploring the Affinities Between Forster and Galgut

"When you come back you will not be you. And I may not be I."—E.M. Forster

This poignant observation by Forster encapsulates the themes of transformation and dislocation central to *Arctic Summer*. Damon Galgut's novel reconstructs "the Arctic summer of Forster's long fictional silence, which lasted from 1910 until the publication of *A Passage to India* in

1924” (Parker). Drawing on Forster’s diaries, letters, and novels, Galgut intricately blurs the boundaries between biographical truth and creative interpretation, so much so that, as one reviewer notes, “it’s hard at times to tell which novelist is which” (Parker). By engaging with biofiction—a genre that blends factual biography with imaginative narrative—Galgut explores how the past and an author’s identity can be reshaped through fiction, questioning the ability of any writer to fully capture the complexities of the self and history. His use of modernist techniques highlights the tension between societal constraints and individual autonomy, portraying how rigid norms can isolate the individual and hinder the pursuit of self-discovery. By examining these affinities between Forster and Galgut, this section explores how *Arctic Summer* reimagines the modernist project in a contemporary context.

Tim Trengove-Jones argues that discussions of modernism and contemporary culture must engage with the “overwhelming presence of a homosexual ethos” (97). This insight is crucial for understanding the political and cultural dynamics in *Arctic Summer*. Galgut’s choice to examine Forster’s life invites a layered reflection on identity and freedom, particularly in the context of shifting societal norms. While Trengove-Jones focuses on post-apartheid South Africa, his assertion that debates about sexualities expose “torsions of ideological opportunity and constraint” resonates with the radical social changes depicted in *Arctic Summer* (98).

Forster’s context, shaped by colonial structures and early 20th-century norms, differs significantly from post-1994 South Africa. Yet, both settings reveal the ambivalence of self-discovery in times of upheaval. Galgut illustrates how Forster’s encounters abroad loosened the “hierarchically structured patterns” of his English identity, creating space for new freedoms while also exposing him to moments of profound alienation (94). This oscillation between liberation and constraint underscores Galgut’s engagement with modernist themes in a contemporary context.

It is the sabotage, emasculation, and replication identified by Trengove-Jones that I would like to align with Galgut's exploration of identity in both the form and content of *Arctic Summer*. Galgut's use of modernist aesthetics—as a gay, South African writer—represents his response to the historical exclusion of marginalised voices from accounts of modernism, both canonical and emergent. Through his re-presentation of Forster, who is constrained by the normative structures of Edwardian England, Galgut engages with themes that may resonate with the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa, where exclusion and injustice persist despite progress.

While *Arctic Summer* departs from national concerns in its immediate content, Galgut's work remains firmly engaged with South Africa's literary and cultural negotiations. His engagement with modernist aesthetics challenges traditional hierarchies of representation, creating space for marginalised figures and texts to contribute significant lessons from their positions on the periphery. This persistence of modernism in South African literature underscores the necessity of exploring alternative cosmopolitanisms—frameworks that expand our understanding of South African identity and culture by incorporating diverse and historically excluded perspectives.

Forster claims that “fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence...” (Forster 98). Galgut was drawn to writing *Arctic Summer* by P.N. Furbank's biography of Forster, Forster's “story of being stuck,” and his “desperate battle with his sexuality” (Galgut). I argue that the “captivating spell of the past” offered Galgut a way to write Forster's history in a manner that could “exist alongside” his own experiences (Detloff 1-2). Fictionalising Forster's life allows past and present to become relational, where “what came before” helps to understand “how one comes to function in the present” (Detloff 2). Galgut's exploration of an

esteemed modernist figure allows the past to be articulated as a part “of the continuously emerging present” in *Arctic Summer* (Detloff 15). In this novel, Galgut assumes the role of a *metic* figure, navigating the boundaries of fiction and history. I argue that immersing himself in modernity provides a sense of belonging, but it also binds him to the context he seeks to understand. This dynamic approach offers a modernism that is not “absolute” but fluid and “expanded” (Detloff 6; Paris 21).

Building on Galgut’s dynamic engagement with modernist aesthetics, his fictionalisation of Forster’s life further deepens the relational interplay between past and present. This connection is not merely thematic but also personal, as Galgut forms an affinity—or what Mathilda Slabbert terms an “affective affiliation”—with Forster (Slabbert 97). In “Forming ‘Affective Communities’ and Narrative Forms of Affection: Damon Galgut’s *Arctic Summer*”, Slabbert argues that *Arctic Summer* employs “self-reflexive gestures, narrative strategies... as well as thematic concern with the politics of friendship and affection” to reflect the shared sexual and creative sensibilities between author and subject. Drawing on Bakhtin, she describes this as “the narrative and compositional weaving [...] of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life” (97).

This shared sensibility between Galgut and Forster contributes to a nuanced understanding of their common experiences. It also resonates with Walkowitz’s exploration of modernist literature’s focus on private, everyday events to redefine international politics and foster critical cosmopolitanism (Walkowitz 10). Both Slabbert and Walkowitz underscore how personal narratives expand our understanding of global processes, advocating for flexible models of perception and representation that link individual experiences to broader socio-political contexts in Galgut’s novel.

Arctic Summer departs from the local and national by imagining terrains that foster plural, more fluid conceptions of selfhood. Galgut's novel interrogates the interplay between belonging and alienation, a tension central to modernist subjectivity. Through Morgan's journey, the novel captures the productive potential of navigating boundaries—be they cultural, geographic, or personal—as sites for redefinition and meaning-making.

This focus on boundaries and transience challenges fixed notions of identity, replacing them with a cosmopolitanism grounded in diversity and mobility. By centring difference and fostering conversations across borders, *Arctic Summer* reimagines modernism as a persistent, ethical framework that embraces fluidity and inclusivity.

3.2 Escaping Singularity

In *Arctic Summer*, Galgut charts the journey of a reimagined E.M. Forster (referred to as Morgan) as he seeks to cross boundaries, both in the world and within himself. Morgan's primary struggle is with his own identity and the societal constructs that have confined it. This sense of self is one that mirrors what Lukács identifies in modernist literature: the tension between individual subjectivity and external constraints. Forster's desire to escape his stifling, singular selfhood reflects a broader modernist rejection of "the dreariness of life under capitalism" and a search for deeper, more dynamic forms of identity (Lukács 29). The novel opens with Morgan striving to break free from a limited sense of self, which is constrained by the societal pressures that demand conformity. This pursuit of a more fluid, transitive identity reflects modernist concerns with transformation, movement, and the quest for self-definition outside traditional boundaries.

However, as Morgan ventures further into this journey, he encounters the complex interplay between freedom and alienation. His attempts to escape the singularity imposed by national

and cultural boundaries lead him into a state of tension where belonging and alienation become intertwined. This aligns with Lukács's observation that the rejection of external reality in favour of subjective experience often leaves one without a clear "sense of direction" (Lukács 30). While Morgan's quest for freedom challenges the confinements of singular identity, it also exposes the fragility of that freedom—highlighting the difficulty of navigating between a desire for belonging and the alienating forces of isolation.

The novel begins as Morgan embarks on his voyage to India and he becomes emblematic of the modernist protagonist seeking to transcend societal constructs and explore the depths of personal identity. Morgan's dissatisfaction with the English company he is travelling with emerges from the outset, "Although he had only come aboard a week ago, Morgan was beginning to feel that he had been on the ship for too long" (Galgut 2). Despite occupying the liminal space of crossing, which holds all the potential of self-discovery and self-reformation, the ship itself becomes a microcosm of the society he is desperate to escape. Morgan describes the ship as "a tiny piece of England" full of "casual vileness, flung out in airy asides" (2-3). His dissatisfaction reflects a broader sense of disillusionment with societal norms and expectations, in line with Lukács's theory of the alienated protagonist grappling with the constraints of reified social structures. At this point, Morgan desires to "be distinguished from [his] social and historical environment" (Lukács 19).

As Morgan navigates the confines of the ship, he finds solace in moments of connection with fellow passengers, particularly Kenneth Searight, whose openness and vulnerability challenge Morgan's rigid sense of self. Searight shares a piece of his sensual, personal poetry with Morgan leaving him surprised by how Searight exposes himself "so recklessly" and "to a near-stranger" (8). He cannot fathom how someone could possibly be "proud of who and what he was" (9). This interaction highlights the tension between the expected and the desired self, as Morgan grapples with the multiplicity of identity. The necessity of self-transformation

becomes evident through Morgan's awareness that "He could not refer to his condition, even in his own mind, with too direct a term; he spoke of it obliquely, as being *in a minority*" (10). In conversations with Searight and Goldie (another travel companion), Morgan learns that there are alternate ways to be in the world, specifically through Searight's candid revelations about his "sexual conquests... mostly with boys and young men" (11).

Morgan acknowledges his inability "to translate yearning into deed" and is troubled by the "perpetually unhappy" image of his mother which rises before him every time "he contemplated sex of any kind" (12). His sense of self becomes increasingly frustrated by his discovery—through Seawright—that "there was another way to be in the world, a way to live more fully" (12). This realisation marks the beginning of his process of self-reformation. Once Morgan understands that selfhood can be reformed, "nothing looked quite the same again" (12). He starts to see that "anyone he knew could be leading an invisible, double life; every conversation could have a second meaning" (12). The first part of the reformation process occurs when Morgan realises that he does not have to exist in isolation and that he has the power to form and reform his selfhood. Much like language, identity holds the potential to be shaped and reshaped.

I would argue that Morgan's realisation of the potential for an alternative selfhood mirrors what Jameson calls the "meaning-loss" of the colonial system (Jameson 157). Morgan has come to understand that "daily life and existential experience in the metropolis" no longer "has meaning" it does not adequately fit with his "deeper reason for being" (Jameson 157). However, despite identifying this loss of meaning, Morgan is still unable to articulate exactly what is "missing" (Jameson 157). Against the backdrop of Jameson's theory of the mark of global imperialism, Morgan's journey takes on a deeper significance, illustrating how personal identity is shaped by broader socio-political forces. As *Arctic Summer* unfolds, it becomes not only a narrative of individual exploration but also a commentary on the complexities of

modernity, the quest for self-understanding, and what Jameson refers to as “the unrepresentable totality” of a rapidly changing world (Jameson 163).

3.3 Navigating Boundaries

In chapters two to four of *Arctic Summer*, the interplay between belonging and alienation becomes central to Morgan’s struggle with identity formation. As Morgan grapples with his desire to break free from his former self and represent his own experiences more accurately, he embodies the struggle of the alienated protagonist within the context of imperial capitalism, where genuine self-realisation remains elusive amidst structural confines. Morgan must “break out of intransitivity” or move beyond *singularity* to better “articulate [his] thoughts and feelings” as well as “identify and integrate [his] divided [self], and connect with others” (Jacobs 100). This process is complicated by his reluctance to reconcile his past self with his present identity. Rather than simply overwriting his past, the new self “patches” itself onto the old, with each new version informing and affecting what came before (Detloff 2). Morgan’s inability to integrate these past versions results in repression. As Friedman warns, the past that “will not be remembered comes back to haunt and trouble the present” (Friedman 434). Morgan’s journey reveals the tension between his desire to belong and the alienation he feels, as the struggle to reconcile these forces complicates his quest for identity.

In chapter two, the narrative moves back six years to trace the formation of the version of selfhood Morgan embodies when he first steps aboard the *SS City of Birmingham*, the rigid version that he first meets Searight with. Since returning from Cambridge, Morgan has felt “himself gradually losing his way”, and his attempt to define himself as a writer feels like an “ill-fitting suit” (18-19). It is only through the arrival of Syed Ross Masood, who forces Morgan to confront his isolated sense of self, that Morgan begins to grapple with the complexity of his identity. Masood, as the antithesis of Morgan, mirrors the divide in Morgan’s

own self-concept. Through Masood, Morgan is forced to recognise how deeply “England was very much with him”, and he despises the “pretence” he maintains to fit in (22-23). Despite his Englishness, many English attitudes feel foreign to him (23).

Conversations with Masood open new perspectives for Morgan. When Masood rejects Morgan’s “very English” thanks, Morgan is confronted with the realisation that his identity is not fixed, and that the boundaries he once adhered to are fluid. Masood’s words— “But I am not English. And when you are with me, you are not English either”—allow Morgan to reimagine his selfhood (27). This moment of clarity reveals that identity is not a singular, static entity but a transitive self that evolves through interactions, connected elements, and shifting contexts.

Masood’s influence prompts Morgan to contemplate broader horizons, challenging his English sensibilities and prompting him to reconsider his cultural identity. When Masood invites Morgan to Paris, he is rejuvenated with “the power of freshness and discovery” that comes from crossing the border into new terrain (36). Masood perceives in Morgan a potential for a more transitive sense of self, one that contrasts with the rigid societal norms constraining him. Masood insists that Morgan is an Englishman who doesn’t “see the world like the rest of his countrymen” and that he has “an Oriental sensibility” (37). Although Morgan engages in moments of self-discovery, particularly in understanding his own identity, he very easily slips back into his rigid sense of self. His return to the familiarity of his established identity is marked by a realisation that “his own appetites” are bound to the working-class men he feels connected to, but also disconnected from. The “immeasurable gulf” between his world and theirs highlights the class divide, as Morgan recognises the impossibility of bridging this gap (39-40).

Morgan's oscillation between moments of self-discovery and retreat into his established identity can be understood in terms of Jameson's analysis of imperialism. Jameson argues that modernism reflects an epistemological break brought on by imperialism's obfuscatory economics, a divide between the macro-economic structures of empire and the subjectivity of individuals within that system. This epistemological break does not only occur at a societal level but also manifests at the level of individual subjectivity. For Morgan, the tension between his desire for a transitive self and the rigid structures of class, nationality, and identity reflects this very break. As he attempts to transcend his Englishness, he is confronted by the entrenched divisions perpetuated by imperial structures—both in the larger economic sphere and within his own subjective experience. His recognition of the “immeasurable gulf” between his world and that of working-class men underscores the limitations imposed by these divisions, highlighting the difficulty of bridging the gap between personal identity and societal constraints (40). In this way, Morgan's internal struggles mirror the broader epistemological fracture that Jameson identifies as a feature of modernism's response to imperialism.

After publishing his third novel, Morgan still does not perceive himself as a writer because he sees writing as a “frivolous but enjoyable distraction”, unable to write freely about who he is and what he actually thinks (53). This struggle reflects both Jameson's critique of the limitations imposed by capitalist structures and Lukács's portrayal of the alienated protagonist. Morgan's perception of writing as a trivial activity despite external recognition aligns with Lukács's notion of alienation within capitalist society, where creative expression is commodified and severed from true self-realisation. Writing, for Morgan, is not an authentic means of self-expression but a surface-level activity, a “distraction” that he engages in without fully engaging with his inner self. In Lukács's terms, this disconnection is an escape “into nothingness”, as Morgan's creative work fails to transcend the alienation inherent in capitalist society (Lukács 29).

Morgan's inability to see writing as true "work" stems from his perception that it does not allow him to "become most essentially" himself (53). While he acknowledges that "at the heart of the story was an emotion very personal to him" and knows his writing is sincere, he still considers it light and insubstantial (53). This dissonance underscores his alienation - not just from others, but from himself. As he struggles to represent a truer version of himself through writing, he finds himself trapped by the very structures he wishes to escape. The creative act remains bound by the capitalist context that commodifies his work and undermines its potential for genuine self-expression. Morgan's struggle to express himself authentically as a writer aligns with the emasculation and sabotage of self-representation identified by Trengove-Jones. His failure to transcend the limitations of his past self reflects not just his personal stagnation but also the larger societal constraints that inhibit genuine self-realisation.

Morgan's sense of inadequacy despite acclaim mirrors Jameson's argument regarding the inability of individuals within an imperial framework to authentically represent themselves. Despite being hailed as a "masterpiece" by reviewers, Morgan's writing fails to capture the essence of his self (56). This reflects Jameson's assertion that within imperial power structures, the dominant narratives obscure authentic self-expression and understanding. Morgan is surprised to find that "people had begun to take him seriously" as a writer (57). What others see as success is the very thing that makes him feel inadequate, highlighting the tension between external recognition and internal dissatisfaction. Morgan's struggle underscores the complex interplay between individual identity and systemic constraints, as outlined by both Lukács and Jameson. As Morgan grapples with his desire to break free from his former self and represent his own experiences more accurately, he embodies the struggle of the alienated protagonist within the context of imperial capitalism, where genuine self-realisation remains elusive amidst structural confines.

He starts a new novel titled *Arctic Summer* inspired by “a horrible tangle of English tourists” at the train station on his way back from Italy. However, the novel quickly becomes hollow and lacks direction. His momentum fades when he realises, “he had written about these people before” and that he “knew them too well”—they represent his former self, a self he now seeks to escape (69). Morgan’s realisation marks a key moment in his struggle to escape his old identity. Frustrated with the limitations of self-expression, he seeks a more authentic connection to the world. His desire to transcend past representations reflects his quest for self-definition, hindered by the constraints of imperial capitalism. This drives his need for new experiences and collaboration to break free from the stagnation of his established self.

In the third chapter of the novel, Morgan’s disillusionment with the Barabar caves in India reflects his struggle to reconcile his expectations with reality, a conflict central to his search for authenticity. Detloff’s notion of ethical productivity, which emphasises the potential for transformative engagement with the world, resonates with Morgan’s desire for genuine experiences and connections. He seeks to confront his innermost feelings and engage meaningfully with the world around him. However, Lukács identifies how alienation complicates this pursuit, as modern society obstructs genuine human connection. Applying Lukács’s perspective, Morgan’s sense of isolation and detachment mirrors the alienated protagonist’s estrangement from both himself and society. At the Barabar caves, Morgan confronts the gap between his idealised expectations and the stark reality of the caves. This encounter forces him to grapple with the complexities of human experience and the limitations of individual agency within a fragmented and uncertain world.

Despite initial disappointment, Morgan’s return to the Barabar caves signals a shift in his quest for self-identity, as he seeks solitude to confront his own guarded self. In the cave’s darkness, Morgan’s ability to speak his own name, Masood’s, and the word love aloud marks a moment of profound self-exploration (82). This mirrors Trengove-Jones’s notion of identity as shaped

by ideological opportunity and constraint, as Morgan drops his guarded sense of self to engage with his true feelings. Through reflection, Morgan attempts to reconstruct his identity, a task that is both personal and deeply tied to his relationship with societal norms. Galgut's narrative structure—retrospective and recursive—mirrors Morgan's ongoing struggle with his sense of self, revealing the fluid and transitive nature of identity in a world constrained by social and political forces.

Morgan's struggle with self-representation in India reflects his journey towards embracing his true identity, despite societal and personal challenges. Initially freeing yet ultimately alienating, India contrasts sharply with England. Morgan acknowledges that although he has escaped into a new world, it "refused to entirely open for him" (86). Morgan discovers that just as "being *in a minority*" requires a kind of camouflage in English society, "crossing the social frontier between East and West" is the camouflage Masood adopts to, as he says, "survive in hostile territory" (88). Morgan realises that he is not the only person who has a guarded sense of self, or employs some "strategy" to navigate societal expectations (89). This recognition aligns with Jameson's concept of the structural division of power, where colonial life remains hidden from the imperial centre (Jameson 157). Similarly, Trengove-Jones's focus on how sexualities expose ideological "torsions of opportunity and constraint" (98) resonates with Morgan's own sense of limitation and desire for freedom. His experience in India underscores how self-representation is shaped by both colonial power dynamics and the constraints of sexual identity, revealing the complexities of navigating a world that refuses to fully open to him (Jameson 157; Trengove-Jones 98).

Morgan's pursuit of his "peculiar second nature" in India—a freer, transitive sense of self—reflects his desire to reconcile the tension between two distinct worlds (98). While India offers him the possibility of coexistence, it is not without tension, Morgan describes it "like two sharp

edges grinding up against each other” (102). Jameson’s concept of the colonial system as divided between the metropolis and the colony resonates with Morgan’s struggle to reconcile his expectations of writing a novel about India with the reality he faces. Morgan’s realisation that two distinct worlds can coexist without necessarily merging reflects the tension between daily life in the metropolis and the absent space of the colony. It registers what Jameson sought: “a kind of exceptional situation, one of overlap and coexistence between these two incommensurable realities which are those of the lord and of the bondsman altogether, those of the metropolis and of the colony simultaneously.” (Jameson 164) Interestingly, Morgan registers a sense of “horror” at the truth that such a situation, “the meeting of two worldviews”, was just “one way of life imposed upon another” which truthfully only “brought out the worst in both” (102). This tension exemplifies Walkowitz’s notion of critical cosmopolitanism, where Morgan’s ambivalence towards both English and Indian societies mirrors his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion by both (Walkowitz 4). Galgut captures the modernist need for breaking from the past through Morgan’s conflicting reflections on his place within these worlds.

Morgan’s journey in India unveils the complex interplay between belonging and alienation as he encounters people like Ahmed Mirza, who helps him understand that “certain human relationships were like two rivers meeting, causing a third to spring up” (121). Both Morgan and Mirza feel out of place in India, with Morgan feeling “unmoored from the world around him” (122), caught in a liminal space that offers potential yet feels isolating. His conversation with Masood’s friends about “English foreign policy and the contradictory interests of the Empire” highlights his openness, illustrating Detloff’s notion of relationality in modernism, where exchanges of ideas transcend boundaries (126). However, Morgan’s inability to engage in “open-hearted conversation” with Masood underscores his persistent alienation, despite leaving the restrictive world of England (127). This reflects Trengove-Jones’ idea that personal

and societal shifts can create “torsions of ideological opportunity and constraint”, which Morgan faces as he navigates both the potential for connection and the alienation that continues to haunt him (Trenegrove-Jones 98).

As Morgan grapples with the purpose of his journey and the novel he intends to write, he confronts the challenge of weaving together the disparate experiences and observations into a cohesive narrative. His “bits and pieces” remain unconnected, lacking a central event to tie them together (134). Morgan envisions “an incident” in a courtroom, inspired by his discomfort with the “suspicion and contempt” between two opposing classes (137). This mirrors Jameson’s idea of the missing puzzle piece in understanding colonial systems. It was this “crack, this deep divide” that would run through his story; “Two nations, two distinct ways of doing things, were in endless friction with each other. And it was everywhere obvious. The conflict was in him and around him, and wanted to be worked out on the page” (138). Morgan desire to confront the complexities of identity and power dynamics, echoes Jameson’s observation of the difficulty in understanding the colonial system’s functioning, as a whole (Jameson 157) Through Morgan’s narrative journey, Galgut illustrates the enduring struggle between the individuals from the metropolis and the colony, highlighting the intricate web of belonging and alienation inherent in colonised societies.

Morgan realises the important connection between memory and fiction through the echo in the cave. In the moment in the cave every word spoken “set off an overlapping mirror of itself which hissed and rustled all around” and returned in “an indistinct surf-like roaring” (80). He could not make sense of the experience in the moment, but in hindsight, he understands that both an echo and memory reproduce something from the past. Morgan realises that memories, which emerge “at unexpected moments”, allow him to engage with self-representation (130). His power lies in his ability to access the processes of combination and recursion, where

“certain sounds” are repeated as he builds some kind of meaningful representation, of his sense of self and the story he wants to write (130). Through reflection, Morgan integrates past versions of himself, becoming more open to forming connections with others. Until this moment, he has been unable to “patch” the past onto his present (Detloff 2). Galgut uses Morgan’s discovery to marry the voices of memory and fiction, demonstrating how literary form links seemingly disparate experiences. Morgan expresses this discovery by saying things “could be made significant...even if the reality had been disappointing” (140). In Morgan’s journey of self-discovery, where memory and fiction converge, Galgut offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of human experience, showing how literary form can bridge the gap between past and present in the quest for meaningful connections in a fragmented world.

In the fourth chapter of the novel, Morgan returns to England feeling adrift, confronting the familiar but stifling environment that fails to resonate with his transformed self after his experiences in India. He no longer feels the overwhelming pressure to fit into the old sense of self and he confesses that he is “intrigued by the idea of giving in to his oddness” (145). Despite initially doubting his ability to capture his Indian experiences in a novel, Morgan finds solace in the power of fiction to reinvent realities and represent the imagined self, realising that through his writing, he can glimpse new personalities and explore truths that he struggles to confront in reality (146-147). Despite having three unfinished novels, the change in Morgan since visiting India shows his growing resilience against the “deadly properness” that once confined him (33). Even after criticism from Hom for romanticising love and marriage, Morgan admits the opinion, while disappointing, didn’t affect him as it once would have (165). He feels that India had “shifted him” and he no longer depends so much on the approval of others “to feel complete” (165). This shift represents a more fluid sense of self, as Morgan moves away

from the rigidity of his past identity toward a more transitional, open self, one better able to connect with others.

With the threats of war increasing Morgan notices a shift in the world and attitudes around him. He describes it as a “new mentality was taking hold, a mentality of crowds and slogans and mass emotions, in which he felt queasy and afraid” (169). Morgan’s response to war reflects a modernist perspective. He is appalled by Lady Morison’s sentiment that war can elevate individuals, claiming that “‘A transfiguration takes place... when a man picks up a gun. A spiritual renewal... almost like a light, shining from within’” (170). This view of war as ties in with Detloff’s resilient writers who challenge the notion of a subject being “heroic, sacrificial...willing to fight and die in order to belong” (Detloff 4). Detloff critiques the “ideology of death” that glorifies violence, suggesting that life is seen as “redeemed” through a fitting death, turning “loss into political gain” (Detloff 14). Morgan disagrees with Lady Morison, yet he recognises his own internal conflict, acknowledging the discomfort of both sides: “Though the idea of killing was awful, he found something distasteful too, about the lofty isolation of those who refused to fight” (170). Caught between idealism and practicality, Morgan finds it “most distressing... to understand both viewpoints while being able to follow neither” (170). Detloff’s observation of the “slippery relationship between the collective and the individual” and the “permeable boundary between spectatorship and participation” captures Morgan’s dilemma (Detloff 12).

Morgan realises that “English life had been broken into two,” with his traditional upbringing now seen as “outlandish” by the youth (175). Faced with significant social and political change, he struggles to form a sense of self. His mother urges him to “stay at home and write,” but Morgan finds writing “most impossible... To invent lives and dialogue, to dream up the unreal when reality had taken on so much weight and ugliness: it would be like defying gravity” (176).

Morgan battles so much with self-formation in this time because he is trying to navigate a more relational view of past and present, both in terms of time, and his past versions of self. He is grappling with the idea of Detloff's relational past and present (Detloff 2). How does Morgan, who was brought up in the outlandish tradition of university graduates wearing gowns and caps, begin to function in the rapidly changing present? How does he, as a writer, begin to think of inventing realities, when his own reality has been thrown into chaos? This process of identity formation, complicated by global events, echoes Detloff's point that it is essential to understand how modernist writers responded to "world-shaping and world-shattering events" of the early twentieth century (Detloff 4).

3.4 Articulating Love and Loss

In *The Persistence of Modernism* Detloff bridges the divide between two strands of trauma studies: the trauma of large-scale historical atrocities, such as war and imperial violence, and the intimate, personal experiences of familial or relational loss (13). She advocates for connecting these dimensions, emphasising how the "interconnections between subjectivity, sociality, and loss" and "national identity, public mourning, and trauma-producing practices" are often oversimplified or overlooked when treated separately (13). Detloff critiques the "ideology of death," which glorifies violence by tying life's meaning to a redemptive or "fitting" death, transforming loss into political gain (14). In contrast, she highlights resilient writing that refuses to reduce loss to metaphor and instead acknowledges the "dynamic relationship between the particularity of suffering and the temporality of living" (14–15).

Galgut's *Arctic Summer* exemplifies this resilience by addressing Morgan's struggle to reconcile love and loss in a world shaped by violence and instability. While earlier passages show Morgan's discomfort with the glorification of war and the "slippery relationship between the collective and the individual", the novel also reflects Detloff's concept of resilient literature

as a form of patchwork (12). By integrating past traumas into the present, Galgut resists the “redemptive” narratives that simplify loss and instead explores how grief and memory remain integral to Morgan’s evolving sense of self (14).

My argument that positions Galgut as a resilient writer can be linked to Jameson’s argument that modernism arises in reaction to globalisation and imperialism. The content of modernist literature embodies the fragmented experience of a world reshaped by capitalist expansion, with formal strategies that mirror the dislocations and alienation wrought by these forces (Jameson 156). Detloff’s framework extends this idea by positioning modernist writers as resilient figures who confront both personal and historical trauma, navigating between resignation and redemption. Similarly, Galgut portrays Morgan as a character caught between resistance and participation, refusing to glorify violence while struggling to find meaning amidst loss.

In *Arctic Summer*, chapters five to seven deepen this exploration of resilience as Morgan questions “the state’s attempts to control the meaning of the deaths of [his] fallen loved ones” (Detloff 18). Through Morgan’s reflections, Galgut intervenes in, rather than repeats, acts of violence, preserving the critical cosmopolitan spirit of modernist writing (Detloff 18). By weaving together personal grief and broader societal tensions, Galgut’s work resists reductive interpretations, reflecting the persistence of modernism in addressing the complexities of love, loss, and identity in a fractured world.

In the fifth chapter, Morgan’s experiences with the British Red Cross expose him to the unvarnished realities of war, prompting a deep empathy for the soldiers’ suffering. Through their stories, he uncovers the “true qualities” of the “real England” once the “idealism had been scraped off the bare facts” (186). Morgan’s perceptiveness embodies the cosmopolitan spirit, reflecting a “double consciousness” that combines self-reflection with a critical stance toward

collective ideologies (Walkowitz 3). This sensitivity to individual narratives challenges the glorification of violence and aligns with Detloff's concept of resilience, which respects "the particularity of suffering" (Detloff 14). Morgan's ambivalence about collective social projects—his simultaneous desire for connection and suspicion of its costs—further positions him as a figure navigating the complex interplay between personal values and societal pressures (Walkowitz 4).

The most meaningful relationship that Morgan forms is with an Egyptian man, Mohammed el-Adl. The interplay between belonging and alienation emerges in Morgan's interactions with Mohammed. Morgan grapples with the dilemma of the missing puzzle piece in his relationship with Mohammed. Through a gesture of kindness, Mohammed refuses to let Morgan pay for his tram rides and faces the reality of potentially losing his job. Morgan occupies an awkward *metic* position as he decides to intervene by reaching out to an old King's colleague, Robin Furness, to help him save Mohammed's job. Although Robin is willing to help Morgan out, he embodies the deadly properness of British society and reminds Morgan that "One knows nothing about these people. They present a friendly face and one wants to believe it, but... a situation can develop" (215). Morgan is sensitive to the "radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation" and in being so is an outsider, however he is still able to claim his full belonging to the *polis* of English society (Jameson 157). Mohammed's eccentric English phrases, such as describing his home as a "Home of Misery" or stating "All is exceptions in men as in English grammar", captivate Morgan (218-219). Their oddness "renews the sound of his own language for him", offering Morgan a way to reimagine his identity (219). Through this cross-cultural exchange, Morgan finds that appreciating new expressions of language enables him to perceive himself anew, reflecting the transformative power of human connection.

Mohammed allows Morgan “to experience the Egyptian world through the skin of his friend, and it didn’t resemble the one he lived in” (230). The racial and social gulf between the two of them is further highlighted when Morgan acknowledges that “no emotion was supposed to cross the great divide of class” (227). This came with flashes of insight and “humiliation and anger” as Morgan develops a deeper sense of sympathy for Mohammed (230). When Mohammed is physically abused by the English, it is “as if the blows had landed on Morgan’s own flesh” (230). Morgan states that only “Distantly, imperfectly, he thought he grasped a little of how it might feel to be an Egyptian working under English control” (230). This insight clearly depicts Jameson’s position that Morgan’s understanding will never be fully reconstructed, that “no enlargement of personal experience (in the knowledge of other social classes, for example), no intensity of self-examination (in the form of whatever social guilt)” will ever be enough to include the radical otherness of Mohammed’s lived experience (Jameson 157).

Morgan reflects that his intimacy with Mohammed meant that “Something in his life had been made whole and complete” (236). Morgan’s newfound desire to write about his experiences in Egypt is a reflection of the connection and intimacy shared on a personal level with Mohammed. He was not ever able to accurately represent his experiences or himself in India because he was not able to establish such a connection with Masood. Morgan is finally able to make the connection between the importance of personal experiences as a means to expand what we know of global processes (Walkowitz 10). Morgan’s appreciation for the more complicated relationship between past and present as well as the people who inhabit a place show how he has embodied a cosmopolitan ethos promoted by Appiah. Morgan has come to terms with the fact that as human beings “we have obligations to others” that go beyond direct relation to “kith or kind” or the “ties of a shared citizenship” (Appiah xiii). He has also realised

the importance of recognising and valuing individual human lives, emphasising the significance of understanding the practices and beliefs that give them meaning (Appiah xiii).

The sixth chapter takes Morgan back to India. Despite feeling a greater sense of belonging to India, Morgan still registers that there is something about his experience of India and his sense of self that cannot be articulated. Morgan's appreciation for what makes India so special is evident in the way in which he experiences events *with* the people. When he first visited India, it was a world that "refused to entirely open for him" (86) because he is so rooted in the immovable history of England. However, because of his travels and his experiences with other people, Morgan has found a more transitive way of being. His various processes of self-reformation have presented him with the opportunity to disregard his initial impatience and irritation with nonsensical India and take on the "typically Indian" way of seeing the world, and himself (275). What fascinates Morgan about India is its sense of mystery and that "even the plainest explanation seemed to throw up more questions; an opacity remained, impervious to language" (276). Morgan is relieved to see Masood again for a short visit, but he is concerned with Masood's "disapproval of Dewas" as he considered it to be "a grotesque caricature that has been bred by the intermarriage of your Empire and our silliness" (279). This notion of Masood's stirs up questions for both of them about the potential for India without the presence of the English. However, because of the inability to fully reconstruct the reality of imperial loss, the answer to what that potential was, was imperceptible to them both (Jameson 157).

During his stay with Masood, Morgan is relieved about the way in which their relationship has transformed and that even though "his friend would never be his lover" this loss "was also a sort of gain, because a new gentleness had sprung up between them" (322). Although he still finds himself conflicted on the topic of politics, he acknowledges that his protest now is only "a very small voice" (324). Morgan has reached a point where he knows that the old, very English sense of self has been built upon and reformed. While it is hard to give these English

justifications up entirely, he is still able to understand that there was no malice in their “frank airings of their political views” (323). Morgan is truly able to embody a more transitive relationship with himself and those around him. In aligning with Detloff’s concept of resilient modernist literature, Galgut’s narrative demonstrates a nuanced portrayal of trauma and loss. Through Morgan’s evolving relationships and internal conflicts, Galgut navigates between resignation and redemption, refusing to simplify loss into metaphor. Morgan comments that “the universe operates according to some vast, unfolding principle, and to abandon oneself to its rhythms wasn’t a senseless undertaking” and believes that this is the reason why he would write the Indian novel (298). It would be a mode of representation that “more closely resembled the world” (299). As Morgan reaches a more transitive identity, his journey echoes Detloff’s emphasis on the dynamic interplay between suffering and the temporality of living. Mohammed had fallen ill again and when Morgan sees Mohammed, he knows that his friend was dying. Instead of dreading the future, Morgan does everything he can to try and help Mohammed in his last days. This resonates with the broader theme of forging connections between historical atrocities and personal trauma, highlighting the complexities of subjectivity, sociality, and loss in modernist literature.

In the final chapter of the novel, Morgan grapples with the difficulty of reconciling his past experiences with his present reality upon returning to England. Morgan ponders over the difficulty of fitting in with ‘normal’ life at home after being “given a glimpse of other Morgans that he might have been” (331). England, to Morgan, “felt passive and indifferent” and he feels an overall “ruing loss” at having to take stock of the past few years of his life (331-332). He finds encouragement from Leonard Woolf to resume his literary pursuits, albeit “more out of curiosity than passion” (333). However, Morgan’s sense of self is further destabilised as he acknowledges a fundamental shift in his perspective, questioning the authenticity of his fictional representations in the face of altered perceptions and a stifling atmosphere in England.

As he navigates the complexities of grief and disillusionment, Morgan comes to realise the limitations of traditional narrative structures. When he receives the news of Mohammed's death he feels the need "to prepare a public face" and to "cover any unruly emotion" (338). There is no one he feels he can talk to and he feels humiliated by the grief for a relationship no one at home had witnessed. He feels that his "individual existence" has to be "distinguished from [his] social and historical environment" (Lukács 19). The "literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality" fails him and he embraces a more enigmatic approach to storytelling, recognising the impossibility of capturing the essence of his experiences in words alone (Lukács 23).

While Morgan is despairing over the obscurity of the incident in the caves which is at the centre of the novel, he makes a significant discovery. He had always felt that as a writer he created a question, and so also had to provide the answer (342). However, mystery was "at the heart of things [in India]" and so it could be at the heart of his novel too. India reminded him yet again "that no answer would suffice" (342). This discovery is not only significant for the progress of Morgan's novel, but for the overall modernist attitude emerging at the time. Morgan admits that his "literary idealism had drained away" and that he knew he had "succumbed to pessimism" (334). The death of the idealism in Morgan's writing is a marked feature of the shift in thinking in the early 20th century. He speculates hopefully to himself that "he suspected that he had created something new" (353). Through the incorporation of mystery, Morgan very effectively shifts his writing to create what Roland Barthes deems a writerly text. Defined as a text that places the reader in control, a writerly text requires the reader to play an active role in the meaning making process. The reader is able to interpret the text subjectively and so the text destabilises the reader's expectations and forefronts the division between the representation and reality. As an author, Morgan also actively engages with what Jameson identified as a key

marker in modernist literature that “will now henceforth always have something missing about it” (Jameson 157).

Perhaps, this is why concluding the novel is anticlimactic and brings Morgan to feel as if “the last eleven years should have been present in the room” but they weren’t (354). All Morgan is left with is “the unruly heap of pages covered with his writing” (354). Again, this was just writing, and Morgan was trying to capture his vast experiences, India, Egypt, a World War and two complicated loves, in what couldn’t be said in words (351-354). The mark of imperialism, “the informing presence of the extraliterary, of the political and the economic, within it” (Jameson 153), is clear in Morgan’s perceptions as he muses:

If he’d stuck to what was familiar and safe, a comfortable tapestry of tea parties and English scenery, he might have kept a quiet industry going, writing numerous books of a similar nature. But the world that interested him was disappearing, or already gone, buried under motor cars and machinery and the smoke of war. Writers should see ahead, not constantly be looking behind them, and his powers couldn’t keep pace with history. (353)

Morgan’s novel *A Passage to India*, is met with laudatory reviews and “people had got used to the notion that E.M. Forster was a novelist—or perhaps it had taken this long for him to accept it himself” (357). Morgan mentions his mixed feelings towards the newfound fame he is experiencing, “He didn’t want the letters, the excitement, the attention; yet it was hard not to feel amplified by them, into something more than one was. It gave enjoyment, but left discomfort in its wake” (360). Once again Galgut demonstrates a form of critical cosmopolitanism where Morgan reflects “both a desire for and an ambivalence about” the hype associated with his novel, and ultimately his representation of an Englishman in India. (Walkowitz 4).

Morgan is faced with a process of self-discovery for one last time within the novel. It is a process shaped by many instances, one of which is his newfound fame paired with a comment he overhears in during teatime in London. A person claims that he is “a timid soul” and that it is said that “he hasn’t really lived at all, except in his mind” which moves Morgan to take stock of his sense of self (361). He describes this moment:

The subject of this discussion caught sight of himself now, as they might have seen him, in a gilt-edged mirror on the opposite wall: a curious, contorted figure, one leg wrapped around the other, right hand clasped in the left, tousled head titled to the side... he seemed to be standing alone in the middle of an immense whiteness. A snowy frozen landscape on which the sun was nevertheless pouring down. Arctic Summer: nothing moving, nothing alive, and yet the sky was open.” (362)

Morgan quickly thinks, “*That isn’t me*” but soon remembers that “the reflection would never show the truth” (362). The ‘truth’ was everything he had been working so hard to discover in and for himself, and for *A Passage to India* too. But the process of reproducing something is a difficult one, it is like trying to remember an echo. It involves the processes of combination and recursion where “certain sounds” are repeated as you try to build some kind of meaningful representation (130-131). This empowers him in his sense of self and Morgan decides that he has loved, and thus lived, in his own way. The other contributing instance to his self-reformation is the loss of first Masood and then his mother. Both deaths set off a kind of freedom in him as he realises that he must move on as it was “self-defeating to be looking back continually, when you only had one existence and it was always slipping through your fingers” (368).

Morgan ultimately decides to “give himself over...to the present”, signalling a transformative acceptance of life’s complexities (369). *A Passage to India* can be viewed as a project that

seeks to preserve and reformulate individual and collective intricacies. Through Morgan's moments of self-discovery and Galgut's experiments with representation in biofiction, *Arctic Summer* achieves a nuanced portrayal of identity that extends beyond specific geographies and cultural boundaries. Morgan's willingness to relinquish his former, insular self in favour of a more integrated and overlapping identity enables him to find "less destructive" ways to process and articulate loss (Detloff 11). By confronting stories of personal and universal loss, Morgan's journey becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring capacity of storytelling to capture the fragile and multifaceted nature of existence.

In its exploration of belonging and alienation, Galgut's *Arctic Summer* emerges as a profound engagement with modernist aesthetics, charting E.M. Forster's period of 'inaction' before the publication of *A Passage to India*. I argue that Galgut can be considered a critical cosmopolitan writer who navigates historical and personal boundaries, employing biofiction as a means of rendering Forster's inner turmoil and his struggle against societal constructs. Drawing on scholarly insights - such as Friedman's relational modernism and Trengove-Jones's reflections on South African literature's engagement with fractured identities—*Arctic Summer* transcends traditional classifications to embody a dynamic and pluralistic modernism. The novel captures the tension between singular and plural identities, offering a layered portrayal of self-discovery amidst the fractured realities of a globalised world.

Through Detloff's concept of resilient writing, Galgut emerges as a writer adept at balancing resignation and redemption. His narrative poignantly reflects on love, loss, and the enduring traumas of empire. By commemorating past violence and interrogating state control over collective memory, *Arctic Summer* reinforces Galgut's commitment to modernist themes and a cosmopolitan ethos. It challenges readers to reconsider conventional notions of belonging

and alienation, highlighting the transformative potential of literature to illuminate the fragmented, overlapping dimensions of human experience.

CHAPTER 4: HUMOUR AS A WEAPON IN *THE PROMISE*

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* exemplifies the persistence of modernism in a contemporary South African context, where existential uncertainty and fractured identities persist. While my analysis of *In a Strange Room* and *Arctic Summer* focused on protagonists grappling with alienation and the erosion of meaningful relationships, *The Promise* marks a shift—where irony and humour become tools for navigating this crisis.

In the previous two novels I examined how Galgut's protagonists grapple with alienation and the erosion of meaningful relationships, navigating an unstable sense of self in a rapidly changing world. Modernist aesthetics in Galgut's work do more than depict isolation - they actively structure it - foregrounding the limits of perception, the instability of identity, and fragile human connections. As Lukács argues, modernist literature blurs the lines between subjective experience and objective reality, exposing how the breakdown of relationships breeds existential uncertainty (Lukács 21-24). Damon and Morgan, Galgut's earlier protagonists, embody this angst, confronting the disintegration of personal and social structures in ways that mirror modernism's focus on alienation.

Sociologists Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling's work on modernity and self-identity offers a useful framework for examining the role of embodiment in *The Promise*. Mellor and Shilling argue that modernist subjectivity is deeply intertwined with the body, which becomes both a site of self-construction and existential anxiety. In Galgut's novel, bodily preoccupation becomes a defining feature of characters, such as Astrid, Lindile and Bob, struggling to assert control over their identities in a shifting socio-political landscape. By foregrounding the corporeal self, Galgut extends the modernist exploration of alienation, showing how the inescapability of physical decline mirrors a deeper crisis of meaning.

In *The Promise*, however, this existential angst evolves into something more self-reflexive: an attitude of irony and humour that interrogates the very act of representation. As Lukács argues, modernist subjectivity is shaped by the tension between confronting an “inexplicable” objective reality and the pursuit of “innumerable possibilities” (Lukács 21-25, 39). In Galgut’s earlier works, this manifests as a deep sense of alienation, but in *The Promise*, angst takes on a performative dimension. Through irony, tonal shifts, and metafictional intrusions, Galgut enacts this existential instability rather than merely depicting it. The novel forces the reader to experience uncertainty, mirroring the way its characters navigate a world where meaning is contingent and history remains unresolved.

Kristin Bluemel references Greenberg’s concept of the “double movement” of satire as a valuable framework for understanding how Galgut navigates the complexities of transition in *The Promise* (527). This mechanism, where the boundaries between good and bad are blurred through redescription, underscores the novel’s persistent modernist tendencies. By employing satire in this way, Galgut avoids easy resolutions, instead forcing the reader to grapple with the contradictions of history, identity, and progress. In this sense, irony in *The Promise* functions both as a narrative mode and an ethical stance, compelling the reader to engage with the instability of meaning.

This shift in affective tone suggests a more nuanced engagement with modernism’s legacy, demonstrating both its limitations and its ethical possibilities in contemporary South African literature. In this chapter, I argue that Galgut’s narrative techniques reflect Kierkegaard’s theory of humour and irony as existential attitudes (Lippitt 4). For Kierkegaard, irony arises from the tension between aspiration and reality—the gap between striving for moral or religious ideals and the inevitable failure to do so. It marks the boundary between the ethical and religious spheres of existence, exposing the limitations of human striving. Humour, by

contrast, emerges upon entering the religious sphere, as it is the “very perception of the permanent discrepancy between ideal and actuality” (Lippitt 6). I contend that if irony and humour “represent responses to the limitations of what is humanly possible,” then Galgut employs them to navigate the existential struggles of his characters and to illuminate broader themes of meaning, faith, and existence (Lippitt 9).

I argue, moreover, that the existential self-awareness in *The Promise* aligns with Walkowitz’s notion of a ‘spirit of critique’, in which modernist literary style fosters new ways of thinking and acting beyond national boundaries. Walkowitz defines style not merely as a set of literary techniques but as an “attitude” or “consciousness” that shapes a writer’s narrative approach (Walkowitz 2). In Galgut’s case, humour and irony function as more than just stylistic choices - they embody a mode of critique, interrogating the contradictions and absurdities of existence.

4.1 ‘Galguttian Neofaulknerism’⁵

Mark Gevisser praises *The Promise* for its “experimental, innovative style” rooted in modernist literature (Gevisser 2021). Galgut cites Faulkner as “fundamental” to shaping his “writing consciousness”, and his novel bears clear ties to the work of modernist writers such as Faulkner and Woolf (Gevisser). In his review, James Wood suggests that *The Promise* revives a modernist tradition that responds to “political and moral disenchantment” with literature’s regenerative power. Gevisser presses Galgut on whether he “felt the need to reach back to these forms of modernism” to address South Africa’s thirty years of political and moral upheaval (Gevisser). While Galgut acknowledges the political readings of his novel, he resists the idea that he wrote with a historical or ethical agenda, stating that he has “an instinctive shrinking away” from positioning himself as a novelist with moral authority (Gevisser).

⁵ I have borrowed this term from Adam Roberts’s review on *The Promise* (*Adam’s Notebook*, 2021).

Galgut's hesitation reflects a tension seen in Faulkner's literary project: the difficulty of writing about racial subjection from the position of an implicated, raced subject. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner employs fragmented, multi-perspectival narratives to reveal the limits of white perception when representing Black lives and histories. Galgut's formal experimentation—his shifting perspectives, intrusive narration, and unstable voice—can be read as a similarly self-reflexive gesture. His refusal to present *The Promise* as a historical or ethical statement does not negate its engagement with history but rather foregrounds the instability of such engagements.

Gevisser identifies Galgut's "commentary on the self... self-awareness, that ability to look at the self" as central to his work (Gevisser). I argue that this reflexivity aligns with Walkowitz's concept of critical cosmopolitanism, in which "a new reflection on reflection" allows literature to interrogate its own ethical limitations (Walkowitz 3). Galgut acknowledges the socio-political necessity of white South Africans relinquishing privilege, suggesting that "our general situation would be very different and maybe a little bit better" if such sacrifices were made (Gevisser). Yet he also expresses ambivalence about the mechanisms of collective social transformation, that ask "white South Africans [to] give up something of what they have" (Gevisser).

This ambivalence places Galgut within a lineage of modernist writers, including Faulkner, whose works sustain the tension between ethical urgency and existential angst without offering neat resolutions. Galgut's formal experimentation emphasises the complexity of navigating social change and its attendant contradictions. In *The Promise*, this modernist approach raises profound questions, resisting closure and reflecting a broader commitment to examining the limits of perception and representation. Through this, Galgut underscores the enduring

relevance of modernism, especially in a contemporary South African context where questions of history and identity remain unresolved.

Formal experimentation is a defining feature of *The Promise* and central to Galgut's excitement about the project. He asserts that "the voice of a book is everything," and the novel's shifting perspectives and tonal changes draw attention to the artifice of the construction (Galgut, *A Response* 40). This self-awareness of artificiality, he explains, is key to the novel's appeal, allowing a story of familiar subject matter to be told unconventionally (Gevisser). Galgut removes "the false authority of a steady centre" in the novel, creating "the tension between the oddness of the narrative voice sardonically relating tropes that are instantly familiar to any South African" (Galgut, *A Response* 40).

Turning to the theories of Lukács, Williams, and Jameson, I consider modernism not just as an aesthetic but as an ideology. These theorists caution against viewing modernism solely through its aesthetic or formal innovations, arguing that by focusing on the inward turn and apolitical protagonist, we risk overlooking how these aesthetic techniques often serve as vehicles for complex ideological and socio-political messages. I want to avoid the trap of merely praising Galgut's style without recognising the social and ideological implications of his formal choices. While Galgut's style undoubtedly resonates with modernist aesthetics, akin to the works of Faulkner and Woolf, it also serves a deeper purpose. As James Wood observes, *The Promise* "redeploys a number of modernist techniques, chiefly the use of a free-floating narrator" (Wood). However, the formal experimentation in the novel goes beyond stylistic concerns; it raises a significant ethical question related to the concept of 'belonging' to South Africa.

In *The Promise*, Galgut's portrayal of stagnation amid political and national change reflects the persistence of modernist themes, particularly the tension between individual agency and

existential inaction. The novel spans thirty years, centred around four funerals in the Swart family, yet the characters show little personal transformation despite the changing social and political landscape. This absence of meaningful self-development underscores a central existential idea: inaction breeds entrapment. As Galgut points out, “what happens in the nation also happens in the home” (Galgut, *A Response* 41), suggesting that the personal and political are inseparable, while highlighting the limitations of personal agency amidst historical and social inertia.

Galgut describes the narrative tone as “ribald and mocking” asserting that he “would argue that there is something in our South African reality that is inherently close to satire” (Galgut, *A Response* 41). Galgut aligns with modernist tendencies to use irony and dark humour to critique human efforts to find meaning or resolution. In this novel, Galgut’s narrative voice draws parallels with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where humour and irony accentuate the futility of Vladimir and Estragon’s search for purpose, adding to the bleak comedy of their existential despair. In *The Promise*, this experimentation with narrative voice allows the novel to explore modernist themes of entrapment, alienation, and the difficulty of navigating change within a society that remains resistant to transformation.

I argue that the central effect of *The Promise* lies in Galgut’s use of modernist techniques to present solitary characters whose development is stunted by their lack of meaningful interaction with the world. As Lukács notes, such characters “do not develop through contact with the world” and are neither formed nor shaped by it (Lukács 21). The characters in *The Promise* exemplify this condition, displaying a limited sense of agency that underscores the novel’s broader existential theme: “such a view of life cannot impart a sense of direction” (Lukács 30). The central failure—the promise that goes unfulfilled—mirrors the larger sense of purposelessness that defines the characters’ lives.

However, I argue that Galgut employs the ontology of the solitariness of man intentionally to draw attention to modernist ideology which “asserts the unalterability of outward reality”, leading to a sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness in human endeavours (Lukács 36). This view of modernist literature presents a worldview where human agency is futile and lacks significance due to the belief in the fixed and immutable nature of reality. This portrayal echoes Jameson’s notion of “spatial disjunction” (Jameson 157), where the silence and invisibility of characters like Salome reflect a deadening of imagination and conscience among the oppressors in an unjust system (Galgut, *A Response* 42). Furthermore, Galgut evokes Williams’s critique of the marginalisation of certain voices, emphasising the oppressive silence that surrounds figures like Salome, whose existence is rendered invisible by societal structures.

In using these modernist techniques, Galgut not only reflects the solitariness of his characters but also offers an ironic commentary on the plight of the modernist protagonist, whose inability to affect change mirrors the broader socio-political stagnation in the novel. By highlighting these themes, Galgut invites readers to consider the ideological implications of such a worldview and the ways in which entrenched systems of power render meaningful action and agency nearly impossible.

4.2 Voices and Silence in *The Promise*

The first voice in *The Promise* is that of Amor, a key character who is plunged into despair and uncertainty at the loss of her mother. Galgut’s experimental narrative style introduces itself quickly in the second paragraph as Amor reflects on the word “dead” (Galgut 11). She “looks at the word, lying there on the desk like an insect on its back, with no explanation” (11) immediately engaging the reader’s pity as Amor struggles to process a moment she has anticipated “for so long” (11). Galgut intensifies this engagement with an interjection of judgment - an unavoidable human instinct: gossip. The narrative voice notes, “Some of the

other girls say Miss Starkey is a lesbian, but it's hard to imagine her doing anything sexy with anyone. Or maybe she did once and has been permanently disgusted ever since", introducing an unnamed narrative presence that persists throughout the novel (11).

Galgut's narrative technique mirrors the modernist approach to character and perspective. Through free indirect discourse, Galgut taps into the human skill of character-reading, something essential to social interaction across all areas of life - be it in marriage, friendship, or business. This technique works by engaging a shared human experience and stimulates the reader's imagination. The reader begins to picture Miss Starkey, drawing upon their own perceptions and biases, and is thus "willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy" (Woolf 17). Galgut's choice to create a narrative voice that is both a character in the book and omnipresent without being named invites readers into a space of narrative intimacy, subtly highlighting the irony of their own judgments.

Throughout the chapter dedicated to "Ma", Galgut delves into the characters' struggles with interpreting their realities. Here, the narrator transitions from an external presence to a subjective mind embedded in the text, introducing moments that reflect the tension between reality and its interpretation. This tension is central to the existential challenges the characters face and mirrors the complex interplay between the past and present, the living and the dead, the personal and the political, and, importantly, the reader and the text.

Amor's response to her mother's death exemplifies the tension between voice and silence. In the opening pages, Amor insists that "It hasn't happened" and "especially not to Ma, who will always, always be alive" (11). She denies reality, repeating, "(It did not happen)", reflecting her struggle to process the loss (12). This denial is intertwined with the narrator's judgment of other characters, such as Tannie Marina, described as "hungry for drama and gossip and cheap

spectacle” (12). This judgment complicates the narrative’s exploration of self-deception and the distortion of truth.

Further, after describing “a diorama of white South Africa” in the suburbs, the narrator directly addresses the reader, saying, “Where you, perhaps, also grew up. Where all of it began” (14). Galgut’s use of the second-person voice implicates the reader, constructing a specific audience while questioning the universality of reader experience. By directly addressing white South Africans, he satirises their complicity in the injustices depicted in the novel. This direct engagement forces readers to reflect on their positionality and responsibility, urging critical self-examination. Aretha Phiri explains this effect, noting how the narrator’s voice “implicates the raced reader as both witness and participant”, shifting moral responsibility onto the reader (Phiri 36).

The tension between the personal and the political deepens as the narrator references “trouble in all the townships” and the voices that “talk away under everything... but whose are they, the voices, why can’t we hear them now? Shhh, you’ll hear them, if you pay attention, if only you will listen” (16). Galgut’s appeal to the reader highlights the divide between different societal experiences and underscores the silence that surrounds marginalised voices. The reader is called to listen, to acknowledge what has been excluded, and to interrogate their own understanding of the political landscape.

In these moments, Galgut invites readers to move beyond passive observation and become active participants in the narrative. The tensions within the text challenge readers to critically engage with the various voices in the novel, encouraging them to consider who is privileged and who is silenced. This process of critique extends beyond the novel itself, urging the reader to reflect on their own role in the ongoing socio-political struggles of post-apartheid South Africa.

Salome's introduction highlights her objectification, described in terms of property: "Oh, Salome, I got her along with the land." (23) She is reduced to an exterior, "she wears her life as a mask, like a graven image" (23), and her dehumanisation becomes more evident when the narrator states, "But some things you do know, because you saw them yourself." (23) This forces the reader to confront the tension between past and present, personal and political. Ambivalence becomes palpable as the reader, while entertained by Uncle Ockie's drunken antics, is unsettled by the exclusion of voices such as Salome's in the portrayal of a multitude of consciousness is disconcerting.

Salome's silence is a poignant reminder throughout the novel that in order to move beyond the elitism and prejudice that arise from defining identity through exclusion, we must remain self-conscious. The narrator notes that Salome "was with Ma when she died, right there next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible" (23-24). This remark highlights the importance of embracing the humanity of others and seeing the world from a multiplicity of perspectives, and not just one. Detloff's notion that "one person's *belonging to the world* might be another person's *exile*" accurately encompasses the potential experience for the reader (Detloff 7).

Phiri compares Salome and Faulkner's Dilsey, from *The Sound and the Fury*, noting that while both occupy peripheral roles, Salome is not depicted as "the self-effacing and serviceable" Dilsey (Phiri 35). The narrator further emphasises this when stating, "whatever Salome feels is invisible too" (24), a point Phiri interprets as extending Amor's white shame "into a lived condition" and in doing so "shame is translated from an individualized 'private, inward-directed' undertaking of being-in-the-self to an inevitably and necessarily socialized, outward-directed process of being-for-the-other" (Phiri 35). Salome's silence and humility in the face

of her assumed non-personhood reinforce how the white self is interpellated by the black other, both socio-politically and experientially (Phiri 36).

Phiri's analysis of *Salome* highlights the tension between sameness and difference in the novel. As *Salome* embodies the materiality of Amor's white shame, her character challenges readers to reconsider the interconnectedness of the white self and the black other. This prompts readers to confront their own biases, both internal and external, and acknowledge the roles these dynamics play in shaping identity. Through encounters with marginalised characters like, "the black girl, what's her name again, *Salome*, who obviously doesn't count", Galgut pushes readers to examine the boundaries between what is seen as the 'self' and what is relegated to the 'other' (27). In doing so, Galgut opens the door to a complex understanding of identity and social dynamics, urging readers to question both their own positionality and their complicity in reinforcing or challenging societal divisions.

Galgut has stated that he "decided to represent only as much of the psyches of the black characters as their white counterparts were likely to perceive" (Galgut, *A Response* 42). I argue that, in doing so, he foregrounds the limits of white perception and narrative authority. This selective representation echoes Jameson's notion that the lives of marginalised figures remain "unknown and unimaginable" within dominant power structures (Jameson 157). While Jameson focuses on imperial subjects, its application to *The Promise* requires nuance - the Swarts are not direct agents of empire, but they are still beneficiaries of a system shaped by colonial legacies and racialised hierarchies. Their inability (or refusal) to fully perceive *Salome* speaks to the enduring structural exclusion that persists beyond formal colonial rule.

Galgut creates a gap that does not "include this radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation" (Jameson 157) a way of "*not* seeing [*Salome*] – in the way that an ordinary middle-class white South African might fail to see her" (Galgut, *A Response* 42). I

argue that he includes Jameson's spatial disjunction to show that the missing marginalised voices are "comparable to another dimension, an outside like the other face of a mirror, which it constitutively lacks, and which can never be made up or made good." (Jameson 157) The blankness and blindness become part of the narrative and should trouble the reader. Jameson argues that modernist art grapples with the fundamental problem or dilemma that is inherent to its nature; a sense of incompleteness or privation within the artistic content itself, akin to a missing dimension that cannot be restored by simply adding back what is missing. Galgut questions the purpose of "bestowing full humanity on a character like Salome" when in the real-world millions of people like her continue to be "voiceless, powerless, almost presenceless?" (Galgut, *A Response* 42)

To do that would be trying to resolve the modernist dilemma by simply adding back what is missing and would only serve as "a gesture intended to console the reader" and absolve them of blame (Galgut, *A Response* 42). Ultimately, the significance of Galgut's modernist approach lies not just in his formal techniques but in what they reveal about contemporary South Africa. By exposing the ongoing erasures embedded in white consciousness, *The Promise* compels its readers - particularly those who may identify with the Swarts - to recognise and reckon with the limits of their own perception.

Salome's prayer exemplifies Galgut's ability to blur the lines between past and present, personal and political, and the living and the dead. After being told by Marina that "she would not be allowed to attend" Ma's funeral, Salome returns "to her own house...beg your pardon, to the Lombard place" and offers up a prayer for Rachel:

'Oh God. I hope You can hear me. It is me, Salome. Please welcome the madam where You are and look after her carefully, because I wish to see her again one day in Heaven. I have known her a long time, from before she was a madam even, from when she and

I both were young women, and in these past days we were sometimes one person. I am sure You understand because it is You who gave this great suffering to her, so that I could look after her. For that she promised this house to me and for that I thank You. Amen'. (72)

Salome's hesitation - hoping that God "can hear" her - underscores her silence throughout the novel. More significantly, her belief that she and Rachel "were sometimes one person", suggests a moment of deep entanglement, complicating the distinction between subject and object (72). However, Galgut refuses to offer this as a moment of resolution. The narrator immediately undercuts Salome's articulation:

Perhaps [Salome] doesn't pray in these words, or in any words at all, many prayers are uttered without language and they rise like all the rest. Or perhaps she prays for other things, because prayers are secret in the end, and not all to the same god. (72)

By casting doubt on Salome's words, the narrator forces the reader to confront the limits of representation. The instability of voice and perspective aligns with modernist literature's concern with the impossibility of fully capturing marginalised experience within dominant narrative structures. Galgut's self-conscious engagement with these representational gaps foregrounds absence rather than attempting to resolve it, unsettling the reader and resisting closure. This self-awareness in Galgut's writing continues the modernist tradition using formal techniques to grapple with the ethical challenges of representing marginalised voices in literature today.

Another striking moment occurs when Rachel Swart's (Ma) spirit occupies the narrative voice. Her fragmented, disoriented posthumous presence suggests that the dead are, "frequently unable to accept their condition, they resemble the living in that respect, but they have forgotten what they're nostalgic for, much is lost in crossing over..." (43). Rachel's consciousness

disrupts the narrative's stability, highlighting what Detloff calls the "permeable boundary between spectatorship and participation" (Detloff 12). This modernist technique of disrupting linear storytelling reflects the novel's focus on the unfulfilled promise, with Rachel's spectral presence symbolising the suppressed past that resurfaces to trouble the present (Friedman 434). Galgut's use of narrative fragmentation mirrors the lingering effects of unacknowledged histories, maintaining the novel's engagement with absence and memory.

The return of the past is further explored in "Pa", the second chapter of the novel, which foregrounds Anton's voice and subverts familiar tropes of the farm novel tradition. Anton, the eldest and only son of Manie, embodies Galgut's satirical critique of the genre, particularly its idealised notions of return, belonging, and inheritance. As Dirk Kloppe⁶ notes, the farm novel often engages with themes of pastoral and anti-pastoral, the tension between domestic and wild spaces, and existential crises tied to land and legacy (Kloppe 99-113). I argue, however, that Galgut approaches these tropes with irony particularly through Anton's perspective, which is steeped in Kierkegaardian notions of self-doubt and existential absurdity. Kierkegaard's distinction between irony, which highlights the gap between the ideal and the real, and humour, which acknowledges their permanent misalignment, is reflected in Anton's troubled sense of identity. Anton's return to the farm is fraught with ironic and humorous moments that reflect the absurdity of human existence. His homecoming is less a triumphant return than a confrontation with displacement, as he remains estranged from both his past and his family (85).

Galgut juxtaposes Anton's disillusionment with Amor's quiet reflections on grief and loss, further destabilising any singular perspective. The shifting narrative voice, combined with

⁶ In his article "The Pastoral, the Primal and the Post Apartheid Sublime in Justin Cartwright's 'White Lightning'" Kloppe highlights contemporary country narratives have at their centre a white male who is "looking for solace, hoping for regeneration, he is refused, even violently denied, the reassurance he seeks" (Kloppe, 97).

ironic commentary on faith and morality, reinforces Galgut's modernist approach. Rather than presenting a cohesive historical or psychological account, the novel foregrounds contradictions, gaps, and competing interpretations. In doing so, Galgut engages with what Detloff describes as "the particularity of suffering and the temporality of living", not as a broad social commentary but as a deeply personal, formally intricate exploration of fractured identity and unresolved histories (Detloff 15).

As both Anton and Amor struggle to come to terms with their reality, the reader is drawn into a familiar emotional landscape, yet simultaneously unsettled as satire unmasks the contradictions of human nature. The passage of time - one year into the new democracy - is subtly marked by Anton's snide remark about Astrid's "new mobile phone...useless heavy brick with buttons" (81). His observation becomes an ironic commentary on the tension between technological progress and the stagnation of personal and societal concerns, underscoring how modern advancements, while seemingly transformative, remain entangled with the everyday absurdities of existence.

Astrid, who "has taken upon herself the silences of the family," calls Anton to inform him - through "no complete words"—that Pa is in ICU after being bitten by a snake (82). Anton's presence in the novel is haunted by the complexity of his past, and his language—his voice a "ghost voice," his existence "far away on the outer margins"—reinforces his struggle with identity and belonging (82). His self-proclaimed affinity for "boundaries" and his assertion that survival depends on pushing things "under the surface" reflect his internal conflict, rationalising repression as a coping mechanism (83). Despite this, he frames his return home as a "turning point", convincing himself that the future is swelling with promise (85).

Anton's description of the new South Africa demonstrates Galgut's ironic redescription embodying Kierkegaard's existential attitudes of irony and humour. Anton observes, "A new,

democratic government in the Union Buildings!... Wonder if Mandela is in there right now, at his desk. From a cell to a throne, never thought I'd see in my lifetime. Weird how quickly it's come to seem ordinary" (85). Later, in the hospital where he encounters his father, Anton notes that he, "...can see a black man in the next bed, bandaged like a mummy. Verwoed must be spinning in his grave, can't believe they haven't changed the name of the hospital yet... Apartheid has fallen, see, we die right next to each other now, in intimate proximity. It's just the living part we still have to work out" (87-88). Anton's observations, infused with Kierkegaard's irony, reflect the gap between the ideal of democracy and the complexities of its implementation. His cynical yet humorous commentary on the lingering effects of apartheid highlights the absurdity of societal transformation. Both descriptions encapsulate the ambivalence of the 'new' South Africa, filled with hope yet haunted by the past, resembling a ghost with unfinished business.

Galgut captures Bluemel's discussion of the "double movement" of satire⁷—where "not only can anything good be redescribed to look bad, but anything bad can be redescribed to look good" (Bluemel 527). This ambivalence in *The Promise* reinforces Galgut's position as a persistent modernist, reflecting the paradoxes of transition. He highlights the potential of democracy, but through Anton's perspective—a deserter of his national service to the SADF—reminds the reader that perceptions of good and bad are shaped not only by language but also by the prevailing hegemonies that define societal norms. In doing so, the novel underscores how entrenched power structures continue to shape moral judgments, complicating the possibility of genuine change.

⁷ Kristin Bluemel reviews Jonathan Greenberg's work *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*. It investigates the role that satire plays in late modernist texts. Greenberg highlights "satire's dynamic repudiation of and dependence on sentimentality" suggesting that the humour created by the late modernists through the way in which they employ satire, depends on a shared sensibility "by those whose experience of modernity has taught them to feel" (qtd. in Bluemel 525).

Contrasted with Anton's sardonic voice is Amor's, whose perspective embodies a more compassionate reckoning with suffering and loss. Galgut balances "sentimental pity and satiric ridicule" (Greenberg 128), framing Amor's moral dilemma within the novel's broader critique of history and accountability. Her conflicted relationship with home is evident when she returns after her father's passing, describing her emotions as a "commotion of longing and revulsion inside" (92). Like Anton, she wants to move forward—"it's best not to look back"—yet her constant displacement suggests an underlying refusal to confront what remains unresolved (92).

Amor's return is tied to the unfulfilled promise made to Salome. Unlike Anton, who fixates on land as inheritance, Amor is drawn to the weight of her mother's dying wish. Her first honest encounter upon returning home is with Salome, captured in a stark exchange: "Salome. / Amor." (98) This moment underscores Amor's recognition of history's lingering debts, as reflected in her observation of Salome's aging face: "An expression of disappointment has started to harden Salome's face, like the calluses that thicken the soles of her feet. She still wears no shoes. In this house, she will never wear shoes" (98). Amor senses the question in Salome's silence—" (Will you help me?)"—and she knows it concerns "her mother's last wish" but she cannot act on it yet (98). Although she registers as the novel's "moral compass – or conscience", she too fails to achieve reconciliation or repair (Phiri 34). Amor's desire to fulfil her mother's promise explores "the material and ethical limits of racial reconciliation and repair" (Phiri 34).

Her shame and inertia can also be understood through Lukács's theory of reification, which suggests that under capitalism, social relations become objectified, leading to alienation and moral decay. Amor's failure to act reflects this broader socio-economic condition, where individual moral agency is constrained by systemic forces. Building on Williams's insights, I argue that Amor's guilt and determination are not merely personal but shaped by the social

expectations and historical legacies surrounding her, reinforcing the ethical complexities of her position within a white South African family marked by both Afrikaner and English heritage. By blending these identities, Galgut critiques the complicity of all white South Africans in sustaining systemic inequality. Lastly, drawing on Jameson's perspective, Amor's moral shame and reparative efforts can be seen as attempts to map the terrain of racial injustice and historical trauma, seeking healing in the fragmented, disorienting post-apartheid landscape. However, as my reading of the novel suggests, this effort remains incomplete - her inaction ultimately underscores the reified nature of racial dynamics in South African society, where genuine human connection is often overshadowed by systemic oppression and historical injustices. Galgut's modernism lies not only in his formal experimentation but in his ability to capture this ongoing tension—in which satire, irony, and sincerity coexist to interrogate the unfulfilled promises of the past.

The tension between past and present, living and dead, is sharply rendered in this chapter. Amor finally asks, "(Can Salome have her house now?)" which is followed by the image of a dove colliding with a window, dropping to the floor (111). Galgut's fluid narrative shifts between the perspectives of family members; Dean terrified, Astrid irrational, Marina inquisitive, Ockie contemptuous, Salome receptive. There is a "troubled spirit abroad" and it is traced through the viewpoints of Dean's awkward gestures to placate grief, Astrid's petty fixation with fittings, Marina's desire to feed, Ockie's alcohol-infused patriotism, Anton's desire to escape being buried by his father and Salome's plight with a haunting promise (111). Even a pair of jackals stake their claim, reinforcing the entanglement of histories, spaces, and identities where Galgut captures the "complex temporality of past, present and future" (Nuttall 11). Phiri acknowledges this element of Galgut's writing noting that the narrator, "interchangeably ironic and satirical", is impartial and "reverberates an intimate, prosaic narrative of a fundamentally, albeit asymmetrically, raced (co-)existence" (Phiri 36).

The question of Salome's house, "the Lombard place" (98), resurfaces after the funeral, where her presence is acknowledged: "...for she was there too, why was it not mentioned before..." (125). Like Amor and Anton, she remains on the periphery, neither fully inside nor outside the family's sphere. The narrative voice reminds us not to "overlook Salome", drawing attention to the uneasy entanglement of past promises and present omissions (125). Amor's reminder to consider Salome sends a "tremor" through the group, with Astrid and Marina dismissing the matter, while Marina's outrage exposes the limits of ethical responsibility within legal structures. Amor's fragmented experience at the will reading, described as having "no centre," mirrors the novel's broader instability and shifting perspectives (127). This aligns with Walkowitz's view of modernist fiction as questioning the self's autonomy within historical structures (Walkowitz 5).

Although Amor presses Anton to fulfil the promise regarding Salome's house, Anton dismisses it, claiming, "not every chance is an opportunity" (134). Yet, under the influence, he concedes, "We can work something out with Salome's house" (135). Amor believes the promise will be fulfilled, but Anton inherits his father's unkept promise which, if repressed, will trouble his present (Friedman 434). The recurring motif of the promise explores the tension between past and present, personal and political, with Galgut's modernist interrogation of historical continuity and rupture.

Though Amor may seem more sympathetic to issues of inheritance, she remains passive, her "saintly inefficacy" as questionable as Anton's failure to shape his own life (Wood). Galgut's narrative techniques emphasise intimacy over alienation, urging readers to recognise how history shapes the present. I argue that Galgut critiques complacency through the characters of Amor and Anton he exposes the dissonance between ideological aspiration and lived reality. Galgut's novel resists closure, embodying modernism's tension between progress and inertia.

Through the chapter dedicated to “Pa”, Galgut demonstrates how the past lingers in the present through the unkept promise and the characters’ continued inaction. The novel’s fluid narration, ironic asides, and direct second-person address create an unsettling intimacy. The hyper-omniscient narrator shifts perspectives unpredictably, exposing both the characters’ blind spots and the reader’s own complicity in systems of privilege. By constantly reframing perception Galgut destabilises fixed notions of identity and belonging. Galgut aligns with modernism’s interrogation of truth and subjectivity. His use of irony mirrors the novel’s existential concerns, where awareness of the past does not necessarily lead to meaningful change. The novel resists closure and forces readers to confront the tension between recognition and responsibility.

4.3 Inaction and Alienation

Inaction and alienation permeate *The Promise*, casting a shadow over the lives of its characters. Rooted in the existential angst of modernist literature, Galgut explores the erosion of meaningful connections and the isolation inherent in the human condition. Lukács argues that modernist literature frequently engages with fractured subjectivities and alienated characters, a theme central to Galgut’s work. Building on this, Mellor and Shilling’s insight into the relationship between selfhood and the body provide a valuable lens, particularly in how characters struggle to construct stable identities. Mellor and Shilling suggest that an individual’s sense of identity is often tied to their physical form, and its disintegration can disrupt personal and existential stability (Mellor and Shilling 413).

This tension is particularly evident in the experiences of Astrid, Lindile, and Bob, whose trajectories reflect a heightened consciousness of mortality and the fleeting nature of existence. Their alienation stems not only from their socioeconomic status but also from their inability to form genuine connections with others, leading to a profound sense of isolation and disillusionment. As they grapple with the void left by disintegrating societal structures, they

confront a world plagued by ambiguity, confusion, and existential uncertainty. This section will trace their journeys, demonstrating how modernist concerns persist within the South African literary landscape—not merely as an aesthetic or intellectual inheritance, but as an ongoing response to the conditions of contemporary life.

The chapter titled “Astrid”, marks “ten years of democracy in South Africa”, anchoring her narrative within a nation still defining itself (141). Galgut intricately weaves themes of inaction and alienation into Astrid’s narrative arc, reflecting broader existential struggles typical of modernist literature. Astrid’s tumultuous journey serves as a microcosm of the post-apartheid South African experience, reflecting the ambivalence and turmoil inherent in identity formation amid societal transition.

Up until this point, the narrator presents Astrid as a figure of bleak failure: bulimic, unhappily married, divorced and unfaithful in her new marriage to Jake Moody. Her fear of death, stemming from her father’s tragic demise, underscores an existential dread that extends beyond personal anxiety to reflect a broader crisis of meaning in post-apartheid South Africa. Her terror of mortality is captured as she reflects: “If it can happen to our own father, it can happen to me. This nothing, this state of Not. She mourns herself in terror” (90). This existential unease, where the boundaries between subjective experience and objective reality blur, recalls the core tenets of modernist subjectivity.

Galgut refracts this crisis through a distinctly South African lens, where personal disintegration is entangled with the remnants of collective trauma. Astrid’s desperate pursuit of significance amidst the chaos of her surroundings reflects the continued presence of modernist alienation within contemporary South African literature, demonstrating how historical and psychological fragmentation shape both individual and national identity.

Throughout the novel and particularly in the chapter dedicated to Astrid, readers witness her attempts to re-construct her own narrative “to establish a reliable ‘sense of self’ in the context of a seemingly hostile and threatening world” (qtd. in Mellor and Shilling 413). Mellor and Shilling further assert that “integral to this project of [re-constructing] the self is the *body*” (413). Astrid’s connection to her body as a defining element of her subjectivity is evident in her turbulent relationship with her outward appearance. Early in the novel, Astrid’s bulimia is introduced when she “vomited up her lunch half an hour ago, as she regularly does, in order to stay slim. She is prone to paranoid fears like these...” (28). Years later, after Pa’s death, Astrid’s ongoing battle with bulimia and her focus the body is highlighted:

It’s hardest of all for Astrid, and her face, even under its make-up, shows signs of internal struggle. How did it turn out like this? She can’t be my sister, this is an imposter... Astrid on her knees over the toilet...Horrible, unnatural, never get used to it no matter how many times, and it’s not even working any more, putting on weight all the time... looking so bad next to Amor, my God how does she turn out that way, used to be porky, never what you’d call sexy... (98)

For Astrid, the limitations in re-ordering her sense of self are clear in the “brute facts of [her] thickening waistline, sagging breasts, ageing body and inevitable death” (Mellor and Shilling 413). Death radically challenges “her sense of the reality of the world, of others and of self, and serves to undermine [her] taken-for-granted consciousness of the reality of day-to-day” (Berger qtd. in Mellor and Shilling 413). Her focus on the corporeal self, characteristic of modernist subjectivity, perpetuates feelings of disillusionment and existential uncertainty. Unable to conceptualise a self beyond the physical body, Astrid is trapped in a cycle of alienation, reinforcing Galgut’s broader engagement with modernist themes of fragmentation and existential despair.

Astrid's fear of death is amplified by the narrator's satirical tone rendering her life - and subsequent death—almost glib. Her infidelity is another symptom of her unstable selfhood. The narrator reveals that for “the past year... she has been having an affair with Jake's partner, the politician who now more than ever shall remain nameless, no need for indiscretion...” (143). The sly comment that follows— “Really, her husband ought to be grateful she's having the affair, if he ever finds out about it.”—blurs the lines between Astrid's consciousness and the hyper-omniscient narrator (143).

Galgut lures the reader into an act of character-reading, granting access to Astrid's thoughts while simultaneously inviting a ‘spirit of critique’. The reader is encouraged to examine how they engage with difference - both in themselves and in others. The negotiation of sameness and difference becomes fraught, as Galgut tempts the reader with the familiarity of gossip and judgment. Yet, his experimental narrative style disrupts these instincts, exposing the stereotypes and assumptions embedded in Astrid's character. Her flaws, rather than being universalised, reflect the contradictions within a particular social milieu—privilege, excess, and a performative engagement with morality.

The narrator's voice, oscillating between detachment and deep familiarity, complicates the reader's response to Astrid. We are both appalled by and drawn to her, a tension that mirrors broader anxieties around identity, performance, and self-perception. Galgut's modernist techniques do more than frame Astrid's subjectivity; they challenge the reader's own. By employing heightened self-consciousness and an experimental narrative style, Galgut offers a means to grapple with both the construction of personal identity and the destabilising forces of history.

Astrid exemplifies a “narcissistic personality”, avoiding thoughts of mortality by refusing deep connections with others (Mellor and Shilling 419). Her obsession with maintaining a youthful

appearance underscores her preoccupation with the “narcissistic body”, where new experiences only serve to reinforce her self-image (Mellor and Shilling 419). Astrid’s (second) affair with her husband’s partner, “a black man”, reflects her search for validation and identity redefinition. She confesses that she once found “blacks unattractive”, but now seeks affirmation through her lover, who is “not prejudiced against heftier women no longer in their first bloom of youth...” (144). This pursuit of desirability is interrupted when Father Batty’s voice intrudes: “This has to stop. You gave me your word!”, reminding readers of their privileged insight, and with it, their implied complicity in Astrid’s transgressions (144).

Astrid acknowledges her “promise” to Father Batty (and perhaps to God) sincerely, but her willingness to change is absent. She admits having “stayed away from the church” for the past six months, and during a phone call with Amor, she senses disapproval (145). Because “approval matters greatly to Astrid”, she seeks confession with Father Batty (145). In this moment, she admits, “it’s been troubling her that God might not approve of her lately either” (145). Father Batty guides her through a reflection of her moral decline, prompting her to ask; “Do you think it’s more of a sin, Father, to commit adultery with a black?” (145)

The satire oozes from the narrator’s description of father Batty’s relationship with “this particular parishner” (145). It highlights how easily “Astrid took to Catholicism” and how her faith has become a “waterproof garment” that “doesn’t stop her acting on her fears and desires, but it provides a way of washing them off afterwards” (145). The cycle of “repent and repeat” means “no penance for [her] today” (145-146). The reader is both disarmed by the humour and invited to glimpse Astrid’s flawed humanity. This opens a space for self-reflection, encouraging the reader to consider their own complicity in the moral ambiguities presented.

Astrid’s dissatisfaction in seeking absolution for her sins stems from her inability to engage in sincere petitionary prayer. This failure “mirrors a more general intention to refuse death”,

undermining and questioning the very way she orders her life and sense of self (Mellor and Shilling 421). Death, therefore, has the potential to “open up the individual (even the narcissistic individual) to the dread of personal meaninglessness” as Astrid cannot establish a stable sense of self in relation to others and the world she inhabits (Mellor and Shilling 421). Her inability to form a stable sense of self echoes Lukács’s observation of blurring of distinctions between subjective fantasies and objective reality, contributing to feelings of alienation and personal meaninglessness (Lukács 21).

Astrid’s sudden death, shortly after leaving the confessional “in a state of unease”, is narrated in 83 sentences—little over three pages (147). Her brief death, I believe, highlights the complexities of forming a stable sense of self in “a hostile and threatening” South Africa (Mellor and Shilling 413). The narrator explains that Astrid’s usual vigilance falters due to her internal vexation over the confessional (148). Before she can explain how it happens, she encounters a calm, smiling man in the seat beside her, “Howzit, he says to her by the way of greeting, showing a gun” (148). It is as if “Astrid has been waiting her whole life for this man... The fear has at last reached Astrid, the certainty of what cannot possibly happen is actually happening. To her” (148). In this moment Astrid becomes “a means to an end” for Lindile—Hotstix, the killer—as she confronts her fear of death and especially her inability “to have certain knowledge of what death will entail” (Mellor and Shilling 421). The killer, Lindile, reflects, “Why do people always want to know what’s going to happen to them?” (149)

Galgut’s fluid narrative voices are essential to conveying the empathetic cosmopolitan ‘spirit of critique’. Lindile is humanised through his exchange with Astrid. The satire adds an edge of humour, but it serves as a sharp blade, splicing open the tension between sameness and difference. While Lindile occupies an entirely different social reality, Galgut forges connections between Lindile and Astrid in their experiences of existential angst. Both

characters lack a stable sense of self. Their exchange highlights the overarching theme of humankind's search for meaning, the journey of finding a sense of self in an unfolding, often hostile world. It offers insight into the complex South African condition; being caught up in a delicate dance of disgust and delight, separation and unity, diversity and prejudice, the list goes on but, in its essence, a condition of ambivalence.

Lindile's identity is described as impermanent, "he doesn't stay anywhere for long... Nothing permanent about him, nothing lasts" (148). His constant crossing of identities leaves him detached and cold with no empathy for others. His interactions, such as with "this hysterical white woman", reflect his singularity—his survival is his sole priority (148). When he takes the BMW, it's "Nothing personal" and her wailing is "not unfamiliar to him" (148). A brief moment of vulnerability occurs when Lindile feels "squeamish" before killing her, cursing himself "so viciously... not her" (149). There is a fleeting possibility for subjective crisis and a break in his alienation, but Lindile does not act on it. The moment ends abruptly: "Sorry, he says. Then it's over, loudly and suddenly done, and so is she" (150).

Later, Lindile reflects on Astrid's terror, but instead of confronting his fractured identity, he pushes it away: "Don't look back" (150). His inability to process grief further emphasises his fragmented psyche. This moment embodies the modernist concern with subjective instability, where meaning is elusive, and identity is not fixed. Galgut's narrative style emphasises this uncertainty through the technique of empathetic cosmopolitanism, encouraging readers to view the world from multiple perspectives, thus complicating notions of ownership and identity (Eze 04).

Galgut uses Astrid's death to explore humanity's blind spots, particularly in how certain lives are dismissed. Bob, the homeless man who resides outside the church, embodies this marginalisation. Once a respected professional, Bob "can't prove it to you" now, emphasising

the loss of both his past identity and his social relevance (169). His name, derived from the song he sings endlessly, “Blowin’ in the Wind”, symbolises the way society reduces individuals to fragments of their former selves (170).

Through Bob’s character, Galgut conveys the disjointed passage of time for those on the margins of society, those whose lives have lost meaning or coherence in the eyes of the mainstream. He writes:

Time passes differently for those who’re shut out of the world. It travels past like traffic at certain points in the day...or like your own body, signalling its cravings to you. It seems to slide by slowly, but the days flicker fast and soon your face is different, not quite yours anymore. Or perhaps it is more like you than ever before, that is also possible. (170)

This passage mirrors modernist preoccupations with subjective time and alienation, offering an unsettling portrayal of time as both stagnant and fleeting, mutable and destructive. Galgut immerses the reader in Bob’s day-to-day existence, revealing the futility and existential weight of life for those excluded from the societal narrative. I would compare the experience of reading this passage to watching a scene from *Waiting for Godot*, simultaneously captivating and perplexing. A barren landscape occupied by mundane characters surrounded by a deep sense of circularity and ambiguity. Moments of humour interspersed throughout the narrative provide brief respite from the pervasive sense of ennui, but one is left questioning the meaning behind the characters’ words and actions. It is an experience that challenges one to confront the absurdity of the human condition and grapple with questions of existence, meaning, and the nature of reality.

The narrative’s critique of societal indifference is emphasised in the conclusion of this moment: “there’s no reason to accompany him and, come to think of it, there never was. Why is he

obscuring our view... demanding sympathy, using a name that doesn't belong to him, how did he waste our time with his stories? He's very insistent on being noticed, how self-centred of him, what an egotist he is. Pay him no further mind" (172). In this, the narrator mirrors the reader's potential reactions, prompting self-reflection on their complicity in marginalising figures like Bob. Through this narrative interruption, Galgut urges readers to confront their privileged position in observing these lives from the outside.

Galgut critiques the reader's own blind spots by occupying two pages with what seems like a meaningless moment, subtly revealing that "certain blindnesses are revealing" (173). He challenges readers to reflect on how often they overlook or dismiss the marginalised, urging them to consider whether they, too, let life pass them by. This moment underscores modernist concerns about the disconnection between individuals and their societies, particularly in how the marginalised are rendered invisible, their suffering dismissed as unworthy of attention.

Time is a central theme in this chapter, with Galgut juxtaposing the fleeting moment of Astrid's death—over in just three pages—with Bob's prolonged perspective over two pages. I believe this contrast highlights Galgut's broader intent as he stated, "time is the buried subject of the novel" (Galgut, *A Response* 41). Time is inevitable, inescapable, and ultimately unifying (Galgut, *A Response* 41). Whether through Astrid's superficial, narcissistic obsession with wealth and appearance, Father Batty's failure to bring about true reconciliation, or Lindile's overwhelming guilt in fulfilling his 'job', all these characters share a sense of stagnation. Galgut signals that we cannot afford to wait until the end of our lives to reflect on the meaning of our actions. Instead, we must resist selfish inertia and indifference, embracing a 'spirit of critique', as embodied in the narrator, whose scepticism is tempered by empathy. The novel invites readers to consider the limitations of each character, urging them to bridge the gaps between individuals and cultivate a collective sense of humanity. In doing so, it encourages

empathy toward marginalised narratives, challenging the notion of elite cosmopolitanism and calling for a reflection on privilege—particularly in how we navigate the complexities of social inequality and collective responsibility.

4.4 The Promise?

In the novel's concluding chapter, titled "Anton", Galgut explores the complexities of unfulfilled promises and the lingering spectre of injustice in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Anton's unfinished novel and its fragmented narrative, the reader is confronted with themes of belonging, poverty, and deferred dreams—issues that reflect the broader struggles of the nation. As the narrative unfolds, Rachel's long-delayed promise unveils layers of irony and ambiguity, underscoring the precariousness of restitution and the unresolved tensions that persist in the wake of political transition. This section reflects on the enduring legacy of apartheid and the individual struggles of reconciling past injustices with present realities, emphasising the difficulty of moving forward in a society marked by historical trauma and personal inertia.

The novel culminates in a South African setting that resonates with the daily realities of those living in the country today: "the power's gone out again, fourth time this week, and the generator's run out of petrol, so everything's off" (197). Anton's life embodies existential paralysis, a key theme in modernist thought, particularly in Lukács's exploration of individuals caught in a cycle of passivity. From the novel's opening, Anton is filled with potential but incapable of meaningful action. His most significant act of agency—abandoning his national service—amounts to little. Despite the passage of time—from the aftermath of Astrid's death to the subsequent decade—Anton remains restless. He is "looking for something... but fucked if he can remember what for...", unable to escape the "bad patch", where he is "losing time, the sense and sequence of it" (194-197). His life is in disrepair: "his too-big, falling-down

house”, a desire to drink his thoughts away, an unfinished novel, dwindling finances, and mounting official claims against his land (197-202). Anton sees the right course of action but consistently chooses “the wrong one, in order to vex you, and himself” (202). Trapped in a cycle of alienation and self-sabotage, Anton cannot form a coherent sense of self or purpose.

Lukács’s concept of the modern protagonist as a passive observer of life’s events resonates in Anton’s perpetual restlessness and futile search for meaning. His self-sabotage—choosing the wrong course of action despite recognising the right one—reflects the contradictions inherent in modern consciousness. Anton’s existential ennui and inability to reconcile his desires with his actions underscore the profound sense of alienation experienced by individuals navigating the complexities of modern life. Like Lukács’s characters, Anton is haunted by a sense of disorientation and disrepair, symbolised by his dilapidated home and unfinished novel. Anton, impotent, resented by his wife Desirée, and unable to deliver on any promise he once may have lived up to, succumbs to the ultimate act of self-destruction—epitomising alienation itself—by committing suicide. His last moments are charged with existential angst and irony as he realises he has wasted his life (205). His inner turmoil is poignantly captured as “Hilarity turns into crying and back into laughter. Oh, I can deal with the tragedy, it’s the farce I can’t handle” (205). In Anton’s final moments, his inner turmoil and existential crisis are laid bare, echoing the themes of alienation and despair often explored by both Lukács and Kierkegaard in their respective works.

Lukács critiques modernity by examining the disintegration of the individual’s sense of self in the face of societal fragmentation. Anton’s rejection of the repetitive and meaningless cycle of existence, symbolised by the “foolish old earth” and its “script unchanging”, reflects profound alienation stemming from his inability to reconcile his inner and outer realities (207). This disillusionment mirrors Kierkegaard’s philosophy of existential despair, especially in Anton’s desperate cry, “No. Can’t do it”, as he seeks release from the suffocating ordinariness of life

(207). Anton's refusal to be "a walk-on in the play" of life echoes Kierkegaard's exploration of humour and irony as existential attitudes, highlighting the profound gap between ideal aspirations and harsh realities (207). His demise reflects the irony of striving for meaning in a world fraught with existential emptiness, culminating in a tragic recognition of the irreconcilable distance between his idealised vision of life and the stark actuality of his existence. His unfinished novel, "emblematic of his own failed life", is only ever read by the last remaining Swart family member, Amor (Manià 25).

Amor returns to the farm one "last time" to fulfil her mother's dying wish and her father's promise (221). In the culmination of the chapter, Amor's visit to Salome to deliver "the Lombard place" presents a stark portrayal of the complexities surrounding the fulfilment of promises (235). Galgut's narrative cleverly blurs the line between reality and illusion, casting doubt on the very existence of the promised title deed, stating, "this piece of paper, which [Amor] can't yet possibly have in her possession" (236). Salome, who "has been patient for thirty-one years", has resigned herself to the fact that nothing will change (236). She contemplates returning to "where she came from" to "live out her last years" and has "started to look forward to leaving" the house on the farm, which has "never brought her any luck" (237). Lukács's framework of deferred justice applies here: the decades-long wait, the house's dilapidated state and the looming land claim all emphasise the harsh reality that justice deferred can ultimately equate to justice denied, which is "as good as nothing" (237). Manià highlights this "Beckettian moment" emphasising Salome's precarious position and the absence of a satisfactory resolution to the novel's overarching theme of restitution (Manià 28).

Phiri argues that Amor's obsessive determination to fulfil her mother's promise leads to "self-flagellating shame" (Phiri 34), which stems from Amor's desire to remain "solitary" (221). I argue that Amor's manifests in her desire to isolate herself from her family. Despite carrying a

sense of “moral shame” throughout the narrative, Amor’s alienation still leads to inaction (Phiri 34). The irony in Amor’s fulfilment of the promise (which arguably is not fulfilled considering the land claim and the fact that Salome may “be given the land and then lose it again”) lies in her futile attempts to find purpose or resolution (238).

The novel’s ambivalent ending has sparked debate regarding the “lack of closure” (Manià 29). I align with Manià’s position, citing Kostelac, that Galgut remains “distrustful of hegemonic narratives which offer premature resolutions to our problems and mask our inexorable ambivalence” (qtd. in Manià 29). I argue that any attempt by Galgut to offer closure would be a consolatory gesture for the reader, failing to adequately, or truthfully, capture the ambivalent experience of South Africa. It would be like the rain at the end of the novel—“some cheap redemptive symbol in a story, falling from a turbulent sky onto rich and poor, happy and unhappy alike...The rain has no prejudice”, but South Africans do (241). The open-ended conclusion, I believe, reminds us to embody a ‘spirit of critique’ in considering what Manià calls the “collective identity of South Africa”, one formed from a more fluid, transitive sense of self (Manià 29). The South Africa represented in *The Promise* is one of “discontinuity: it is the product of tensions between divergent or conflicting versions—but telling one story does not preclude other ways of telling—and so the selfhood that emerges is one that needs to be continuously open to re-examination and reconsideration” (Kostelac qtd. in Manià 29). It is a version of selfhood forced to navigate the tension between belonging and alienation.

Galgut’s *The Promise* concludes not with redemption or resolution, but with the same ambivalence that permeates the narrative. Amor’s comically clumsy attempt to scatter Anton’s ashes on the roof symbolises the futility of trying to impose meaning on a life defined by contradictions and failure. In the moment, she imagines the ashes scattering into the wind, but they are set to be swept into the gutter by the next rain, much like the legacies of those who

came before her—fragile, impermanent, and ultimately forgotten. This ironic image mirrors the absurdity of Anton’s life and death, where even the most significant acts seem pointless, slipping through the cracks of time and circumstance. The metaphor Amor grapples with, of a branch losing its leaves and eventually breaking off, poignantly captures the existential despair at the heart of the novel: that no matter how hard we try to grasp at meaning, life ultimately writes its own stories, erasing the traces we leave behind.

In this final act, Galgut channels a ‘Kierkegaardian’ humour—a wry recognition that life is both tragically empty and ironically absurd. Amor’s journey, like Anton’s before her, is marked by a constant oscillation between despair and dark comedy. Every attempt at resolution only reinforces the impossibility of achieving one. Galgut, distrustful of any neatly tied-up narrative, rejects the comfort of closure, leaving us with the unsettling recognition that identity—both personal and national—remains fluid, fragmented, and forever in flux. The novel’s refusal to offer closure is not a failure, but rather a deliberate commentary on the absurdity of seeking finality in a world where meaning is elusive, and the self is never fully realised. Thus, *The Promise* leaves us with the uncomfortable truth that the search for meaning—much like Amor’s climb up the roof—is an act of both futility and absurdity, yet profoundly human in its persistence.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I offer a sustained analysis of Damon Galgut's engagement with modernism, demonstrating how his work reanimates modernist aesthetics to navigate the personal and collective histories of post-apartheid South Africa. By positioning Galgut's novels as key examples of modernism's enduring vitality, this study has shown how its techniques—fragmented narratives, temporal dislocation, and formal experimentation—interrogate identity, alienation, and the weight of historical trauma. Drawing on the theories of Lukács, Williams, Jameson, Detloff, Friedman, Walkowitz, Appiah, and Eze, I have situated Galgut's work within a global literary framework, extending the conversation beyond national borders to address universal questions of identity, belonging, and memory.

Central to this study is the assertion that Galgut's use of modernist strategies is not merely stylistic but deeply ideological. His fragmented narratives and disorienting temporalities illuminate the fluidity of identity and the challenges of reconciling personal and collective histories. Through close readings of *In a Strange Room*, *Arctic Summer*, and *The Promise*, I have demonstrated how Galgut's novels grapple with the complexities of selfhood in a rapidly changing society, offering a critical lens to explore the tensions between individual experience and external reality. In doing so, his work reveals modernism's capacity to address both the specificities of post-apartheid South Africa and broader global concerns.

Galgut's writing not only reflects modernist influences—such as Woolf's polyphonic narratives or Beckett's absurdism—but also extends modernism as a living, evolving force. His work highlights modernism's relevance beyond its historical moment, offering fresh insights into identity formation and the ongoing reckoning with historical trauma. In a 2021 interview, Mark Gevisser noted the modernist sensibility permeating *The Promise*, highlighting how its fragmented structure and exploration of time, identity, and history reflect the influences of

modernist authors like Faulkner. Gevisser's comments touch on an aspect of Galgut's writing often acknowledged in reviews but not fully explored in scholarly investigation. This dissertation addresses that gap, offering the first comprehensive analysis of modernism's pervasive influence across Galgut's most recent novels, while critically examining the implications of that influence on both his literary style and thematic concerns.

Although modernism is often referenced in discussions of Galgut's work, its full significance and evolution remain underexplored. This study provides a detailed analysis of modernism's role across his novels. I illustrate how his engagement with modernist aesthetics reflects the broader historical and cultural shifts in post-apartheid South Africa, while also extending its relevance to global concerns. By placing modernism at the core of Galgut's creative process, this dissertation offers a new lens through which to understand his literary contributions to both South African and global literature, demonstrating that modernism remains an enduring and transformative force in contemporary literature.

As modernism continues to resonate in Galgut's novels, the act of reading becomes more than just an absorption of narrative; it becomes an invitation to critically engage with the world. This is particularly significant in a South African context, where the trauma of apartheid and the complexities of post-apartheid identity necessitate a literary form capable of addressing both the personal and collective. Galgut's fractured narratives, temporal experimentation, and formal innovation highlight the tensions between the private and the political, offering a space for reflection and transformation. Through this modernist framework Galgut's work moves beyond the specificities of South Africa, reflecting universal themes of identity, alienation, and historical trauma.

In *In a Strange Room*, Galgut employs modernist aesthetics to explore the fragmented self, portraying Damon as an alienated figure navigating personal and historical trauma. The novel's

shifting perspectives and blurred autobiographical elements align with modernist concerns about identity, dislocation, and self-representation. Drawing on Lukács, Detloff, and Jameson, I have argued that Galgut's formal experimentation critiques and extends modernism, using irony and self-reflexivity to interrogate the tension between isolation and fleeting moments of connection. Damon's encounters with Reiner and other travellers illustrate the persistence of colonial mindsets and the failure to engage with local histories, mirroring broader structural disconnections. Yet Damon's ironic awareness and sensitivity to others signal a potential for ethical re-engagement, embodying Detloff's concept of resilience. Galgut's novel thus allows me to position modernism not as a static mode but as a dynamic, evolving aesthetic capable of addressing the complexities of identity, belonging, and global citizenship.

In Arctic Summer, Galgut deepens his engagement with modernism, capturing E.M. Forster's creative and personal stagnation. The narrative reflects the tension between isolation and the longing for connection that defines modernist aesthetics. Through formal experimentation with biofiction, Galgut explores Forster's inner turmoil as he navigates the constraints of imperialism and the search for authentic selfhood. Drawing on Jameson's theory, Morgan's oscillation between self-discovery and retreat mirrors the fractured identity shaped by imperial structures, while his evolving relationship with Masood reflects Detloff's concept of resilient literature. By weaving personal and historical narratives together, Galgut reveals how moments of intimacy and loss shape Morgan's gradual acceptance of a more fluid, transitive self.

Ultimately, *Arctic Summer* positions Galgut as a critical cosmopolitan writer, blending affective affiliation with Forster's life to interrogate the complexities of belonging in a fractured world. As Slabbert and Walkowitz suggest, this interplay between private and public spheres expands modernism's reach, linking individual subjectivity to broader socio-political forces. Galgut's narrative resists simplistic redemptive arcs, instead embracing the unresolved

tensions of identity, memory, and collective trauma. In doing so, the novel exemplifies literature's transformative potential—illuminating the overlapping dimensions of human experience and reaffirming the enduring relevance of modernist inquiry in contemporary fiction.

The Promise exemplifies modernism's enduring relevance within the South African context, using existential uncertainty and fractured identities to explore a world in flux. The novel shifts from Galgut's earlier works like *In a Strange Room* and *Arctic Summer*, where alienation and disintegration of relationships dominate, to a more experimental style that employs irony and humour to navigate the same crises. Galgut's formal experimentation, including shifting perspectives, intrusive narration, and fluid voice, mirrors modernist techniques, particularly the fragmented narratives of Faulkner, to expose the limitations of perception and the instability of identity. This self-reflexivity aligns with critical cosmopolitanism, where literature interrogates its ethical limitations and the responsibility of its audience. Galgut's refusal to present *The Promise* as a moral or historical statement allows for a deeper examination of social change, focusing on the tension between ethical urgency and existential angst without offering tidy resolutions.

The novel's irony and wry humour reflect the absurdity and complexity of navigating historical and personal change. Galgut's direct engagement with the reader, particularly through the second-person address, implicates white South Africans in the narrative, forcing them to confront their role in systems of privilege. This self-awareness is reinforced through the portrayal of time, stagnation, and the limits of individual perception, as characters like Astrid, Bob, and Lindile grapple with guilt, complicity, and unresolved histories. Galgut's refusal to offer closure underscores the central modernist theme: the search for meaning is both futile and absurd, yet profoundly human. The fragmented structure of the narrative not only reflects the

South Africa's ongoing struggle with its colonial and racial legacies, but also the fluidity of personal and national identities, making *The Promise* a striking meditation on the persistent uncertainties of modern life.

This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the field of Galgut scholarship by offering the first comprehensive analysis of modernism's influence across his most recent novels. By positioning Damon Galgut within the modernist tradition, I reveal how his use of modernist techniques - often dismissed as mere stylistic flourishes - reflects deeper ideological concerns. In this study, I reinterpret Galgut as a central figure not only in South African literature but also in global modernist discourse, illustrating how modernism's aesthetic strategies continue to address contemporary issues of identity, history, and belonging.

I challenge the dominant critical narratives that regard modernism as a distant literary movement, instead presenting it as a living force that remains deeply relevant to contemporary storytelling. Through my examination of Galgut's work, I reaffirm the relevance of modernism in understanding the complexities of the post-apartheid world. Through its fragmentation and innovation, modernism offers a space for both reflection and transformation, allowing literature to interrogate and engage with the social, historical, and personal issues that shape the present.

In conclusion, this dissertation asserts that modernism's aesthetic and philosophical concerns are integral to understanding the complexities of Damon Galgut's most recent works, particularly in relation to post-apartheid South Africa. By examining *In a Strange Room*, *Arctic Summer*, and *The Promise*, I have shown how Galgut's engagement with modernist aesthetics provides a unique lens through which to explore the ongoing complexities of life in contemporary South Africa and beyond. His novels not only reflect the world but also shape how we relate to it, offering a space for critical engagement with the past and present.

Future scholars might expand on this research by exploring how modernism narrates post-colonial identities, particularly in works that resist moral or historical closure, as Galgut's do. This study emphasises that modernism is not a closed historical moment but an evolving aesthetic that continues to shape our understanding of identity, history, and belonging. In Galgut's work, the act of reading becomes an invitation to listen—to the silences and voices emerging between personal identity and collective memory, between historical trauma and the present. Through this engagement, literature becomes a tool for generating new stories and new understandings, reaffirming the enduring relevance of modernist inquiry in contemporary fiction.

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