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Introduction: Damon Galgut's *The Promise* and the Booker Prize Double Bind

Sofia Kostelac

In November 2021, Damon Galgut became the third South African – after Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee – to be awarded the prestigious Booker Prize for his ninth novel, *The Promise*. Although clearly gratified by the accolade, Galgut's comments about the award have been more cautious than celebratory. '[P]rize lists are problematic in all sorts of ways,' he noted in one interview with *The Guardian*, 'and there's such a frenzy surrounding this particular prize that one feels almost guilty benefiting from it' (in Anderson n.p.). His circumspect tone is echoed by many of the contributors to this volume, who were invited by the editors to submit a response to the news of Galgut's Booker victory. Each essay, while distinct in intellectual focus, expresses reservations about the degree of cultural authority that the Booker exerts over literature in the English-speaking world, and the extent to which it has delimited the South African canon – as it circulates in the global literary marketplace – to particular instantiations of white writing (see Boehmer, van Urk, Muponde and Phiri in this volume). Indeed, *The Promise* shares so many thematic preoccupations with the country's previous Booker winners – most notably around the pathologies of whiteness – that it does not seem unreasonable to ask: will the Prize's appetite for portraits of dysfunctional white South Africans (apparently the most hapless and hopeless of all the Empire's orphans) ever diminish?

Yet, even a cursory reading of *The Promise* reveals that its resemblance to a Booker-endorsed canon of South African writing is no matter of mere derivation. The novel self-consciously, and with unreserved mirth, parodies the tropes of what Elleke Boehmer cannily calls the 'South African Novel™' (Boehmer, 2023, 6) in the essay which opens this volume, with its requisite cast of 'various circus animals and other familiars of South African writing' (7). The dexterity with which Galgut deploys his ironic perspective on the marketable South African novel is perhaps unsurprising, given the length and variety of his forty-year writing career, which has exposed him to the full ambit of (often peculiarly stringent) cultural, ethico-political and commercial expectations that have governed the reception of local writing since the late apartheid years, as I have argued elsewhere (see Kostelac, 2014). While an

early work like *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* evinced Galgut's considerable anxiety about the parameters of South African authorship, *The Promise* registers such concerns with a degree of ease and play that is largely unprecedented in his work.

In her contribution to this volume, Helena van Urk accounts for the novel's ludic, metafictional character in terms of the double bind that the Booker Prize creates for postcolonial writers, who must navigate its ostensible predilection for 'neo-Orientalist' (Huggan 24) works in order to gain visibility and prestige in the Anglosphere, despite any aversion they may hold for the Prize's politics. Her analysis draws from the literary sociology of scholars like Graham Huggan and Laura Chrisman, who have pointed out both the colonial history of the Prize, and the ideological stakes that underpin its annual selection. Structures like the Booker Prize, these scholars suggest, give the erstwhile Empire cultural authority over its former colonies despite its ever-diminishing political influence. They tend, accordingly, to favour works that bolster a neo-imperialist English identity by representing the 'third-world' as the perpetual 'other' of the Northern Anglosphere (whether by virtue of its perceived exotic or, in the South African case, perpetually catastrophic qualities). Galgut's Janus-faced accomplishment in *The Promise*, van Urk argues, is to both exploit and critique the expectations of the metropolitan reader by self-consciously satirizing the very tropes that the novel relies on to achieve its archetypal South African 'effect'.

The scepticism for the Booker Prize apparent in most of the contributions to this volume evince the influence of decoloniality on South African literary studies in recent years, and the intellectual distrust the movement has engendered in the field for the forces of cultural legitimation emanating from the Global North. Yet we cannot miss the irony that, even as we labour to critique the Prize, we are participating in the cultural machinery that ensures its pre-eminence. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us in *The Rules of Art*, academics are among the key legitimizing agents in the field of literary production and, by directing our scholarly attentions (approbatory or otherwise) to the Booker committee's choice, we invariably concede the Prize's cultural authority and duly canonize its winners. This scholarly conundrum is in the background of Robert Muponde's response to *The Promise*, which expresses reservations about the degree of visibility that the Prize and our subsequent critical attentions have granted the novel. His response is contextualized within his 'time of reading' the novel; that is, the tail-end of the COVID pandemic. In the context of the mass and unending grief produced by the pandemic, Muponde finds no recompense in *The Promise*'s fatalistic portraits of the irredeemable Swart family and their ignominious deaths. The novel, he argues, is concerned with 'recovery rather than rescue' (Muponde, 2023, 19); that is, with disclosing the 'existential mess' (23) produced by South Africa's racist history, rather than with forging new forms of imaginative expression and philosophical engagement amidst the ruins. For the latter, he suggests, we might look towards the selections made by local literary prizes rather than international ones.

Aretha Phiri takes *The Promise*'s rejection of a 'utopic' ethos of reconciliation and repair in South Africa as the point of departure in her response, but detects greater philosophical nuance in the novel's reticence in this regard. Her reading is attentive to Galgut's dramatization of the peculiar forms of existential entanglement produced by apartheid's racist legacies. The narrator's shifts from the third- to second-person plural – from 'they' to 'we' – do not, in this reading, install a bifurcated readership of implicated and exonerated subjects, but rather invite a 'disquietingly embodied responsiveness to, and recognition of, our collective, inter-subjective raced biographies as well as complicity in the everyday machinations of being white' (Phiri, 2023, 37). These are not the ambivalent but potentially productive forms of entanglement

theorized by scholars like Sarah Nuttall in recent years, whose future-oriented explorations of post-apartheid South African cultural practices are attentive to the forms of mutuality that may issue from our complexly imbricated histories. Phiri's analysis suggests that for Galgut, in contrast, no future can be imagined beyond the fact of the perpetual injury that the subjugated and dispossessed – like Salome – continue to suffer by virtue of our knotted, but grossly unequal, existences in South Africa.

The contributors to this volume are divided in their interpretations of *The Promise's* conclusion, which offers no resolution for Salome and sees Amor, the youngest of the Swart progeny, leaving the blighted family farm for the last time, 'whatever it is that happens next' (Galgut, *The Promise* 243). For Muponde, this final gesture is an all-too-glib response to the novel's complex ethical saga that leaves the status-quo perilously unchanged. Kirby Manià, conversely, detects the potential for change in the novel's deliberate lack of closure and argues that it opens the narrative possibility for Amor (but perhaps only Amor) to rescript her identity in protean terms that jettison the calcified legacies left to her by her disgraceful family. I would like, in these concluding remarks, to offer a third possibility: Galgut's refusal to disclose the terms in which the future might unfold for Amor or Salome is a deliberately queer negation of the rhetoric of futurity that has so relentlessly structured South African socio-political discourses since the late apartheid years. The references to Amor's childlessness in the novel, and the concluding descriptions of her menopausal body, symbolize *The Promise's* rejection of a future-oriented ethics which, as Lee Edelman reminds us, so often coalesces around the figure of the child. Edelman's *No Future* discloses the conservatism that inheres in political appeals to notions of futurity, even when these issue from ostensibly opposing ideological positions. 'For politics,' he argues, 'however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child' (2–3). In contrast to taking up a position on the existing political spectrum, Edelman argues for a queer ethics that remains 'outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears' (3) and which, in its transgression of socio-symbolic structures, is associated with pleasure (or *jouissance*) and the death-drive. Like Edelman's treatise, *The Promise* rejects the 'coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity' (Edelman 6) and refuses to offer us any narrative reassurance about our political future. And in this rejection, the novel also finds the *jouissance* – so apparent in its ludic aesthetic and ironic affective dimensions – that Edelman argues might come from embracing negativity against all injunctions to do otherwise.

This volume concludes with a welcome riposte from the author himself, who generously agreed to respond to the six essays outlined above. The response is characterized by Galgut's receptiveness to the views of his academic readers, whose perspectives he interlaces with illuminating reflections on his creative choices, despite his sense that 'the experiences of writing and reading a book happen on different planets' (Galgut, 2023, 39). On behalf of the editors of *English Studies in Africa*, I would like to thank him, most warmly, for the careful consideration he has given the views expressed in this special edition.

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Notes on contributor

Sofia Kostelac is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interests include the politics of canonicity in postcolonial literature, and she has published several articles on the critical reception of Damon Galgut's novels. She has also published articles on the representational legacies of modernism in South African writing and has recently started working on cognitive literary theory and its potential for transformative pedagogies.

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