



Grace unfulfilled: A missiological reading of reconciliation and forgiveness in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

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Abstract: Christian missiology is used as a lens to speak on the themes of broken promises, mortality, and justice and how the novel *The Promise* tackles these topics in relationship to theological and moral issues of post-apartheid South Africa. Against a changing landscape, the novel charges the misuse of covenants by the personal and national governments and the resultant collapse of the Swart family with severe social criticism. In the quest for unity and recovery from collective horrors, the foremost Christian doctrine of grace becomes the centrepiece. The current paper underlines *The Promise* within the larger theological discussion on forgiveness and restorative justice by outlining central themes such as reconciliation, inheritance, and grace. The analysis undertaken from the perspective of mission insists that Galgut's output offers an arduous meditation on individual and churches moral duties in the face of systemic inequalities and historical traumas.

Keywords: literature, missiology, reconciliation, justice, theology, South Africa, fragmentation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The research on *The Promise* by Damon Galgut is a rich and deep space for a non-dogmatic treatment of the different theological conceptions vis-à-vis the life in the anti-apartheid South Africa, where the literature frequently mirrors the complex gamut between faith, justice, and societal change. Galgut's narrative is highly focused on theological motifs, including promises that are not fulfilled, reconciliation, and redemption, the portrayal of broken moral and spiritual horizons of society that are still persisting. Similarly, as Wright presents in *The Mission of God*, the mission of the church comes with the task not only to work for social justice but also to challenge the church with the moral problems reflected in the works of Galgut (1).

This paper aims to, within the framework of literature, show how *The Promise* goes beyond the boundary of fiction to deal with Christian missiological issues. The intertwinement between literature and theology is no new discovery, as many writers have formerly fashioned stories to investigate human condition and the divine nature. Dostoevsky, e.g., through *The Brothers Karamazov*, deals with the struggle between faith and moral responsibility, which he shows on a social level in the form of spiritual abuse (2).

Even Galgut's text demands from the readers to think about the remnants of broken promises, covenants that are unfulfilled and the justice that has not been dealt with reminding the broader theological issues like grace, accountability, and redemption. In it, he echoes Tutu when the bishop claims in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* that reconciliation is compulsory for the spiritual and societal rebirth (3). The likeness between Galgut's description of separation in families and the national hardship for unity proves the point of theological communication in the comprehension of both individual and collective realities. This review refers to various theology pieces and literary books to illustrate the way the novel discusses death, the importance of reconciliation, and justice, which has profound implications for contemporary faith communities. Galgut's description of death, for example, is in line with Bonhoeffer's statement in *The Cost of Discipleship* that death is like a moment of recognition allowing spiritual truths to be revealed, which often remain concealed in life (4). The novel also criticizes lip-service religion, which is the same subject Volf deals with in *Exclusion and Embrace* and thus asserts that authentic faith has to supersede the surface and stand out as a genuine act of love and justice (5).

By setting these theological discussions against the backdrop of South Africa's post-apartheid reality, this paper intends to add to the growing conversation of literature, theology, and social justice. Essentially, *The Promise* functions as a mirror and a task to the contemporary faith communities by underlining the continuous emergency of reconciliation, integrity, and justice in mission work. Wright stipulates that mission directed by the church should deal with the totality



of human life, not as a fixed pattern of rituals but as a tangible action that restores broken relationships and systems (6). The study not only examines the case of how Galgut's story represents these missiological principles but also ponders on the implications for the praxis of faith in a world tainted by the unending disparities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

South African literature after apartheid, in most cases, is associated with healing, justice, and past memories, a characteristic theme of J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer's works. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is the moral labyrinth of race relations and the pervasion of the corrupted society that gets decorated with redemption (7), while Gordimer's *July's People* voyages through power changes and the fragile process of liberation (8). Analysis of a social return to, among others, are also given as, Mahmood Mamdani who goes through *Citizen and Subject* that enlightens how colonial legacy can be revealed, even if the time of apartheid has passed (9).

In a religious viewpoint, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness* confirms the church's role in stopping conflicts but actually introduces the issues of structural transformation and social change (10). Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* compared to grace, moral inheritance within the context of faith, and the personal as well as the collective aspect of responsibility (11). The environment of this background is sheerly matched by Galgut's *The Promise* which showcases the disillusionment of both people and nations remaining as both a dark cloud of despair and a source of mission studies' reflection.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative method relying on textual analysis to view Damon Galgut's *The Promise* through a Christian missiological framework. The examination is targeting the central story formatting techniques such as character development, plot structure, and thematic motifs to show up the book working out its issues in the concern of grace, reconciliation, and justice. Books that include both theological texts and literary analyses serve as a perspective that is still a bit more general when it comes to the situation that the novel is involved in under the faith and ethical discourse.

The interpretation of specific situations, for example, the recurring funerals and the broken promise to Salome, as the ground to locate the moral shortcomings of Swart family in societal patterns of injustice is the major point of connection. Furthermore, the study is linked to the historical and theological contexts, and some quotes such as Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999) and Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* (2014) are used to add depth to the analysis. The approach of combining literature and theology is designed in such a way that it brings forth the novel's example in the contemporary missiological area.

4. BROKEN PROMISES AS SPIRITUAL FAILURES

The Vauntages moral failure not to give Salome her promise pledge and the Swart family's servant, black, is generally a metaphor for spiritual failure herein, and it also subsumes the moral inadequacy of mankind and society as a whole in *The Promise*. This covenant disintegrated mirrors the families' negligence of moral responsibility and the nation's reluctance to deal with its historical pains. Theologically, improperly kept promises symbolize the Bible that is filled with instances of the unfaithful corporate people, these for example can be found in *The Prophetic Imagination*, the failure to respect the promises is considered as a violation of the divine justice and grace (12). Salome's deal of not owning family's property like marginalized people attached in the post-apartheid South Africa, are not, rather, the fact that the restorative justice is being ignored by the society. Burger's trend of ideas is similar to Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* in the assessment of the ethical proportionality and also the theological connections reveal the profound effects of the ignoring the commitments in both personal relationships and societal structures.

The distorted family relations amongst Swarts have been a strong part of Danie Galgut's narrative. The rifts and unresolved issues, too personal to be articulated, among the family members reveal the deeper spiritual malaise, like the alienation of the family talked about in Marilyn Robinson's books, *Home*. According to Robinson, reconciliation stands for a healing process in which people arrive through grace and understanding which eventually makes forgiveness unproblematic (13).

On the contrary, the impossibility of reconciliation as a family translates into the patterns of division and sunforth rest in South Africa. Theologically, this unforgiveness corresponds with Miroslav Volf's views about the significance of reconciliation as a foundation of communal and spiritual healing (14). Hence, the impact of the withholding of forgiveness narrated by Galgut is heart-breaking at both the micro- and macro-level. In *The Promise* novel the author emphasizes constant death as a reminder of human mortality and as a judgment of human life. Each of the funerals witnessed in the Swart family takes the time when they faced a negative state that cracked down the family, and took the children away, since the entire society participated (15), which made the family's pursuit of reconciliation a hard



task. The introduction of memento mori reflects the existential in *Life and Times* of Michael K by J. M. Coetzee where death is the lens through which the fragility of human being's dignity is examined (16).

Galgut's treatment of mortality highlights the issue of divine judgment and the possibility of redemption, ideas that are also central to Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Tutu claims that death should not be looked as an end but an opportunity for us to ponder on the legacy of grace and justice we leave behind (17). Thus, by interweaving these theological aspects, Galgut writes a text which is not simply a critique of social failure but also a metaphysical reflection on the truth of death.

5. FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION AS MISSIONAL GOALS

The missiological implications of Damon Galgut's *The Promise* lie at the heart of its critique of systemic injustices and spiritual failures, particularly in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to address the inequities depicted in the novel, including the marginalization of Salome and moral degradation within the Swart family. The church is not only to give out spiritual comfort to the individuals as the bishop reminds in *No Future Based on Forgiveness* to be actively involved in the search for the justice and unity of the fractured societies (18). They miss by serving the needy, churches can get away with them by proposing projects that can encourage these groups to become independent, basing their directives on the parts of the scripture that call for the assistance of the downtrodden (19). Galgut's representation of the promises not kept and the social inequalities brings out the need for mission strategies that dwell on both the spiritual and material aspects of justice.

The emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation in the novel *The Promise* is a hyperbole of forgiveness and reconciliation as the utmost goals, which do not only add some extra salt to the problem but also offer some unique treatment thereby presenting innovations for mission practice. The family issues such as those in the Swart family are a reduced picture of the enlarged problem in South Africa, that of the apartheid issue. Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion and Embrace*, writes of the power of forgiveness in creating genuine reconciliation which is not only the resolution of personal commitments but also the restructuring of an institution to a new way of life (20). The methodologies associated with forgiveness in the mission area would be initiatives dealing with the truth as typified by the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in which the people tell their horror stories and forgiveness is the result of dialogue with healing playing a major role (21).

Such attempts are consistent with the themes of the novel, whereby the necessity of grace in the healing of divisions is emphasized. Christian initiatives that aim at bridging the societal gulf gap like making communities friendlier through cultural and economic development initiatives can be used as a platform for expressing how forgiveness can be implemented practically in mission work.

The Promise, at the same time, brings home the lacking of religious authenticity by presenting characters whose faith is not genuine and does not pull integrity for others. This dressing of the agenda which is hypocrisy is much founder in the novel and in the recent criticism of the current faith practices. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* rejects the soft presentation of grace over truth arguing that what is costless cannot be truth; it actually leads to life of faithlessness (22). It is, thus, imperative for missiological approaches to give priority to genuineness and consciousness in ensuring, above all, that participation in mission is rooted in authentic faith and a pledge to justice.

Through the merger of spiritual rejuvenation and the practical serving, the congregations may refute the failures seen in (the writer's) record and live out the principle of grace, justice, and reconciliation. These tactics serve as a clarion call to Christians to go beyond the superficial religiosity and to uphold a holistic view of faith that is in line with the transformative ends of the gospel.

6. CONCLUSION

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* is a deep-dive into the spiritual and societal failures. It is a narrative that revolves around the themes of broken covenants, consecrated relationships being estranged, and the ubiquitous fact of death. From a Christian missionary perspective, the novel is a mirror through which faith, justice, and reconciliation can be reflected on. The Swart family's inability to keep their promise to Salome is an analogical representation of the community's lack of efficacy in coping with systemic social injustices. This unfulfilled pledge is a cadence of the prophetic voice to justice conveyed by Walter Brueggemann in the book *The Prophetic Imagination*, where the unsurpassed commitment to ethical obligations denotes a deeper breach in human and divine.

Thenceforth the novelist thrusts counteraction for churches trying to assess their situation away from the spectatorship and to become crafters of justice that are instrumental in facilitated space for the oppressed to be healed. The writing of the novel on the topic of reconciliation, or maybe rather on its lack, has actually huge consequences for the present-day faith-based missions. The split at the Swart family is the small part that vividly depicts the bigger division that envelop most of society, pointing out the forgiving grace as the sole hope for healing. As Miroslav Volf



indicates in *Exclusion and Embrace*, which is about the real reconciliation that involves the step of both repentance and the restitution of dignity, such are the morals that must as a consequence come to be the fundamental command of all mission-driven interests.

Galgut's description of the unresolved animosities within the family, which is akin to South Africa's consistent struggle with her apartheid heritage, underlines the role of faith communities in fostering a milieu in which grace would be the springboard to justice. If the lessons advanced by *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* were to be used as guides, future missiological efforts might be directed towards storytelling and literature facilitation of dialogue and empathy as Antjie Krog suggests in the book, *Country of My Skull*. These dialogues not only widen the understanding of theology but also provide practical solutions to address the division deeply sentient.

Last but not least, *The Promise* persuades faith-based organizations to look inward and self-assess their authenticity and integrity, especially as Galgut takes into consideration the religious stances. The characters found in the novel displaying a symbolic faith induce torment in the believers so that they might find ways to bring a holistic spirituality that would entail the harmonization of their actions with their beliefs.

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