



'Good' South African Literature: The Booker Prize, its Infatuation with the Postcolonial and Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

Helena van Urk

To cite this article: Helena van Urk (18 Sep 2023): 'Good' South African Literature: The Booker Prize, its Infatuation with the Postcolonial and Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, English Studies in Africa, DOI: [10.1080/00138398.2023.2247710](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2023.2247710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2023.2247710>



© 2023 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 53



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

‘Good’ South African Literature: The Booker Prize, its Infatuation with the Postcolonial and Damon Galgut’s *The Promise*

Helena van Urk

He had been nominated for what is undoubtedly one of the world’s most prestigious literary prizes three times previously, yet Damon Galgut still reported feeling a touch of imposter syndrome when his most recent novel, *The Promise*, was awarded the Booker Prize in 2021 and he joined the prestigious ranks of South African laureates Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee (Eloff 2021). The novel in question is centred on four funerals within the ironically named Swart family – ironic because they are white, and their Afrikaans name, in English, means ‘black’. The family disintegrates spectacularly whilst South Africa progresses from the State of Emergency of the 1980s to the euphoria of democracy and, eventually, the broken promises and let-downs of the present. The plot of the novel, however, takes inspiration from the family’s domestic worker, Salome. She is granted the titular promise of ownership of the ramshackle house that she occupies as a reward for her diligent efforts in nursing the Swart matriarch, Rachel, throughout her battle with cancer. Yet only the youngest Swart daughter, Amor, is ultimately willing to see the promise carried through. Regarded as a ‘misfit’ by her family since being struck by lightning as a child (Galgut 96), Amor’s more liberal attitude towards the promise is implied to be a fluke of nature, considering how utterly irredeemable the other Swarts are – content to indulge in their unacknowledged privilege and pride in illegitimate ownership of stolen land (Leclair 2021).

In his review of the novel, Tom Leclair writes that the decision to award the Booker Prize to *The Promise* was ‘probably a wise one’. (Generally, much more enthusiastic adulation followed in the wake of the Booker Prize being awarded to Galgut.) This somewhat lukewarm review is highly revealing when trying to discern why this novel was chosen as the winner of the 2021 Booker Prize: Leclair almost grasps at straws when trying to find reasons to recommend *The Promise* to a Euro-American audience. What he eventually lands on is a degree of literary familiarity: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is quoted in the text’s final chapter; and the novel should appeal to American readers due to its similarities to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* – another family chronicle centrally concerned with questions of land ownership in the context of a racially

divided society. Expanding his arguments to reference something closer to home, Leclair then hints at the similarities between *The Promise* and Coetzee's *Disgrace*, also a Booker Prize winner, which touches on analogous themes of land ownership, race and family. It's worth remembering that the first South African novel to win the prize, Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), is also a narrative concerned with the 'dangerously deluded and wilfully ignorant privilege' of a white South African during apartheid, centred once again on the matter of land ownership (Eloff 2021). Leclair's review thus insinuates that Galgut's novel is a worthy winner of the 2021 Booker Prize largely because it has reproduced 'good' South African literature: narratives that have previously won the award, and may thus be considered worthy of being invested with such cultural authority.

Leclair grants *The Promise* a shred of originality by stating that it is 'somehow ameliorated by being at times unexpectedly laughable,' with the petty, absurd and downright embarrassing sides of its characters on full display (2021). Whilst it is true that the novel is at times delightfully comic, I would argue that Leclair is more correct than he realizes in describing Galgut's use of satire as a welcome break from 'earnest, grave-digging melodrama and post-apartheid political correctness' (Leclair 2021). In fact, one may consider *The Promise* to be a novel that consciously leans into and hopes to exploit the tropes of 'good' South African literature, whilst simultaneously interrogating, and perhaps even denouncing, these conventions through the use of satire.

This essay will argue that postcolonial and South African Booker-winning precedents would doubtlessly have influenced the selection of *The Promise* in 2021, as part of a larger pattern of neo-Orientalist impulses demonstrated by the Prize's adjudicators and the global publishing industry with regards to a desire to commodify the 'postcolonial exotic' for a modern Western readership. However, it will also interrogate the possibility of Galgut's use of satire in *The Promise* deliberately pushing back, or poking fun, at culturally sanctioned notions of 'good' South African literature. Not only does Galgut turn to metatextuality to directly confront the neo-Orientalist impulses some of his Western readers may have, but his portrayal of the Swarts, 'an ordinary bunch of white South Africans' (Galgut 186), is rendered deliberately extreme and ostentatious in terms of their conservatism, hypocrisy and racism. This rendition, I will argue, is something of a token protest against an apparent obligation to create white South African characters who 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.

The Booker Prize: Inconvenient Truths

'It is the ultimate prize to win in the English-speaking world' is how J.M. Coetzee, South Africa's second Nobel laureate in the field of literature, described the Booker Prize (previously called the Man Booker Prize) at the time of his win for his novel *Disgrace* (1999). Coetzee is well-placed to comment on the Booker's vast literary authority as its first ever two-times recipient (Eloff 2021). The growing cultural capital accrued by the award, to say nothing of the extensive media attention it garners yearly (Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic' 22), has over the past decades offered little evidence to contradict Coetzee's assessment. Originally instituted in 1969 to honour the year's best novel in English with a cash prize of £5000 (Huggan, 'Prizing "Otherness": A Short History of the Booker' 415), the Prize today offers a whopping £50 000 in prize money (Eloff 2021). The media fanfare around the annual prizegiving has only increased,

to the point where an international scandal was created in 1972 when John Berger, who had won the Booker Prize for his novel *G*, renounced the Prize in his acceptance speech and stated that he could not in good conscience accept money from a multinational corporation with such a sordid history (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 25).

The Booker Prize is awarded by its much lesser known parent company, Booker-McConnell, itself a subsidiary of the Booker Group PLC, a massive food wholesale supplier that was recently purchased by the supermarket chain Tesco. However, when it was founded in 1835, the company’s main source of revenue lay in its involvement in the notoriously brutal Caribbean sugar trade, notably in Demerara, where it benefitted commercially from a harsh colonial regime. In the 1960s Booker-McConnell began buying up the rights to the work of authors of quintessentially British popular fiction, such as Agatha Christie (Huggan, ‘Prizing “Otherness”’ 415). The company’s highly questionable colonial history makes it particularly noteworthy that, since Salman Rushdie’s win in 1981 for his seminal postcolonial novel *Midnight’s Children*, there has been a decided shift in what sort of book is most frequently nominated for and awarded the Booker Prize (Huggan, ‘Prizing “Otherness”’ 417). By 1994 it was being remarked on that, of the twenty-seven Booker-winning novels to date, seventeen dealt explicitly with the subject of Empire or the postcolonial condition (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 26), and that over the previous two decades, Commonwealth authors had fared considerably better than their European counterparts (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 23). Whilst some may be tempted to view this trend as indicative of our modern and theoretically ‘post-racial’ world, others have been considerably less enthusiastic, viewing many of the postcolonial authors who have won the Prize as mediators in a global trade of ‘cultural commodities,’ and thus agents in the perpetuation of a form of neo-Orientalism (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 24). This fetishization of people, places and cultures perceived as exotic by typically Euro-American audiences may be considered more ‘politically correct’ than its forebear of the colonial era, since the favoured authors are generally people of colour with authentic postcolonial perspectives. The implications of granting such significant cultural authority over the literary works of some of the world’s most renowned postcolonial authors to a panel that, regardless of its multiracial character, almost exclusively comprised of Euro-American judges, are certainly very problematic (Chrisman 108).

However, that the Prize started out as little more than a gimmick to drum up publicity for a company with an unsavoury colonial history is rarely the key reason cited by detractors, and even some former awardees (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 28; Metha 77), in their criticism of it. Most of its critics view the Booker Prize as a commodifier of the arts (Huggan, ‘The Postcolonial Exotic’ 24) and the cultural authority it wields as ultimately damaging and restrictive to literature due to the award’s potential encouragement of compromised artistic integrity. Coetzee himself was forced to concede that ‘pressure from editors and the example of the kind of books that do win prizes could in some cases have an influence on writers’ practice’ (Metha 77). Whilst there is no obligation to produce works of fiction that might be considered ‘Booker worthy,’ the commercial allure of a global English-speaking readership might easily prove irresistible (Metha 77). The prize money itself is not the most enticing reward offered by the Booker Prize: it is the extensive publicity that ensues, which often guarantees commercial success for the rest of a winner’s career (Eloff 2021). The concurrent problems of the Booker’s potentially neo-Orientalist relationship to postcolonial literature and its great potential to stifle non-conforming works must be examined in the context of *The Promise*, as I hold that a problematic nexus of these features contributed to making this novel a ‘wise choice’ as the 2021 winner of the Booker Prize.

The poet Diane Mehta has argued that the Prize's willingness, from 2013, to consider all English literature, no longer limiting the competition to works produced in Great Britain and the Commonwealth, had the potential to reinforce Western stereotypes of 'native' peoples, despite authors' likely noble intentions to the contrary (Mehta 77; Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic' 26). Using the example of *Midnight's Children*, Huggan had previously advanced the same argument: despite being an avowed anti-colonialist, with this novel Rushdie had 'sold out' to a degree, writing in large part to satisfy late-stage capitalist markets' desire for escapist, Orientalist fiction (Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic' 28–29). However, Huggan's analysis should not be misconstrued as outright condemnation: he expresses admiration for Rushdie's metatextual approach to the crafting of his protagonist Saleem Sinai. With this character, Rushdie embraced the imagery of a peddler of exotic artifacts and foreign cultures, thus parodying the readers of the novel as avaricious devourers of cultural otherness for their own amusement, ultimately mocking their very enjoyment of his novel (Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic' 28). I would argue that Galgut does much the same in *The Promise*, simultaneously wishing to conform to the criteria of what is considered 'acceptable' South African literature in the hope of commercial success, whilst metatextually holding up a proverbial mirror to his metropolitan readership to critique their enjoyment of the 'commercialized' version of South Africa and its people that the novel serves up for them.

Defining and Commercializing 'Good' South African Literature

Mehta and Huggan have raised concerns regarding the commercialization and extensive marketing of postcolonial literature to metropolitan readerships. Both argue that this could easily lead to postcolonial fiction being misinterpreted by readers who are not fully aware of, nor particularly interested in, the historical and material contexts that inform the postcolonial novels they read, which could encourage the development of fetishizing, Orientalist impulses (Huggan, '(Not) Reading "Orientalism"' 129; Mehta 77). Orientalism is after all not conducive to gaining understanding of, or appreciation for, other cultures, as Huggan argues; rather, it is designed to confirm the prejudices the white, metropolitan literary consumer already holds with regards to foreign people or places (Huggan, '(Not) Reading "Orientalism"' 127). This impulse therefore confirms the epistemic authority of the West and vindicates the paternalistic cultural authority that the Booker Prize may be projecting onto postcolonial spaces (Huggan, '(Not) Reading "Orientalism"' 27). Huggan also speaks of (neo-)Orientalism as a self-perpetuating machine, which recycles and regurgitates the same narratives endlessly. Perhaps this is the reason why the comparisons between *The Promise* and *Disgrace* proved so easy, almost irresistible, for Leclair to draw in his review. The implication inherent in Huggan's arguments with regards to *The Promise* is that any novel wishing to be considered 'proper' South African literature would do well to include some controversy around land ownership, as well as racist, conservative and generally 'backwards' white South African, specifically Afrikaner, characters if it wishes to enjoy measurable financial success.

This yoking together of neo-Orientalist tendencies, which Huggan views as being encouraged by the Booker Prize in its current form, and the commercial realities of South African literature in the global market, could prove to be devastating and restrictive in shaping conceptions of South African literature. In a review of the history of the global publishing industry's relationship with South Africa, Laura Chrisman makes clear that British publishing houses have long played an inordinately influential role in shaping the development of South African literature

(109–10). Building on Huggan's arguments, Chrisman sees the increased marketing and rising popularity of postcolonial literature among metropolitan audiences, which started in the 1980s and 1990s, as symptoms of a Thatcherite imperial nostalgia (107). Due to the violent political tensions in South Africa at the time, it is natural that a demand for South African literature among Euro-American readers would follow (109). However, the types of South African literature that garnered the most attention were carefully curated for its intended readership. Works by black South Africans (especially radical, potentially threatening male authors such as Stephen Biko) were neglected in favour of more 'familiar' white authors (111–12). Most significantly, the treatment of the subject of race in these novels, and how they were marketed, was peculiar to say the least. Publishing houses went out of their way to negate any personal discomfort that white, British readers may feel when confronted with South African literature, designating the Afrikaner as an object of special interest. The egregious brutality, inhumanity and injustices of apartheid were harnessed to deflect attention from Britain's own longstanding history of racial and colonial oppression. Theatrical displays of virulent racism by Afrikaners in literature very easily allowed for the identification of a 'tribal backwardness' in these uncouth, conservative and often anti-intellectual people. Apartheid's petty cruelty, its brutality and especially its irrational economic underpinnings made it an easy scapegoat when compared to 'benign' British colonialism, which had embraced principles that were positively liberal by comparison (117–18). Feeding into this, some other postcolonial texts of the time were marketed with a distinct aura of imperial nostalgia about them, effectively declaring a monopoly on liberal, socio-political and economic progress and transformation for the former British Empire and its 'civilizing' mission (118).

***The Promise* as a 'Good' South African Novel and 'Wise' Booker Winning Candidate**

Galgut leans into decades-old tropes of 'good' South African literature to produce a novel that could win such a prestigious award as the Booker Prize, and the approval of its adjudicators and metropolitan readership (Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic' 25). However, Manie, Marina and especially *Pastoor* Simmers, whilst cleaving close to the tropes concerning white South Africans and Afrikaners more specifically, are racist characters rendered through satirical caricature.

An initial argument in favour of such a reading may be made by examining another literary technique used throughout *The Promise*: Galgut's employment of metafiction. Having embraced the highly unusual choice of a second-person narrator throughout sections of the novel, Galgut demonstrates that he is not averse to breaking the fourth wall. When describing Father Timothy Batty experiencing a violent bout of diarrhoea, for example, Galgut's narrator cheekily points out that the novel's indulgence in such embarrassing revelations about the human condition are a sure-fire way for readers 'to be sure you are not in a fiction' (Galgut 169). However, at key points in the novel Galgut seems intent on breaking the fourth wall for more explicitly political purposes: addressing a liberal, likely Euro-American readership who may not be aware of, or don't concern themselves much with, the socio-political and economic realities of post-apartheid South Africa. In what is often a caustically sarcastic tone, Galgut addresses readers directly at key points in the novel that relate to the eponymous promise, holding up a mirror of self-reflection to any member of his Western readership who may be taking too much pleasure in voyeuristic, neo-Orientalist fetishizing of the human tragedies of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

The novel's most effective satirical rendering of the tropes of 'good' South African literature lies in its cartoon-like Afrikaner characters. The evening before Rachel's funeral culminates in a catastrophic argument, which sets in motion the wholesale disintegration of the Swart family. Beforehand, Manie felt the innate (Afrikaner) desire to 'slaughter some living thing' for the *braai* (54) – the brutal language implying something inhuman in his character, and that of the archconservative Afrikaner patriarch by extension. When his son Anton confronts him about his hypocritical religiosity and abuse of Rachel, Manie later disowns his firstborn. The extent of his pettiness only comes to the fore later in the novel, when Anton's inheritance of the farm is made contingent upon a grovelling, almost literally kneeling, apology to *Pastoor* Simmers for a perceived slight nine years previously (105). Manie and his sister Marina are not only hard, cold and unsympathetic people, but are also virulently racist. Theirs is a particularly ugly, Afrikaner-specific racism, one shown to be an indicative component of a much wider range of bigotries endemic in the Swart family.

They direct, for example, blatant displays of antisemitism at the deceased Rachel and her Jewish family of 'heathens' (47), and Manie's attempts to assert his patriarchal authority over Anton, whilst ultimately thoroughly pathetic and petty, are deeply callous and cruel as well; he tells his son to 'humble [him]self,' (73) and threatens him for no crime other than denouncing *Pastoor* Simmers as the 'snake' even *Tannie* Marina is eventually forced to admit he is (100). Most especially, neither of the elder Swarts is prepared to entertain for a moment the promise made to Salome, the woman they 'got ... along with the land' (Galgut 23). It is specifically their racism and arrogant masquerading as devout and moral Christians, whose views on race are sanctioned and supported by the teachings of the *NG Kerk*, that allows Galgut to satirize his most prized Afrikaner characters, rendering them caricatures in the eyes of readers – and by doing so, inducing some self-reflection in the reader regarding their enjoyment of the text. In a farcical episode, the sex-starved *Tannie* Marina, a one-time adulterer, has an erotic dream of President P.W. Botha 'feeding her strawberries with his thick white fingers' (35–36). Manie Swart, the ostensibly venerable patriarch, dies the most improbably pitiful death imaginable when he spends days in an enclosure with a venomous snake to raise money for Simmers' church in a twisted fantasy of biblical martyrdom (90). What renders this ignominious end even more parodic is its wild improbability, considering the staunch, dour flavour of Calvinism typically associated with conservative Afrikaners, who are portrayed elsewhere in the novel as very ill at ease in the presence of anything so foreign as meditation (219).

Pastoor Simmers himself, a devout believer in the 'divine' truth that 'the sons and daughters of Ham should be toiling on behalf of their masters,' (62) is revealed to be involved in an incestuous relationship with his sister Laetitia (120). The second chapter's descriptions of Simmers and his blindness are particularly overblown, bordering on 'grotesque' (104), as described by Anton. However, Galgut immediately punctures this illusion of the archetypal Afrikaner authority figure by exposing Simmers as the hilariously cynical and corrupt crook that he is. Set at a time when the apartheid regime had just been excised from the world, this chapter renders a man who helped to prop it up a comically, even pitifully, unscrupulous capitalist; a pastor with 'customers' rather than congregants, whose idea of blessings from God may be boiled down solely to 'a fat flock who regularly pay their tithes,' and whose most prized possession, a talking wristwatch, continuously interrupts his highly performative prayers (103–05). So extreme are these Afrikaners in their moral failings and backward racial views that each is granted at least one cartoonishly comical or vulgar trait, which makes not merely their presence within the novel, but their entire existence, seem implausible.

Galgut’s characterization of post-transitional South Africa also falls entirely in line with a novel that could invoke imperial nostalgia in a white metropolitan audience. The corruption that has hollowed out the country now that ‘the President’s friends have run off with the cash’ is highlighted to a near-physical degree when the droughts suffered in Cape Town and the threat of Day Zero loom over the generally unshakeable Amor (214). The knowledge that corruption and the mismanagement of critical public infrastructure played a key part in these ‘lean times in the land of plenty’ may even tempt Western audiences to pin blame for the literal weather on yet another inefficient, crumbling and thoroughly corrupt postcolonial African government (214).

Of course, the legendarily high levels of violent crime in South Africa must also be given prime place. The third funeral the Swart family assembles for comes after Astrid’s death in a hijacking, which leaves behind only ‘a tangle of hair and clothing at the bottom of a wall’ (150) – a crime scene described by the police as just another instance of ‘South Africans kill[ing] each other for fun, ... for small change, or for tiny disagreements’ (155). These sentiments are echoed at the funeral, when South Africa is characterized from the pulpit as a place that both ‘the demonic voices of black and Afrikaner’ (Chrisman 119) have turned from a Paradise into a nation of monstrous Cains (Galgut 182). Leclair, still keen in his review to project *Disgrace* onto Galgut’s narrative, is convinced that this particular tragedy is divine retribution for Anton having shot and killed a woman in a township during the 1986 State of Emergency. Considering the state that South Africa is in, Euro-American readers are almost encouraged by Galgut to embrace a minor white character’s sentiments of having ‘lost all faith in this damned country’ and long for a simpler, more idyllic time or place, such as Australia (199), insidiously implying that at the very least, an imperial power or white European government would be able to maintain public infrastructure (Huggan, ‘Prizing “Otherness”’ 421).

Conclusion

The awarding of the 2021 Booker Prize to Damon Galgut’s novel *The Promise* must be seen in the context of the long and controversial history of the Prize’s engagement with postcolonial literature. Whilst increased diversity amongst its recipients is widely regarded as progress to be lauded, critics such as Huggan and Metha argue that the Prize does postcolonial literature a disservice by commodifying it into little more than a cultural product for metropolitan audiences. This late-stage capitalistic process encourages an insidious form of neo-Orientalism in Euro-American readers, who will now be more inclined to see their biases about the postcolonial ‘exotic’ confirmed by popular postcolonial literature if they do not read with an appropriate level of discernment. Huggan has theorized that the most ethical way authors should proceed under these circumstances is to expose and satirize the reader’s fetishization of the exotic cultural offerings they are enjoying. He identifies Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* as a stellar example, and I have argued that much the same may be said of *The Promise*. A remarkably insightful author who is not disinclined towards metatextuality, Galgut is intent on not allowing his Western readership to take any pleasure in the penurious realities and injustices of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, nor any comfort in prompt political redemption or socio-economic redress. *The Promise* certainly contains the requisite racist and backward Afrikaners, failed postcolonial African state and bitterly divisive land debate that Euro-American readers and publishing houses expect from South African literature. However, these characters, as well as the novel’s portrayal of violence and degradation in post-apartheid South Africa, seem to be

verging on caricature at times. Such instances may in fact be intended as a satire of well-known, often-recycled and Western-sanctioned tropes of popular South African literature, and therefore serve as a subtle rebellion against the formulaic conventions that aided in ensuring Galgut's win.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Helena van Urk is a postgraduate English scholar and researcher focusing on postcolonial literature, with a particular interest in South African literature as well as the intersection of postcolonial and mediaeval vernacular philosophy. Having received her BA and BA (Hons) in English from the University of the Witwatersrand, she is currently pursuing an MPhil in English Studies at the University of Cambridge.

Works Cited

- Eloff, Herman. 'A Gordimer, two Coetzees, and a Galgut: 4 South African Novels that Have Won the Booker Prize'. *news24*. 2021. <https://www.news24.com/life/books/a-gordimer-two-coetzees-and-a-galgut-4-south-african-novels-that-have-won-the-booker-prize-20211104>. Accessed on 3 Sept 2022.
- Chrisman, Laura. *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Colonialism*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003.
- Galgut, Damon. *The Promise*. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2021.
- Huggan, Graham. '(Not) Reading "Orientalism"'. *Research in African Literatures: Edward Said, Africa, and Cultural Criticism* 36(5), 2005: 124–36.
- Huggan, Graham. 'The Postcolonial Exotic'. *Transition* 64, 1994: 22–29.
- Huggan, Graham. 'Prizing "Otherness": A Short History of the Booker'. *Studies in the Novel: Postcolonialism, History, and the Novel* 29(3), 1997: 412–33.
- Huggan, Graham. '(Post)Colonialism, Anthropology, and the Magic of Mimesis'. *Cultural Critique* 38, 1997–1998: 91–106.
- Leclair, Tom. 'The Promise by Damon Galgut'. *Open Letters Review*. 2021. <https://openlettersreview.com/posts/the-promise-by-damon-galgut>. Accessed on 23 Oct 2022.
- Metha, Diane. 'Prize and Prejudice: Do International Book Awards Dilute World Literature?'. *Foreign Policy* 210, 2015: 76–77.