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Oscillating South African Truths: A Metamodern Reading of History, Trauma, and Hopeful Melancholy in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*.

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Abstract: In post-apartheid South African literature, the search for forms capable of capturing historical ambiguity and eroded hope remains urgent. Damon Galgut's Booker Prize-winning novel, The Promise (2021), responds to this need not through allegory or postmodern scepticism, but through a metamodern sensibility, one defined by strategic oscillation between irony and sincerity, fragmentation and coherence, despair and fragile hope. This article argues that the novel employs oscillation as both a narrative technique and an ethical stance, formally mirroring South Africa's suspended condition between traumatic pasts and unrealised futures. Through close analysis of its disembodied narrative voice, non-linear chronology, and the perpetually deferred promise, the novel rejects both redemptive closure and cynical withdrawal. Drawing on metamodern theory, as propagated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, the protagonist Amor is read as a figure of persistent ethical labour, whose weary fulfilment of the promise embodies responsibility without guarantee of repair. Findings indicated that the novel's affective core is conceptualised as "hopeful melancholy": a stance that honestly mourns historical loss while sustaining commitment to action. By situating The Promise within post-millennial African literary trajectories, this article offers a new critical vocabulary for narratives of historical exhaustion. It proposes metamodernism as a vital framework for contemporary postcolonial fiction that navigates broken promises without succumbing to narrative or ethical despair. The study concludes that The Promise marks a post-postcolonial turn in South African literature, proposing oscillation itself as a mode of truth-telling in the unresolved aftermath of political transition.

Keywords: Metamodernism, The Promise, Damon Galgut, South African literature, Hopeful Melancholy

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1.1 Introduction: Situating *The Promise* Beyond Postmodern Cynicism

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* has rapidly crystallised into a defining story for contemporary South Africa, capturing the nation's lingering, unresolved condition. It is a novel that seems haunted by its own title. Spanning four decades, its structure is governed by four funerals in the ailing white Afrikaner Swart family, a rhythm that throws into sharp relief a single, unkept vow: the promise of a small house to Salome, their Black domestic worker. This deferred inheritance is more than a plot point; it becomes the novel's conscience, a silent, ticking measure of historical and ethical debt. In its restless form, its unsettling tone, and its deliberate denial of easy solace, *The Promise* confronts South Africa's "unfinished business" with history, with unflinching honesty, exploring the persistence of trauma, the fatigue of political ideals, and the stubborn survival of obligation long after the official transition has ended.

Critical responses have understandably sought to place the novel within familiar frameworks. It has been viewed as a postmodern family epic, rich in irony and fragmentation; as a realist allegory of national failure, spotlighting the inertia of white liberal guilt; or as a direct historical critique of apartheid's long shadow. While these readings are valuable, they often stumble over the novel's peculiar emotional texture. Galgut's prose oscillates unnervingly between sharp satire and moments of genuine pathos, between cool detachment and sudden moral urgency. The narrative voice itself, a fluid, almost spectral presence that flits between characters and eras, resists the settled, knowing irony of postmodernism. It feels, instead, both exhausted and intently watchful, suggesting an ethical horizon that lies beyond simple disillusionment.

This article suggests we might find a clearer lens in the concept of metamodernism. First articulated by cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, metamodernism describes a sensibility emerging in our current century, one characterised not by a fixed stance but by a principled *oscillation*: between irony and sincerity, deconstruction and reconstruction, apathy and engagement. It is a mode for an era of crisis and exhausted grand narratives, one that holds contradictory impulses in productive tension without forcing a false resolution. When scholars like David James and Usha Wilbers extend this thinking to literature, they find it remarkably suited to postcolonial contexts, places like South Africa, where historical trauma collides with an urgent need for ethical imagination.

Through this lens, *The Promise* reveals itself not as a narrative trapped between cynicism and hope, but as one that deliberately inhabits the space between them. Its aesthetic, the restless narrative voice, the symbol of the perpetually deferred promise, a temporality of haunting repetition, performs a metamodern negotiation. Galgut neither offers a redemptive resolution for South Africa's past, nor does he let his characters (or his readers) off the ethical hook. Instead, the novel sustains what Vermeulen and van den Akker term an "informed naïveté": a weary, knowing form of persistence that continues to act, even in the absence of guaranteed success.

Guided by this framework, this paper explores two central questions: How does *The Promise* narrate South African history in a way that moves beyond the familiar poles of postmodern scepticism and naïve optimism? And how do its formal strategies, its voice, its symbols, its handling of time, orchestrate a metamodern oscillation between confronting trauma and holding space for possibility? We will argue that *The Promise* embodies a metamodern sensibility, one that maintains a difficult, truthful tension between the nation's wounds and its uncertain future. By rejecting narrative closure in favour of sustained ethical engagement, Galgut ultimately crafts a profound and moving affect: a hopeful melancholy. This is not a contradiction, but a mature stance, one that mourns what has been irrevocably lost while still, steadfastly, insisting on the necessity of the promise itself.

The paper is in six parts: part one is the introduces the text and the theoretical framework deployed in elucidating the text. Part two examines the technicalities of Metamodernism as deployed in the study, while part three analyses the theme(s) and tropes deployed in the novel. Part four examines other features of Metamodernism in the novel, while chapter five discusses the findings and chapter five summarises and concludes the discussion.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Metamodernism as a Post-Postcolonial Lens

1.2.1 From Modernist Faith to Postmodern Skepticism

The conceptual emergence of metamodernism must be situated within the longer arc of twentieth-century intellectual history, a trajectory defined by the successive dominants of modernism and postmodernism. Modernism, for all its formal experimentation and epistemological fragmentation, retained an underlying faith in the potential for meaning, the seriousness of ethical pursuit, and the possibility of meaningful historical intervention. As Bradbury and McFarlane (1976) observe, modernist art was sustained by "a profound seriousness of moral purpose, even when certainty itself was under strain" (p. 19).

Fragmentation, in this sense, was not an end in itself but a means of reconstituting significance in a fractured world.

Postmodernism emerged as a systematic scepticism toward this modernist faith. It rejected the authority of grand narratives, exposing history, identity, and truth as discursively constructed and ideologically mediated. Linda Hutcheon's (1988) influential theorisation of historiographic metafiction captures this dual impulse with precision:

Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. It simultaneously installs and subverts the conventions of historiography. (p. 5)

In postcolonial contexts, postmodern strategies proved indispensable. Irony, parody, and narrative instability enabled writers to dismantle colonial epistemologies and contest the realist claim to transparent representation. Yet these very tools carried an inherent risk: persistent irony could devolve into detachment, and relentless deconstruction could foreclose the possibility of affirmative ethical engagement. As Attridge (2004) cautions, an excess of scepticism may produce "a refusal of responsibility disguised as intellectual vigilance" (p. 63).

In societies such as post-apartheid South Africa, where historical injustice remains materially present and psychologically unresolved, this limitation becomes acutely visible. The collapse of the modernist-inflected "Rainbow Nation" ideal has rendered naïve optimism untenable, yet a default posture of postmodern cynicism proves equally inadequate. The result is an interpretive and affective impasse: a condition in which critique is necessary but insufficient, and the desire for belief persists, albeit in compromised form. It is within this conceptual space that metamodernism becomes legible as a distinctive post-postcolonial sensibility.

1.2.2 Defining the Metamodern Turn

Metamodernism was first systematically articulated by cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as a means of naming an emergent cultural logic that neither abandons postmodernism nor returns to modernist certainty. Rejecting linear models of succession, they propose that metamodernism operates through a principled oscillation between opposing affective and epistemological poles:

> Metamodernism oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness. It is not about balance, but about an

> ongoing negotiation (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p. 6).

This oscillation is not indicative of confusion or indecision, but constitutes a deliberate mode of engagement suited to an era marked by crisis, contradiction, and historical fatigue. Rather than synthesising opposing impulses, metamodernism sustains them in dynamic tension. As such, it is perhaps best understood not as a coherent movement or unified style, but as what Raymond Williams (1977) would term a **structure of feeling**: an affective orientation that registers lived experience before it solidifies into fixed doctrine.

A defining feature of this sensibility is what Vermeulen and van den Akker term *informed naïveté*, the will to act as if ethical meaning and hope remain possible, despite a full awareness of historical disappointment. They describe this stance as one that "acknowledges that history has disappointed us, yet refuses to abandon the possibility that it might still demand something from us" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p. 7). The hope it engenders is thus neither redemptive nor triumphalist; it is, crucially, a hope without guarantees.

Literary scholars have extended this framework into the domain of contemporary fiction. David James (2015) argues that metamodernism allows the novel to re-engage ethical seriousness without relinquishing formal self-consciousness:

> What distinguishes much twenty-first-century fiction is not a rejection of postmodern reflexivity, but a renewed willingness to pursue value, responsibility, and affect in spite of it (p. 14).

Similarly, Wilbers (2018) has situated metamodernism within postcolonial and post-transition contexts, contending that it offers a critical language for texts that neither resolve historical trauma nor retreat into irony:

> Metamodernism articulates an ethics of persistence: an engagement that continues not because success is assured, but because withdrawal is no longer viable (p. 432).

The resulting affective mode is what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) describe as a *hopeful melancholy*, a condition in which longing survives alongside loss, and ethical responsibility persists despite exhaustion.

1.2.3 Metamodernism in the Postcolony: Beyond the Rainbow Nation and Postmodern Exhaustion

The particular relevance of metamodernism to post-apartheid South Africa lies in its capacity to theorise a cultural condition shaped by what we might call failed futurity, the coexistence of unresolved historical trauma with a pervasive sense of ethical fatigue. The democratic transition of 1994 was underwritten by a potent, modernist narrative of progress, reconciliation, and national renewal, popularly crystallised in the discourse of the "Rainbow Nation." This vision, as scholars have widely noted, relied on an anticipatory faith in historical closure and moral repair. The material persistence of inequality, racialised dispossession, and social fragmentation has, however, rendered this project increasingly untenable.

Achille Mbembe captures this condition with stark clarity when he theorises the postcolony as a space where historical rupture has not yielded renewal but rather a "time of entanglement," in which the violence of the past remains insistently present (2001, p. 14). The South African post-transition moment is thus characterised not by resolution, but by a state of suspension, an unfinished historical condition that resists both triumphalist narratives and absolute despair.

Postmodernism, for all its critical power, proves ethically limited in this context. Its emphasis on irony, epistemological scepticism, and the deconstruction of truth claims was invaluable in dismantling apartheid's ideological certainties. Yet, as several critics have argued, postmodern critique struggles to sustain a positive ethical engagement once the work of demystification is complete. Boehmer (2012) observes that post-apartheid writing increasingly confronts "the problem of how to speak meaningfully after the dismantling of belief, without lapsing into either nostalgia or nihilism" (p. 88).

Metamodernism intervenes precisely at this impasse. It incorporates postmodern scepticism while cautiously reactivating an ethical orientation. As Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) emphasise, the metamodern sensibility is defined by its ability to inhabit contradiction:

> The metamodern sensibility negotiates between the modern and the postmodern, not by resolving their tensions, but by sustaining them in a state of productive oscillation (p. 5).

In postcolonial contexts, this oscillation is especially significant. It allows for the simultaneous acknowledgement of historical failure and the persistence of ethical demand. It holds together trauma and mourning, critique and responsibility, without collapsing into either redemptive fantasy or ironic withdrawal. As Wilbers (2018) argues, metamodernism

enables postcolonial texts to articulate "a mode of engagement that neither abandons political seriousness nor overstates the possibility of repair" (p. 430).

For post-apartheid South Africa, then, metamodernism functions as a vital post-postcolonial lens. It recognises the exhaustion of liberation narratives while refusing the ethical abdication implied by perpetual irony. It affirms the necessity of continued engagement with history, even, and especially, when the horizon of justice remains deferred. This capacity to hold the "and" – deconstruction and reconstruction, scepticism and longing, despair and fragile hope – renders metamodernism particularly apt for reading a novel like Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, a text profoundly attuned to the moral ambiguities of the post-transition condition.

1.2.4 Key Oscillations for Analysis: A Metamodern Analytical Framework

Building on this theoretical grounding, the present study identifies three primary oscillatory axes through which *The Promise* enacts a metamodern sensibility. These axes function not merely as thematic concerns but as formal and aesthetic strategies that structure the novel's engagement with history, trauma, and ethical possibility.

1.2.4.1 Narrative Voice: Detached Irony / Empathetic Fluid Omniscience

One of the most distinctive features of *The Promise* is its unconventional narrative voice, which oscillates between a position of ironic, cinematic detachment and sudden, profound intimacy. The narration moves restlessly across characters and temporalities, often adopting a surveillant perspective, only to plunge unexpectedly into a character's interior consciousness. This generates an unstable ethical position for the reader, who is at once rendered a critical observer and an implicated witness.

Such oscillation exemplifies what James (2015) identifies as a defining feature of contemporary metamodern fiction:

> The novel no longer commits itself wholly to either ironic distance or empathic immersion, but moves restlessly between them, cultivating a critical intimacy that resists readerly complacency (p. 22).

In *The Promise*, irony serves to expose the moral inertia of the Swart family, while moments of deep empathy, particularly in relation to Amor, reassert the possibility of ethical feeling. The narrative voice thus performs metamodernism's central dynamic: it is sceptical without being cruel, engaged without being illusioned.

1.2.4.2 The Central Trope: The Promise as Deconstructed Signifier / Sincere Ethical Demand

The trope of the promise itself functions as a powerful oscillatory device. On one level, it operates as a hollow signifier within the Swart family economy, endlessly deferred, instrumentalised, and stripped of its performative force. This aligns with postmodern accounts of language as inherently unstable and ethically compromised. Yet, simultaneously, the promise persists as an inescapable moral claim, returning with ghostly insistence across the novel's four-part structure.

Jacques Derrida's reflection on the ethical structure of the promise illuminates this tension:

> A promise can be broken, deferred, or betrayed, but it does not cease, for that reason, to bind. Its force lies precisely in its exposure to failure (Derrida, 1992, p. 16).

Within a metamodern framework, the promise in Galgut's novel oscillates between emptiness and necessity. It is both a lie and the only remaining truth that matters. This duality mirrors South Africa's post-apartheid condition: the failure of liberation's promises does not absolve the present from responsibility; rather, it intensifies the ethical demand to act, however belatedly and imperfectly.

1.2.4.3 Temporality: Entropic Fragmentation / Messianic Time and Haunting

Finally, *The Promise* enacts a distinctly metamodern temporality. The novel's structure, organised around four successive deaths, suggests entropic repetition and historical stagnation, time as a cyclical process of decay resistant to notions of linear progress. Yet this is persistently countered by what we might term a **messianic temporality**, in which the past interrupts the present with a demand for reckoning.

Walter Benjamin's conception of "messianic time" is instructive here:

> The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one (Benjamin, 1968, p. 254).

In *The Promise*, the unfulfilled vow and the lingering presence of the dead function as such temporal interruptions. They prevent the narrative from settling into either a narrative of linear progress or a static condition of repetition. Instead, the novel oscillates between fragmentation and haunting, producing what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010)

describe as a metamodern temporality oriented toward "a future that is felt but never secured" (p. 8).

Through these three interlocking oscillatory axes – voice, trope, and temporality – *The Promise* formally enacts the metamodern condition. The novel does not seek to resolve South Africa's historical contradictions; rather, it sustains them in narrative form, insisting that ethical engagement must continue even when certainty, redemption, and closure remain definitively elusive.

2. Narrative Form as Metamodern Oscillation: The Disembodied Voice

The narrative architecture of Damon Galgut's *The Promise* is its most conspicuous formal innovation: a roving, disembodied voice that refuses to settle into a stable point of view. This technique, far from a mere stylistic flourish, constitutes the primary mechanism for the novel's metamodern oscillation. The voice functions as a disorienting, almost spectral presence, simultaneously adopting the panoramic detachment of a surveillant camera and plunging, without warning, into moments of profound, unguarded interiority. In doing so, it enacts the central metamodern dynamic identified by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010): a principled oscillation "between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (p. 6), generating a reading experience that is at once critically distant and empathetically entangled.

2.1 A Camera on a Drone: Technical Innovation

Galgut's narrative perspective operates with a radical fluidity, approximating what could be termed a free-indirect drone-shot consciousness. It glides across the landscape and through the walls of the Swart farmhouse, observing characters from a cold, external remove, only to slip, mid-sentence, into their private thoughts and fears. This creates a destabilising effect where the boundary between external observation and internal consciousness is perpetually porous. In Excerpt 1, as the family drives back from Rachel's funeral, the narration hovers outside the car before infiltrating the mind of the young Amor:

> If she can keep focused on the hands, the shape of them, with their short, blunt fingers, she will not have to listen to what the mouth above the hands is saying, and then it will not be true. The only thing that is true is the hands, and me looking at the hands (Galgut, 2021, p. 13).

Here, the voice seamlessly transitions from describing Amor's tactic of avoidance to articulating her childlike, phenomenological refuge in immediacy. This fluid omniscience is not a godlike, authoritative perspective but a restless, probing one:

> They pass on through the dark landscape, stitching from shadow to shadow, following a path they themselves have worn down around the base of the koppie. The landscape is luminous to them and the air swarming with messages. Tracks and traces and happenings far off (Galgut, 2021, p.96).

As it is later described of the jackals, refusing to grant the reader a fixed, comfortable moral vantage point.

This technical innovation allows the narrative to construct a collective portrait of the Swart family as a microcosm of national inertia. It observes them as if through a lens, capturing their petty disputes and moral failings in sharp, cinematic detail. The effect is one of critical diagnosis, a form of narrative surveillance that lays bare the 'stubborn survival of obligation' (Introduction) as a largely hollow performance. The voice's ability to flit between characters at will, from Manie's religious guilt to Astrid's vanity, from Anton's intellectualised despair to Amor's silent witnessing, enacts a structural irony, juxtaposing their isolated subjectivities to highlight their collective failure to connect or fulfil their most basic promise.

2.2 The Ironic Pole: Detachment and Satire

At its most pronounced, this disembodied voice functions as a potent instrument of postmodern satire and deconstructive irony. It adopts a tone of clinical, almost cruel detachment, laying bare the moral paralysis and hypocrisies of the white South African family in the post-apartheid era. The narration frequently reduces human drama to a series of biological or statistical processes, a technique that drains events of sentimental significance and underscores a worldview of entropic decay. This is starkly evident in the aftermath of Rachel's death, where the narrative catalyses the scene with brutal, reductive precision:

> By the time she comes in through the back door, a hundred and thirty-three minutes and twenty-two seconds have passed since she ran away... The three toilets downstairs... have between them flushed twenty-seven times, carrying away

> nine point eight litres of urine, five point two litres of shit... Numbers go on and on, but what does mathematics help? In any human life there is really only one of everything' (Galgut, 2021, p.23).

The voice here performs a double move: first, it deploys a hyper-rational, quantifying gaze that satirises the notion of capturing human grief through data, aligning with a postmodern scepticism towards grand emotional narratives. Yet, in its concluding rhetorical question and assertion, 'what does mathematics help?', it immediately undercuts its own irony, reinstating a melancholic truth about singular human experience. This is the essence of metamodern oscillation: the ironic, deconstructive gesture is perpetually haunted by a residual pull towards sincerity and ethical reckoning.

The voice's sardonic edge is particularly sharp in its treatment of the family's performative mourning and self-absorption. During Anton's return after his father's death, his introspection is framed with detached irony:

> He's made the same promise to a couple of other people in recent months and always meant it fervently, but he especially means it today because this really is a turning point... Already, as he draws closer to the source, he can sense his future swelling with promise, like a melon ripening under his hand' (Galgut, 2021, p.73).

The simile is bathetic, undercutting Anton's self-mythologising and exposing his renewed sense of purpose as naive and self-serving, a diagnosis of the 'inertia of white liberal guilt' that remains trapped in cycles of expectation and failure.

However, to read this voice solely as a vehicle for irony and critique is to miss its metamodern complexity. As David James argues of contemporary fiction, the narrative "moves restlessly between [ironic distance and empathic immersion], cultivating a critical intimacy that resists readerly complacency" (2015, p.22). Galgut's disembodied narrator may diagnose paralysis, but it does so not from a position of secure, cynical superiority. Its very restlessness, its refusal to settle, enacts the ethical unease it observes. It is a voice exhausted by the failures it chronicles yet compelled to keep watching, to keep moving between the cold exterior and the vulnerable interior, performing the 'informed naïveté' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 7) of an engagement that persists despite knowing better. Thus, the narrative form itself becomes the first and most profound expression of the

novel's central concern: the difficult, oscillating labour of witnessing a promise perpetually deferred.

2.3 The Sincere Pole: Sudden Intimacy and Empathy

The narrative's relentless, diagnosing mobility is consistently and deliberately fractured by moments of profound, lyrical arrest. This constitutes the sincere pole of the novel's metamodern oscillation, where the surveillant 'camera' ceases its panning and tilts into a deep, immersive plunge into subjective consciousness. These moments, often clustered around the character of Amor, function as ethical and affective counterweights to the prevailing irony, reinstating the possibility of interior depth, vulnerability, and emotional consequence. They rupture the detached diagnosis with what Vermeulen and van den Akker term the modern 'enthusiasm', not in the sense of naive optimism, but as a serious, empathetic engagement with the texture of lived experience (2010). This sudden shift in narrative focalisation creates what David James describes as a renewed willingness in contemporary fiction to "pursue value, responsibility, and affect" despite an awareness of epistemological uncertainty (2015, 14).

The narration achieves this through a shift in linguistic register, abandoning its statistical or satirical shorthand for a concentrated, phenomenological lyricism. A prime example occurs during Amor's first menstruation at her mother's funeral. The detached observation of the family conflict gives way to a visceral, embodied rendering of her trauma:

> She is thinking about this problem right now, and she very much wants to mention it… the words are actually in her mouth, their individual syllables completely innocent… What harm can such a question do? Send it out into the warm room, perhaps the answer will surprise you. / Whaddah! The impact is like a soft punch… Amor's question drops to the floor, unasked' (Galgut, 2021, p.95).

Here, the free-indirect style locks onto Amor's fragile, hopeful interiority ('What harm…?'), rendering her thought process with a tender immediacy that invites readerly empathy. The violent interruption ('Whaddah!') is felt not just as a narrative event but as a physical and psychic blow *to her*, a crushing of nascent agency. This technique formally enacts the suppression of her voice and her claim, making the reader complicit not through judgment, but through shared sensory and emotional disturbance.

These penetrative intimacies are most sustained in the novel's final sections, where the narrative voice seems to fatigue of its own irony and settles, with a kind of exhausted compassion, into Amor's perspective. As she sits atop the koppie as an adult, the prose slows, adopting the rhythm of her contemplation:

> 'Amor Swart, four and a half decades on this earth and in all that time the only moment she herself has been close to death is that lightning bolt when she was six. Long-ago event, forever receding, but somehow also sealed inside, nearby and reachable as the scar on her foot… Your body knows, even if your brain is stupid' (Galgut, 2021, p.204).

This passage exemplifies the sincere pole. The voice does not just report Amor's thoughts; it *becomes* her mode of reflection, lyrical, somatic, and haunted. The blunt, almost anti-intellectual conclusion ('Your body knows…') carries a weight of hard-won, corporeal truth that stands in stark contrast to Anton's intellectualised, unrealised novel. It is a moment of epistemological sincerity that grounds knowledge in lived, scarred experience rather than in deconstructive critique. The narration, in these instances, fulfils what Usha Wilbers identifies as metamodernism's capacity in postcolonial contexts to articulate "a mode of engagement that neither abandons political seriousness nor overstates the possibility of repair" (2018, p.430). The seriousness is located precisely in this empathetic attention to the carrier of the ethical promise.

2.4 Synthesis & Argument: Inducting the Reader into Metamodern Engagement

The constitutive power of Galgut's narrative strategy lies in its refusal to let either pole, the ironic or the sincere, achieve dominance. This sustained oscillation performs a crucial pedagogical function for the reader, formally inducting them into the novel's demanded mode of metamodern engagement. The reader is systematically denied a stable position from which to consume the text. One cannot settle into the comfortable role of the superior, cynical observer (the postmodern stance), because of the sudden, unannounced plunges into Amor's or even Anton's vulnerability, 'He finds himself, absurdly,

> He hasn't thought about her in years. But suddenly she is back in front of him, falling down at the impact of his bullet, dying all over again. He finds himself, absurdly, weeping, just before Savage draws back the curtain. That is, the sheet (Galgut, 2021, p.130).

At the mortuary, it implicates us in a shared humanity and pain. Conversely, one cannot succumb to a sentimentally absorptive identification with any single character (a naïve or modernist stance), because the narrative is always liable to pull back into a cold, diagnostic wide-shot that frames individual anguish within a cycle of historical and familial failure.

This destabilising rhythm creates what can be termed a **critical intimacy**. The reader is made to oscillate in tandem with the narrative consciousness, forced to hold contradictory responses in productive tension. We observe the Swarts' moral failures with satirical clarity, yet we also *feel* the weight of Amor's lonely burden and the tragic arc of Anton's wasted potential. This dual positioning is exemplified in the treatment of Anton's suicide. The lead-up is rendered with detached, almost procedural irony (his drunken stumbling, the cliché of the 'howling wolf'). Yet the aftermath, filtered through Amor's discovery of his unfinished novel, achieves a profound melancholy:

> She turns to the last page. Under the notes, separate from them, a kind of signing-off. Oh, what's the point? That's what it says, in funny, faint letters, still recognisably Anton's hand. Could be the moment when the book finally collapsed (Galgut, 2021, p.196).

The reader is left with neither the catharsis of pure tragedy nor the cleansing dismissal of ironic judgement, but with the more difficult, metamodern affect of 'hopeful melancholy' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, p.8), a sorrow for what is lost, intertwined with a clarified sense of what Amor must now, hopelessly hopefully, attempt.

Thus, the disembodied voice is the primary engine of the novel's ethical project. It refuses the consolations of both postmodern scepticism, which might dismiss the promise as always-already void, and modernist redemption, which might demand its triumphant fulfilment. Instead, by keeping the reader perpetually off-balance, moving between diagnosis and empathy, critique and connection, it formally replicates the 'ongoing negotiation' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, p.6) that defines the metamodern condition. The reader emerges not with a resolved judgment of the Swarts or South Africa, but with a lived, textual experience of what it means to be critically observant yet open to feeling, to be wearily 'informed' of all reasons to abandon the ethical field, yet compelled by a residual 'naïveté' to recognise, with Amor, that the promise, however broken, remains the only thing that matters.

3. History and the Unfulfilled Promise: Between Allegory and Ethical Demand

The central, titular trope of *The Promise* functions as the novel's primary site of metamodern oscillation, suspended between two distinct but co-existent interpretive registers. On one axis, it operates as a hollowed-out postmodern signifier, endlessly deferred and instrumentalised within the Swart family's transactional dynamics, thereby allegorising a national history of bad faith. Simultaneously, and against this deconstructive reading, it persists as an irreducible ethical horizon, a 'messianic' claim that haunts the narrative and structures its very form. This dual existence, as both empty token and binding demand, prevents the novel from settling into either a purely allegorical critique of post-apartheid failure or a sentimental fable of redemption. Instead, it enacts what Jacques Derrida identifies as the paradoxical structure of the promise itself: 'A promise can be broken, deferred, or betrayed, but it does not cease, for that reason, to bind. Its force lies precisely in its exposure to failure' (1992, p.16). It is this exposure, and the persistent binding force it generates, that Galgut explores through a metamodern lens.

3.1 The Promise as Postmodern Signifier: Deferral and Bad Faith

From its inception, the promise to bequeath the 'Lombard place' to Salome is enmeshed in a political and familial economy that renders its fulfilment structurally impossible. The promise is not merely broken; it is shown to be, in its initial context, a performative utterance devoid of the conditions for its own success, aligning with a postmodern scepticism towards language's ability to enact ethical reality. In the apartheid-era setting of Excerpt 1, the promise is immediately exposed as a hollow token. When the young Amor, having overheard her dying mother's plea, confronts her brother Anton with the vow, his response underscores its legal and social nullity:

> Salome can't own the house. Even if Pa wanted to, he can't
> give it to her. Why not? she says, puzzled. Because, he says.
> It's against the law. The law? Why? (Galgut, 2021, p.64-65).

The promise is thus revealed as a cruel fantasy, a sentimental gesture made within a system designed to void it. Its substance is deconstructed not by personal malice but by the overarching ideology of the state, allegorising the hollowness of liberal goodwill within the apparatus of apartheid.

In the post-apartheid decades, the promise's hollowness morphs from a legal impossibility into a symptom of ethical evasion and interminable deferral, a microcosm of what Achille Mbembe theorises as the 'time of entanglement' where historical ruptures fail

to yield renewal (2001, p.14). The vow becomes a bargaining chip, a subject for endless discussion and strategic postponement. When Anton, now the inheritor, negotiates with Amor, he proposes a cynical substitution: a life-long right of occupation rather than ownership, a legalistic manoeuvre designed to mimic fulfilment while retaining ultimate control. His reasoning,

> She nods. Yes, I heard that. You understand, he says, people don't always take what you give them. Not every chance is an opportunity. Sometimes a chance is just a waste of time. Yes, she says. But a promise is a promise. The bus is already waiting outside the station, its engine running (Galgut, 2021, p.115).

This reveals the promise's degradation into a discourse of managerial condescension. It is stripped of its ethical core and recast as a pragmatic 'chance' offered by the benevolent, a perfect allegory for the stalled economic transformation of the 'Rainbow Nation'. The family's discussions around the promise, filled with 'murmurs of insincere protest' (p.158) at the reading of the will, perform a theatre of obligation while actively working to void it, exemplifying the 'inertia of white liberal guilt' (Introduction) in its most intimate, domestic form.

3.2 The Promise as Metamodern Ethical Horizon: Haunting and the Messianic Pull

Yet, the novel rigorously resists allowing the promise to collapse entirely into a signifier of postmodern emptiness. Its power derives not from its fulfilment but from its stubborn, ghostly persistence as a **structuring absence**. It functions as what Vermeulen and van den Akker, via Derrida, might term a 'messianic' horizon: a future-oriented pull that is 'felt but never secured' (2010, p.8). The promise's ethical force is independent of its speakers' intentions; it becomes an autonomous claim that haunts the Swart lineage, marking each of the four funerals not just as an end but as a failed reckoning. This transforms the promise from a simple plot point into the novel's ethical spine, an 'unfinished business' that refuses narrative closure.

This haunting is most powerfully embodied in the character of Amor, who becomes the promise's unlikely and reluctant vessel. Unlike the postmodern sceptic who would dismiss the vow as always-already void, Amor relates to it with what can be termed an 'informed naïveté'. She is fully aware of its history of betrayal and the family's bad faith, yet she insists on its validity. Her confrontation with Anton is pivotal: '**A promise is a**

promise,' she states, to which he retorts, 'So you say' (p.115). This exchange crystallises the metamodern oscillation: Anton speaks from a position of cynical, deconstructive realism (the promise is merely a contested utterance), while Amor speaks from a position of ethical sincerity, recognising the promise as a transpersonal bond that survives its breach. She upholds what Emmanuel Levinas would call the 'face' of the Other, here, Salome, which issues an unconditional demand prior to any contract or law (1969, pp.75-81). For Amor, the promise is not a legal document but a foundational ethical relation that her family has violated.

The promise's messianic pull is ultimately realised not in a triumphant act of restitution, but in a melancholic and compromised transaction that acknowledges the impossibility of full repair. In the novel's conclusion, Amor's act of transferring the title and her accumulated inheritance is met not with gratitude but with Lukas's furious rejection:

> It's what you don't need any more, what you don't mind throwing away. Your leftovers. That's what you're giving my mother, thirty years too late. As good as nothing. It's not like that, Amor says. It is like that. And still you don't understand, it's not yours to give. It already belongs to us. This house, but also the house where you live, and the land it's standing on. Ours! Not yours to give out as a favour when you're finished with it. Everything you have, white lady, is already mine. I don't have to ask (Galgut, 2021, p.201).

This searing critique from the recipient's perspective performs a final, crucial deconstruction of the white saviour narrative. Yet, significantly, Amor's action stands. The promise is fulfilled, but its fulfilment is stripped of redemptive glory; it is an act of ethical necessity that arrives too late, is insufficient, and is angrily contested. It does not heal history but acknowledges a debt. This 'hopeful melancholy' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, p.8), the hope residing in the act of finally honouring the bond, the melancholy in its profound inadequacy and poisoned reception, is the quintessential metamodern affect. The promise endures not as an achieved justice but as a binding ethical claim that, however belatedly and imperfectly, finally compels a material response, insisting that in the 'time of entanglement', the obligation to act persists even when the conditions for pure justice have irrevocably passed.

3.3 Amor as the Metamodern Carrier

Amor Swart is the human locus of the novel's central oscillation, embodying its metamodern structure of feeling in her very characterisation. She resists categorisation as either a redemptive heroine or a passive victim; instead, she functions as the vehicle for an 'ethical persistence amidst absurdity'. Her defining characteristic is a profound, observant silence. This detachment mirrors the narrative voice's ironic pole, which is paradoxically coupled with the most sincere and weary commitment to the material fulfilment of the deferred vow. She embodies what Vermeulen and van den Akker term 'informed naïveté': a full awareness of historical and familial failure, yet a will to act 'as if' ethical meaning remains possible (2010, p.7). This is not optimism but a form of stubborn, ethical traction.

Her detachment is established early. During the tumult of her mother's funeral, she is described as holding herself apart,:

> She's used to being treated as a blur, a smudge at the edge of everybody's vision. Too young, too silly, to be taken seriously. And strange too, a strange child. Unusual and maybe tragic, easy to overlook. But tonight her brother, from his high place, seemed to notice me (Galgut, 2021, p.53).

This strangeness is a form of critical distance, an almost postmodern removal from the performative grief and hypocrisy swirling around her. As an adult, this evolves into a clinical, weary professionalism, whether as a nurse or in her dealings with her family. Her sister-in-law Desirée observes, 'It's in the way she listens. Never noticed it before. Makes you want to offer something up… **She's somebody you can tell things to**' (p.149). This listening is not warm empathy but a neutral, non-judgemental receptivity that ironically exposes the confessor's own emptiness, again aligning with a deconstructive, diagnostic stance.

Yet, this detached observer is the only character compelled by the promise as a binding, pre-verbal ethical claim. Her commitment is not fiery or ideological but literal, bodily, and exhausted. When Anton tries to bargain, her response is unwavering in its simplicity:

> Yes, she says. But a promise is a promise. The bus is already waiting outside the station, its engine running. A few other passengers are lined up outside, all of them, in Anton's eyes, marked with a common quality, of grime and desperation and

> too little money. Only those who're struggling and down on their luck travel in this way and he feels unexpectedly sorry for his little sister as he gets out to say goodbye. Here, he says. Take this. Holding out a couple of notes. No thanks. It's okay. But she does, all of a sudden, hug him hard, and he finds himself returning the pressure (Galgut, 2021, p.115).

This exchange is the core of her metamodernity. Anton speaks from a position of cynical realism ('So you say'), questioning the very reality of the vow. Amor's defence, 'Am I lying?', shifts the ground from legalistic debate to a phenomenology of truth-telling and memory. Her certainty is not about facts but about an ethical event she witnessed. Her subsequent action, relinquishing her entire inheritance to Salome, is the sincere pole made manifest. It is an act stripped of sentimental grandeur, performed with clear-eyed recognition of its inadequacy and lateness. As she tells Salome,

> It isn't much, she says. I know that. Three rooms and a broken roof. On a tough piece of land. Yes. But for the first time, it'll belong to your mother. Her name on the title deed. Not my family's. That isn't nothing (Galgut, 2021, p.201).

Her ethics are minimalist, anti-redemptive, and material. She represents the 'ongoing negotiation' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 6) incarnate: she sees the absurdity (the broken roof, the belatedness, Lukas's rage) yet persists in the sincere act of transfer, because withdrawal into irony alone is, for her, not viable.

3.4 Historical Allegory Recast: The Lie that is the Only Truth

Through Amor's embodiment of this oscillation, the promise itself is recast as the novel's central historical allegory, one that refuses monolithic interpretation. It perpetually oscillates between being the definitive 'national lie' and the 'only meaningful truth', thus capturing South Africa's suspended condition between the failed project of liberation and the ethical necessity of still imagining a future. The promise, like the post-apartheid 'Rainbow Nation', is shown to be a performative utterance issued in bad faith, built on a foundation (apartheid law, structural inequality) that guaranteed its failure. Its endless deferral within the Swart family allegorises the stagnation of meaningful economic and social transformation, a process mired in 'talk and sandwiches' rather than substantive transfer.

Yet, the novel insists that this deconstruction is not the final word. The promise's power lies in its survival *as a promise*, as a demand that outlives its initial speakers and historical context. It functions as a 'messianic' claim in Walter Benjamin's sense, where 'the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption' (1968, p.254). Rachel's dying wish becomes a ghost in the machine of history, a 'secret agreement' between a betrayed past and an obligated present. This is articulated in the narrative's own commentary on the vow's persistence:

> The question of the Lombard place and her mother's last wish and her father's promise, really several questions although they feel like only one, **has followed her [Amor] around the world, bothering her at particular moments like a stranger importuning her in the street, plucking at her sleeve, crying out, *Attend to me!***' (Galgut, 2021, p.85).

The promise is personified as an external, spectral ethics, a Levinasian 'Other', that cannot be silenced. It is the 'unfinished business' that refuses to be archived. In this formulation, the promise as a *broken* vow becomes the only 'truth' that matters precisely because its breach constitutes an enduring ethical injury that demands address, however imperfect. Amor's final act does not redeem South Africa's history; it merely, and with immense difficulty, honours one specific, long-neglected claim within it. This is the metamodern historical vision: a rejection of both the grand narrative of redemptive liberation *and* the cynical narrative of absolute historical failure. Instead, the novel posits a weary, localised, and persistent ethics of settlement, a 'hopeful melancholy' where the obligation to attend to the plucking sleeve of history remains, even when the dream of a reconciled nation has faded. The promise, therefore, is not a blueprint for the future but an ethical imperative generated by the past, compelling a difficult, imperfect, and forever-belated action in a suspended present.

4. Time, Trauma, and the Structure of Hopeful Melancholy

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* constructs historical meaning not through linear progression or redemptive closure but through a temporal architecture shaped by repetition, decay, and haunting. Time in the novel oscillates between entropy and interruption, exhaustion and ethical insistence. This oscillation produces what metamodern theorists describe as *hopeful melancholy*, a mode that acknowledges loss and historical failure while refusing complete disengagement (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010).

4.1 The Pole of Fragmentation and Entropy: Death, Decay, and Historical Fatigue

The novel is formally structured around four deaths, each marking a narrative section. This death-driven organisation fractures linear temporality and produces a cyclical rhythm that resists developmental progress. Each death returns the narrative to the same unresolved moral centre, reinforcing a sense of historical stagnation rather than transformation. As the narration observes during Rachel Swart's death:

> So the only people who were with Rachel Swart when her time came were her husband, aka Pa or Manie, and the black girl, what's her name again, Salome, who obviously doesn't count. So the only people who were with Rachel Swart when her time came were her husband, aka Pa or Manie, and the black girl, what's her name again, Salome, who obviously doesn't count (Galgut, 2021, p.25).

This moment encapsulates the ethical fatigue that defines the novel's temporal logic. The casual erasure of Salome, both linguistically and morally, signals how apartheid's structures persist beneath the surface of post-apartheid life. Time moves forward, yet nothing is ethically resolved.

The Swart family farm, repeatedly returned to across decades, becomes a spatial correlative of this entropic time. It deteriorates alongside the moral decay of its white owners, functioning as what Mbembe terms a "site of sedimented histories" where past violences remain materially present (Mbembe 2001). The farm does not develop; it rots, mirroring the cyclical paralysis of the nation itself. This stagnation is reinforced by the narrative's repeated return to moments of death, inheritance, and failure, creating what feels like trapped time rather than historical movement.

The exhaustion produced by this temporal repetition is explicitly registered in the characters' affective states. The narrative frequently describes emotional depletion and weariness, aligning trauma not with spectacle or rupture but with attrition and moral inertia. Trauma, here, is not an event but a condition, one that drains the possibility of decisive action.

In this sense, *The Promise* departs from revolutionary or transitional models of history. Its fragmented temporal form reflects what post-apartheid South Africa has become: a nation moving forward chronologically while remaining ethically stalled. This is the entropic pole of the novel's metamodern oscillation.

4.2 The Pole of Haunting and Messianic Time: The Unfinished Past and Ethical Interruption

Counterbalancing this entropic temporality is a second, opposing force: haunting. The past in *The Promise* refuses burial, returning insistently in the form of Rachel's unfulfilled vow and the figure of Salome, whose promised inheritance remains endlessly deferred. Early in the novel, Rachel extracts the vow from Manie:

> I don't want to go back to the hostel. I hate it there. He thinks about it. You don't have to go back, he says. It was just temporary, while Ma … while Ma was sick. So I'm not going back? No. Not ever? Never. I promise. Now she feels sunken and removed, as if she's in a hot, silent, (Galgut, 2021, p.27-28).

This promise introduces a messianic temporality, what Derrida describes as a future-oriented ethical demand that interrupts the present without guaranteeing fulfilment (Derrida 1994). The promise does not belong to chronological time; it hovers over the narrative as an obligation that is always overdue.

Rachel's death does not neutralise this demand. Instead, her absence intensifies it. She becomes a haunting presence whose ethical claim persists across decades, structuring the novel's return to the same moral failure. The promise functions simultaneously as an empty signifier, endlessly deferred, instrumentalised, and ignored, and as a sincere ethical horizon that refuses erasure.

This temporal logic aligns closely with what Vermeulen and van den Akker identify as metamodern oscillation: the movement between despair and hope, knowingness and belief. The promise neither redeems the narrative nor collapses into irony. Instead, it produces a fragile forward pull, a messianic "not yet" that keeps ethical responsibility alive despite repeated disappointment.

Amor, who ultimately fulfils the promise, does not inaugurate a new era or resolve historical trauma. Her act is quiet, belated, and exhausted. Yet it represents a decisive interruption of stagnant time. The ending does not offer optimism, but it clears a space for ethical persistence. This is hopeful melancholy in its purest form: hope without triumph, action without redemption.

By staging time as an oscillation between entropy and haunting, *The Promise* articulates a metamodern historiography suited to post-transition South Africa. The novel

rejects both revolutionary rupture and postmodern resignation, instead presenting history as an ongoing ethical burden that demands repeated engagement. Its temporal structure embodies a commitment to responsibility without illusion, a weary but necessary refusal to let the past remain unresolved.

4.3 Trauma Beyond Catharsis: Exhaustion, Absence, and Moral Paralysis

In *The Promise*, trauma is neither staged as a spectacular rupture nor resolved through cathartic release. Instead, Galgut renders trauma as a condition of attrition: slow, cumulative, and ethically paralysing. This mode aligns with what scholars of trauma have identified as *post-traumatic duration* rather than eventfulness, a form of suffering that persists as fatigue, numbness, and moral deferral rather than dramatic breakdown (Caruth 1996; Craps 2013). Within a metamodern framework, this refusal of therapeutic closure becomes central to the novel's affective logic.

The four-part structure, each section anchored by a death, does not culminate in resolution or transformation. Rather, each funeral marks another missed ethical opportunity, reinforcing a sense of temporal stasis. Trauma here is embedded in repetition. At Rachel's funeral, the narrative already gestures towards this emotional depletion, as the child Amor registers not grief but vacancy:

> She shakes her head. At this moment, it's true, she doesn't feel anything, just vacant. Did you love her? Of course, she says. But even in response to this question, nothing stirs inside. Makes her wonder if she's telling the truth. Half an hour later, she sits on the back seat of Ockie's old Valiant (Galgut, 2021, p.15).

This early articulation of emptiness anticipates the novel's broader affective economy. Trauma is not expressed through excess emotion but through its absence. As the Swart family progresses through decades of political change, this vacancy calcifies into moral inertia. The end of apartheid does not inaugurate renewal; it merely removes the legal alibi for inaction.

Anton's trajectory is emblematic of this paralysis. His intellectual ambitions, guilt, and self-reproach never translate into ethical action. Even his writing project, ostensibly a reckoning with the past, collapses into exhaustion and self-disgust rather than insight. After his father's death, the narrator observes his fleeting resolve with brutal understatement:

> He's made the same promise to a couple of other people in recent months and always meant it fervently, but he especially means it today because this really is a turning point and he can feel it. He made a terrible mistake when he exiled himself. Return is the only solution. Not if, but when. And already, as he draws closer to the source, he can sense his future swelling with promise, like a melon ripening under his hand (Galgut, 2021, p.73).

The irony here is entropic rather than playful. The language of promise is hollowed out by repetition; the future swells only to rot. Anton's eventual suicide is not framed as a tragic rupture but as the logical endpoint of accumulated stasis. Trauma does not explode; it drains.

Crucially, Galgut refuses redemptive mourning. There is no narrative therapy, no healing arc. As Stef Craps argues, postcolonial trauma narratives increasingly resist Western models of recovery, foregrounding instead "ongoing damage and structural exhaustion" (2013, 4). *The Promise* exemplifies this shift. Its characters are not traumatised once; they are worn down by history's refusal to end.

In metamodern terms, this constitutes a refusal of both modernist redemption and postmodern spectacle. Trauma is acknowledged without being aestheticised. It remains unresolved, sedimented in behaviour, property relations, and silence. The novel thus sustains ethical pressure by denying emotional release.

4.4 "Hopeful Melancholy" as Metamodern Affect: Hope Without Optimism

The affective resolution of *The Promise* is best understood through what Vermeulen and van den Akker describe as *hopeful melancholy*: a condition in which loss is fully acknowledged, yet ethical action persists without belief in historical redemption (2010). Galgut's ending exemplifies this stance with remarkable restraint.

Amor's final act, the transfer of the house, is not framed as victory, reconciliation, or justice. It is materially executed, legally completed, and emotionally repudiated. Lukas's response annihilates any lingering possibility of sentimental closure:

> Ours! Not yours to give out as a favour when you're finished with it. Everything you have, white lady, is already mine. I don't have to ask. White lady? She looks steadily at him,

> while he quivers. I have a name, Lukas (Galgut, 2021, pp.201-202).

This moment forecloses optimism. The act is exposed as belated, insufficient, and structurally compromised. Yet, and this is crucial, the novel does not invalidate the act itself. Amor proceeds not because success is guaranteed, but because refusal has become impossible. This is metamodern ethics in its purest form: action without faith in outcome.

The final image leaves Amor alone, unaccompanied by affirmation or gratitude. The narrative does not follow Lukas or gesture toward national reconciliation. Instead, it clears a space, an ethical rather than symbolic one, defined by completion without consolation. The promise has been honoured, but nothing is healed.

Earlier, the novel articulates the persistence of this obligation in explicitly haunting terms:

> It isn't spoken aloud, but Amor hears it as if it is. The question of the Lombard place and her mother's last wish and her father's promise, really several questions although they feel like only one, has followed her around the world, bothering her at particular moments like a stranger importuning her in the street, plucking at her sleeve, crying out, Attend to me! (Galgut, 2021, p.211).

This haunting does not end with fulfillment. What ends is only the possibility of deferral. Amor's solitude at the close of the novel thus signals not defeat, but ethical clarity. She stands in what might be called a cleared aftermath, a space emptied of illusion.

Walter Benjamin's notion of messianic time is instructive here. The act does not redeem the past; it answers it: "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption."

(Benjamin 1968, p.254) In *The Promise*, redemption is stripped of transcendence. What remains is obligation, fulfilled without applause. This produces the novel's final effect: melancholy for all that has been lost, delayed, and damaged; hope residing solely in the fact that an ethical demand was met at all. This is hope without optimism, action without fantasy, repair without reconciliation. It is the affective signature of metamodernism in the postcolony, a stance that mourns honestly while refusing withdrawal. Galgut's novel ends not with promise renewed, but with promise acknowledged, honoured, and laid bare in all its insufficiency. That this act still matters is the novel's quiet, devastating insistence.

5. Discussion: Metamodernism and the Direction of South African Fiction

5.1 *The Promise* within Post-Apartheid Literary Trajectories

Since the formal end of apartheid, South African fiction has undergone a series of aesthetic and ethical recalibrations, responding to the exhaustion of liberation narratives and the persistence of structural inequality. Early post-apartheid literature was marked by an urgent engagement with testimony, exposure, and moral reckoning, often employing realist or allegorical modes to confront the violence of the past (Attwell & Attridge, 2012). As the optimism of the transition waned, however, a more sceptical literary posture emerged, one frequently aligned with postmodern strategies of irony, narrative indeterminacy, and ethical withholding. J. M. Coetzee's late apartheid and immediate post-apartheid fiction is emblematic of this phase. Novels such as *Disgrace* (1999) deploy radical ethical minimalism, refusing redemptive closure and foregrounding the limits of moral agency. Coetzee's work has been widely read as exemplifying a postmodern ethics of refusal, one that exposes complicity and violence without offering consolation or political prescription (Attridge, 2004). While this mode proved incisive in diagnosing the failures of liberal humanism, it also risked entrenching what some critics have identified as an impasse: a literature of perpetual negation.

The Promise inherits this sceptical legacy but does not remain within it. Galgut's novel neither revives the testimonial urgency of early post-apartheid realism nor settles into the austere negations of postmodern ethical withdrawal. Instead, it marks a significant tonal and formal shift. Its oscillation between irony and sincerity, detachment and ethical insistence, situates it within what may be understood as a metamodern phase of South African writing.

Unlike earlier postmodern texts, *The Promise* does not treat ethical claims as inherently suspect or irretrievably compromised. The novel acknowledges historical failure while insisting, quietly, stubbornly, on the continued relevance of obligation. In this sense, it aligns with what James (2015) identifies as a broader twenty-first-century literary movement towards "renewed ethical seriousness without a return to moral certainty" (p. 3). Galgut's work thus signals a reorientation in South African fiction: away from the exposure of failure alone, and towards a sustained engagement with what remains ethically demanded after the collapse of political idealism.

5.2 The Usefulness and Limits of Metamodernism as a Postcolonial Lens

Applying metamodernism, a framework articulated largely within European cultural theory, to a postcolonial context such as South Africa raises legitimate critical concerns.

Postcolonial scholarship has long warned against the uncritical transplantation of global theoretical paradigms onto local historical formations, particularly when such paradigms risk flattening material specificity (Boehmer, 2012). From this perspective, metamodernism might appear overly abstract, insufficiently attentive to the concrete legacies of racialised dispossession and economic inequality.

However, *The Promise* demonstrates that metamodernism, when employed as a flexible sensibility rather than a rigid schema, can be critically productive. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) do not propose metamodernism as a universal aesthetic programme but as a "structure of feeling" responsive to conditions of crisis, exhaustion, and deferred futures. These conditions resonate strongly with post-apartheid South Africa, a society shaped by what Mbembe (2001) terms a "time of entanglement," in which past injustices persist unresolved within the present.

The value of metamodernism in this context lies precisely in its refusal of closure. It neither demands reconciliation nor celebrates disillusionment. Instead, it provides a language for understanding texts that hold contradiction without resolving it, texts that continue to act ethically despite recognising the insufficiency of such action. As Wilbers (2018) argues, metamodernism is particularly suited to postcolonial contexts where "engagement must persist in the absence of credible political teleology" (p. 429).

Nevertheless, the framework has limits. Metamodernism risks under-theorising material power if it is reduced to an affective or stylistic category. In reading *The Promise*, it is crucial that metamodern oscillation not be mistaken for political neutrality. Galgut's novel remains firmly grounded in questions of land, inheritance, and racialised ownership. Metamodernism is useful here only insofar as it sharpens, rather than obscures, these material stakes. Its application must therefore remain historically anchored and critically alert.

5.3 Implications for Contemporary African Literatures

Beyond South Africa, the metamodern sensibility identified in *The Promise* has broader implications for contemporary African fiction grappling with post-utopian realities. Across the continent, writers increasingly confront the aftermath of failed national projects, compromised independence, and lingering colonial structures without recourse to either revolutionary optimism or total cynicism.

Recent African novels frequently exhibit this oscillatory posture: a sceptical awareness of political failure combined with a refusal to abandon ethical imagination.

Scholars have noted similar dynamics in post-millennial African writing, where irony coexists with renewed affective investment, and historical trauma is neither monumentalised nor dismissed (Nuttall, 2009; Gikandi, 2011). In such contexts, metamodernism offers a conceptual vocabulary for analysing texts that persist in ethical questioning without promising repair.

What *The Promise* contributes to this emerging field is a model of narrative restraint. Its metamodernism is not exuberant but weary; not future-oriented in a triumphalist sense, but compelled by unfinished obligations. This distinguishes it from more celebratory accounts of post-postmodern culture and underscores the importance of adapting metamodern theory to the uneven temporalities of postcolonial societies.

In this regard, metamodernism should be understood not as a replacement for postcolonial critique, but as a complementary lens, one capable of articulating how contemporary African texts negotiate the tension between historical damage and ethical persistence. As African literatures continue to reckon with the long afterlives of colonialism and the erosion of nationalist promises, metamodernism may prove vital in naming a mode of writing that neither believes too much nor gives up entirely.

6. Conclusion: Oscillation as a Form of Truth-Telling

This article has demonstrated that *The Promise* articulates a metamodern mode of literary truth-telling uniquely attuned to the ethical, historical, and affective impasses of post-apartheid South Africa. Rather than offering narrative reconciliation or retreating into postmodern scepticism, Galgut's novel sustains a deliberate oscillation across formal, thematic, and temporal registers. This oscillatory structure enables the text to hold together competing demands, critique and care, mourning and responsibility, historical exhaustion and ethical insistence, without collapsing them into resolution. In doing so, *The Promise* does not evade South Africa's contradictions; it renders them formally and experientially legible.

At the level of narrative form, the novel's disembodied, fluid voice operates as a metamodern aesthetic engine. Its movement between ironic detachment and sudden intimacy refuses the stable moral vantage points traditionally afforded by realist or allegorical narration. This instability trains the reader in a mode of engagement that mirrors the novel's ethical project: to remain critically alert without relinquishing the capacity for empathy. The voice neither absolves the Swart family nor reduces them to caricature; instead, it exposes moral paralysis while preserving the human residue of vulnerability and

loss. Such formal oscillation exemplifies what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) describe as a "structure of feeling" shaped by historical disappointment yet oriented toward continued engagement.

The article has further shown that the promise itself functions as the novel's central metamodern trope. It oscillates between postmodern emptiness and ethical necessity: at once a deconstructed signifier emptied of legal and moral force, and a binding demand that persists precisely because it has been violated. This duality allows the novel to recast historical allegory. Rather than presenting apartheid and its aftermath as either concluded trauma or total failure, *The Promise* figures history as an unresolved claim, what Benjamin (1968) terms a "messianic" interruption, where the past continues to exert pressure on the present. The promise is not redeemed, but neither is it dismissed. Its endurance as obligation, rather than achievement, becomes the novel's ethical fulcrum.

Through its treatment of time and trauma, the novel further consolidates its metamodern stance. The death-driven, four-part structure enacts a temporality of entropy and repetition, capturing a national condition of stagnation and historical fatigue. Trauma is rendered not as a spectacular rupture but as lingering exhaustion, moral paralysis, and deferred reckoning. Yet this entropic temporality is persistently interrupted by haunting: the unresolved vow, the memory of Rachel, and the ethical demand carried by Amor. The novel thus oscillates between cyclical decay and future-oriented insistence, refusing both linear progress and static repetition. This temporal tension produces what this article has theorised as *hopeful melancholy*, an affective mode in which loss is neither transcended nor totalised, but held alongside the minimal possibility of ethical action.

Crucially, Amor Swart emerges as the human embodiment of this metamodern condition. She is neither a redemptive figure nor a passive witness. Instead, she inhabits the difficult space between detachment and commitment, exemplifying what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) term *informed naïveté*. Fully aware of the failures that surround her, Amor nonetheless persists in acting as if ethical meaning remains possible. Her final act does not heal history; it acknowledges debt. It is late, insufficient, and contested, yet it is undertaken. In this sense, Amor models a mode of ethical being suited to a post-utopian world: one that recognises the impossibility of justice without surrendering to ethical withdrawal. Her journey confirms Wilbers's (2018) contention that metamodernism articulates an "ethics of persistence" in contexts where both optimism and cynicism have been exhausted.

Taken together, these findings reposition *The Promise* within the evolving landscape of South African literature. While earlier post-apartheid fiction often relied on postmodern irony (as in Coetzee) or realist social critique, Galgut's novel exemplifies a post-postcolonial turn: a literature that retains scepticism while reactivating ethical seriousness. Metamodernism, as this article has argued, offers a productive framework for understanding this shift, not as a global imposition, but as a flexible sensibility capable of responding to local histories of trauma and deferred justice. Its emphasis on oscillation, rather than synthesis, proves especially apt for societies marked by unfinished transitions and exhausted political imaginaries.

Ultimately, *The Promise* suggests that in the wake of collapsed grand narratives, whether apartheid ideology or liberation utopianism, truth no longer resides in stable positions, moral certainties, or redemptive endings. Instead, ethical truth emerges through the sustained labour of navigation: the willingness to remain with contradiction, to acknowledge failure without absolution, and to act without guarantees. Galgut's novel thus proposes oscillation itself as a mode of fidelity, to history, to responsibility, and to the fragile persistence of ethical demand. This, finally, is the novel's most profound and ambiguous promise: not a vision of resolution, but a model of how to live and write honestly in the aftermath of disillusionment, where the ghosts of the past continue to speak and must, however belatedly, still be answered.

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