

An Exploration of a Journey Towards Self-Liberation through Trauma in *The Promise* by Damon Galgut

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Abstract

Trauma often survives long after the event that caused it, shaping memory, identity, and human relationships in ways that are neither immediate nor easily resolved. Damon Galgut's *The Promise* presents this enduring psychological reality through the fragmented lives of the Swart family, where recurring deaths become catalysts for guilt, repression, and emotional disintegration. This study investigates the traumatic experiences of the novel's major characters, examines the defense mechanisms they employ to cope with psychological distress, and explores their gradual journeys toward self-liberation. Adopting a qualitative research design and a psychological approach, the study undertakes a close textual analysis of the experiences of Amor, Astrid, and Anton. The findings reveal that repeated encounters with death generate unresolved psychological wounds that continue to influence the siblings' thoughts, emotions, and relationships long after the traumatic events have passed. While each character adopts distinct defense mechanisms—including repression, denial, escapism, and guilt-driven self-deception—these strategies offer only temporary relief, leaving them trapped in recurring cycles of emotional suffering. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that healing is neither linear nor complete; rather, it is a continuous struggle between remembering and forgetting, confronting and avoiding the past. By illuminating the enduring effects of trauma on individual identity and family dynamics, this study positions *The Promise* as a profound exploration of psychological resilience, memory, and the complexities of human healing.

Keywords: Trauma, Traumatic effect, Psychological, PTSD, Liberation, Defense Mechanism.

Introduction

This paper explores the sufferings of the vow that has been carefully ignored Damon Galgut's novel *The Promise*. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by the traumatic events is the main subject of this study. PTSD is a form of psychological disorder that is haunted by traumatic events (Harvey 5). Galgut, in his novel *The Promise*, discusses emotional scars and deep-seated pain. Psychological trauma can occur in the wake of traumatic events such as unfulfilled promises, betrayal and deaths.

Damon Galgut, the Booker Prize 2021 winner for his most recent book *The Promise*, writes a contemporary drama in exquisite prose about a family that could only have originated from South Africa. He has also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize twice before, for *The Good Doctor* and *In a Strange Room*. In his book *The Promise*, he primarily addresses the issues of land ownership and distribution that apartheid directly caused. Damon Galgut has established himself as a prominent voice in contemporary South African literature. Like writers from Palestine or Northern Ireland, South African authors are often expected to engage with politics—a demand that carries both opportunities and constraints.

Although Galgut confronts the enduring legacy of apartheid and the condition of post-apartheid South Africa, his primary concern lies in exploring the dynamics of power between individuals and the forces that unite or divide them. Going through Damon Galgut's writings, is not a comfortable process. Characters are troubled, situations are tense, atmospheres are brooding, and landscapes are depressing. However, Galgut has discovered a convincing method of handling difficult circumstances as well as the weight of politics and history in a nuanced, captivating way. The scalpel-sharp precision of his writing ensures that readers are hooked in and stitch in it.

The Swart family, haunted by an unfulfilled promise, loses touch after their matriarch dies. Adrift, the lives of the three siblings move separately through the uncharted waters of South Africa; Anton, the golden boy who bitterly resents his life's unfulfilled potential; Astrid, whose beauty is her power; and the youngest, Amor, whose life is shaped by a nebulous feeling of guilt. Reunited

at just four funerals in thirty years, the shrinking family reflects the atmosphere of the nation, which is one of resentment, rebirth, and, in the end, hope.

In Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, episodes of mental suffering permeate the story and have an impact on the characters' personal and social lives. The historical trauma of apartheid is palpable in the characters' lives and relationships. The dysfunctional family relationships, particularly within the Swart family, contribute to a sense of emotional trauma. The strained interactions, secrets, and unresolved conflicts among family members impact their individual psyches. The characters' relationships with the land, as well as the impact of historical injustices related to land ownership, contribute to a broader sense of trauma. Galgut has written this novel in the third-person narrative and the novel explores the themes of trauma, guilt, redemption, isolation, social injustice, and psychological issues. This novel encompasses the character viewpoints and experiences of emotional distress and their sufferings. These three siblings are the focus of the novel, *The Promise*: Amor, Anton, and Astrid.

It would be appropriate to analyze *The Promise* using trauma theory. The research paper establishes a new perspective of looking at the novel *The Promise*. It is helpful to understand the human behavior, human choices and the consequences of these choices. The study also scrutinizes the psychoanalytical view point of the literary texts and shows how Galgut employs the psychology of her characters. This work may also be helpful for the new researchers or the readers of Galgut's work to understand the psychology of her characters and penetrate deep down into her art of characterization to relish the true essence of her work.

Delayed response to trauma might cause severe exhaustion, hallucinations, insomnia, recurring visions, anxiety due to flashbacks, nightmares, guilt, depression, conflict between thought and action and avoidance of feelings, disturbed emotions, or actions that even vaguely remind one of the traumas.

This study attempts to demonstrate the signs of PTSD and to learn how to deal with trauma and its effects. The current study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. How does the novel *The Promise* depict trauma through the characters?
2. How does the traumatic journey lead the characters towards self-liberation in *The Promise*?
3. What kind of Defense Mechanism is employed by the major character in the novel *The Promise*?

Theoretical Framework

Herman's (1992) theory is used for the current study's analytical purpose. The ideas fall under the psychological approach and cover PTSD symptoms, the idea of trauma, and traumatic events. Trauma theory is a psychological framework that seeks to understand how individuals react and cope with traumatic experiences. It posits that exposure to an event that threatens the physical or psychological wellbeing of a person can have lasting effects that extend beyond the initial experience. Trauma responses are often characterized by a range of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, dissociation, and hypervigilance. In severe cases, individuals may arise posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can significantly impact their quality of life.

According to trauma theory, the severity of the experience, the individual's coping mechanisms, and many other factors all have an impact on how people process and deal with trauma, the individual's prior experiences, and their social support network. While some individuals may be able to recover from traumatic events relatively quickly, others may require more intensive treatment and support. Trauma theory was one of Freud's major contributions to psychology. Freud defined trauma as an experience that is so overwhelming that it transcends the person's capacity to cope with it. Trauma can be physical or emotional, and it can occur at any age.

The term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became established in 1980, but only in reference to combat experiences. Studying trauma throughout the 1970s and 1980s could only be justified in light of "the sacrifice of young men in war" (Herman 9). Feminist organizations were battling for acknowledgement of the devastating impacts of rape, abuse, and captivity at that period due to challenges associated with growing interest in liberation of women. When the term

“post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) was coined and given official recognition in 1980, experts investigated the PTSD signs and symptoms and quickly discovered that the tension and anxiety experienced by the soldiers was exactly the same as that of women and children in their daily lives. This prompted more research into the types of traumas that can cause these signs in women and children in modern times.

Herman provided the following definition in her book *Trauma and Recovery*:

Trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman 25).

Herman divides traumatic symptoms into three categories: hyper arousal, intrusion, and constriction, which together represent the pathophysiology of these symptoms. She describes how hyper arousal is seen by trauma survivors as the human mechanism of self-preservation turning into perpetual alert, as if danger could reappear at any time (Herman 35). She contends that the traumatized individual startles easily, reacts irritably to tiny provocations, and sleeps badly during this hyper arousal state, which is the earliest symptom of PTSD (Herman 35).

Herman outlines how trauma survivors experience hyperarousal as “the human system of self-preservation going into permanent alert, as if danger might return at any moment” (35). She argues that in this hyperarousal state, which is the initial sign of PTSD, “the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly” (Herman 35).

The second symptom of PTSD, intrusion, according to Herman, prevents trauma survivors from carrying on with the “normal course of their lives” since they repeatedly (27) experience the trauma as if it were happening right now (37). In other words, symptoms might appear long after the real incident has gone. Constriction, the third symptom of PTSD, is described by Herman as

a person becoming totally helpless and entering a “state of surrender” (42). She also describes that how the individual’s self-defense mechanism collapses.

Literature Review

In critique of Rand Richards Cooper, “Galgut deploys the unkept vow as a stand-in for white South Africa’s moral bankruptcy” (The New York Time). According to this review, the novel’s depiction of a broken commitment is a powerful symbol of white South Africa’s moral bankruptcy, highlighting the deep trauma the country has experienced due to its history of racial oppression and apartheid. This broken promise represents the betrayal and abandonment marginalised communities have endured; despite being promised justice and equality, they have been subjected to persistent violence and discrimination.

The rupture of trust and the erosion of moral integrity depicted in the narrative mirror the deep-seated wounds of South African society, where the legacy of injustice continues to reverberate through the lives of individuals and communities, perpetuating trauma and mistrust.

As Jon Day (2021) explains, in his review for The Guardian,

While the promise is a literal one, it’s also a metaphorical as well. Over the years, as members of the family find reasons to deny or defer Salome’s inheritance, the moral promise—the potential, or expectation—of the next generation of South Africans, and of the nation itself, is shown to be just as compromised as that of their parents.

Pledge in the novel is described both as literal and symbolic. It provides evidence how Salome’s inheritance, which stands for the hope of a better future, is entwined with the tragedies and concessions of the past. An unresolved trauma cycle in the family causes Salome’s inheritance to be delayed. This perpetuation of trauma across generations underscores the complex interplay between personal and collective histories, shaping the moral fabric and aspirations of individuals and societies alike.

In turn, writing for *The New Yorker*, James Wood (2021) suggests that the novel depicts: A family at odds [which] reveals a nation in the throes”, adding that “[t]he Swart farm cannot be just a family property but must also come to stand in for debatable land, and perhaps also for an entire contested country.

The divided Swart family symbolises more than a fractured household; it serves as a microcosm of a nation burdened by historical trauma. Their conflicts mirror the social, political, and psychological divisions that continue to shape post-apartheid South Africa. Likewise, the family farm, as a site of contested ownership, becomes a powerful metaphor for the country’s struggle with land, justice, and reconciliation. Through the Swarts’ disintegration, Galgut exposes how the enduring legacy of apartheid and colonialism continues to influence both power structures and personal relationships.

Wood (2021) summarises the novel’s moral question in a similar way when he asks:

Can Amor’s loving, self-sacrificial kenosis offers a feasible political model?” The land promised to Salome functions metonymically in these reviews as both the specific object of redress—not surprising given the centrality of land in historical and contemporary patterns of dispossession (Ngcukaitobi 2018)—and as a placeholder for a broader project of social transformation.

In consonance to this critique, Amor’s loving and self-sacrificial actions can serve as a viable political model underscores the complex interplay between personal morality and collective trauma. Amor's willingness to sacrifice and love amidst the turmoil and injustice of South Africa’s history reflects an attempt to navigate the moral complexities of a society deeply scarred by trauma. This question resonates with the broader challenge of finding ways to address systemic injustices and heal collective wounds in the aftermath of apartheid. It highlights the tension between individual agency and structural forces, as well as the ongoing quest for reconciliation and transformation in the face of entrenched inequality and historical trauma.

Tom Leclair in his open letter states that, “What saves *The Promise* from earnest, grave-digging melodrama and post-apartheid political correctness is Galgut’s combining the tragic downfall of *The Sound and the Fury* with the antic comedy of *As I Lay Dying*, where another dysfunctional family has very different motives before and after the burial of the mother ...”.

The comparison drawn between *The Promise* and the works of Faulkner is incredibly insightful. Galgut’s skill in merging the tragic elements of “*The Sound and the Fury*” with the dark humor of “*As I Lay Dying*” showcases a masterful understanding of storytelling. By intertwining the complexities of familial dysfunction and the aftermath of apartheid, Galgut elevates the narrative beyond mere political correctness, creating a rich and compelling exploration of human nature. This juxtaposition of tones and themes not only adds depth to the storytelling but also highlights the intricacies of the characters' motives and actions. Overall, it's a testament to Galgut’s talent as a writer to seamlessly blend these elements into a cohesive and impactful narrative.

Research Methodology

This study adopted qualitative methodology to explore trauma in Damon Galgut’s *The Promise*. Qualitative research contributes to the literature in many disciplines by describing, interpreting, and generating theories about social interactions and individual experiences as they occur in natural, rather than experimental, situations. The motivation for conducting research which is qualitative in nature comes from close reading as it demands an in-depth examination on the impact of emotion on perceptions, behavior and emotion. The study discusses psychological aspects of the characters, which means that it examined human actions, expressions, thoughts, and motivations. As a result, the methodology used in my study was a psychological methodology. In their book *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren (1962) explain that psychological analysis in literature may be approached through three main perspectives: the psychology of the author, the psychology of the story’s characters, and the psychology of the reader (75–76). The second category was the primary subject of this study. This research used journals, online articles, books and reviews to collect data to address the research problem.

Analysis and Findings

Portraying Trauma Through Narrative Techniques and Characters

The reader's heart is captured by the novel's intense traumatising. The reader is able to depict the ongoing tension by the sudden or abrupt shift in narration and the immense confusion created through space and time. It would not be incorrect to argue that in this book, Galgut is more interested in playing with time than action. The disarray and fragmentation of the novel is a reflection of the psychological rifts in the characters. She carries it away and goes in search of the needle and thread. If Rachel keeps such things. Kept. The mental correction is satisfying, like a stiff joint clicking into place, Rachel will always be in the past tense now (Galgut 26). This paragraph advances the trauma theme by highlighting the characters' necessary emotional and mental transformation. Switching "keeps" to "kept" is a sudden and painful realization that comes with acknowledging and accepting Rachel's absence. Particularly in these tense shifts, the writing style mirrors the characters' internal struggles and the unsettling presence of trauma in their lives. Then there is another passage that illustrates trauma through the author's writing style:

By the time she comes in through the back door, one hundred and thirty-three minutes and twenty-two seconds have passed since she ran away. Four cars, including the long dark one, have departed, a single new one has arrived. The telephone has rung eighteen times, the doorbell twice, on one occasion because somebody has sent flowers that improbably turns up all the way out here. Twenty-two cups of tea, six mugs of coffee, three glasses of cold drink, and six brandy and Cokes have been consumed. The three toilets' downstairs, unused to such traffic, have been have between them flushed twenty-seven times, carrying away nine liters of urine, five point two liters of shit, one stomach full of regurgitated food, and five millimeters of sperm. Numbers go on and on, but what does mathematics help? (Galgut 32).

Rather than using the conventional expression that is two hours, thirteen minutes, and twenty-two seconds, the narrative describes the duration as "a hundred and thirty-three minutes and twenty-two seconds" (32). This unusual representation of time creates a sense of uncertainty and

disorientation, reflecting the characters' fragmented perception of time under the influence of trauma.

Similarly, the meticulous recording of time, people, phone calls, drinks, and even bodily waste reveals an obsessive attention to detail that functions as a coping mechanism in the face of chaos. The concluding rhetorical question, "But what does mathematics help?" (32) exposes the futility of imposing numerical order on an emotionally overwhelming experience. Together, these stylistic choices reinforce the characters' psychological fragmentation and heightened anxiety.

Amor emerges as the quintessential candidate for a trauma study in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*, embodying a profound depth of experience forged through the crucible of numerous tragedies. This positioning in the analysis underscores the magnitude of heart rendering events she endures, making her story a focal point that encapsulates the overarching theme of trauma in the narrative. Before she learned how to live, Amor had already learned how to grieve, carrying one unbearable loss after another until trauma became the language of her existence. Born into a home that was already falling apart, she entered the world at the wrong time. Before she could understand who, she was. Her father made her question whether she was even his daughter. From the devastating impact of her mother's protracted battle with cancer, her father's untimely demise due to a snakebite, the chilling specter of her sister's murder, and the haunting aftermath of her brother's suicide, she had to face it all alone. How much grief can a child be expected to carry before it becomes too heavy to bear? What kind of adult can emerge from a childhood where love is overshadowed by rejection and every bond ends in loss? Perhaps the answer is simple: a person who does not merely suffer from trauma, but becomes its very embodiment.

Her traumatic journey begins when she secretly overhears her dying mother, Rachel, asking her father to give their maid, Salome, ownership of the house she lives in. This deathbed promise becomes permanently etched in Amor's memory, shaping her conscience and guiding her throughout the novel. The first time she hears this conversation, the words echo hauntingly: "They didn't see me; I was like a black woman to them. Do you promise me, Manie? Holding on to him, skeleton hand grabbing like in a horror film. Ja, I will do it. Because I really want her to have

something after everything she's done. I understand, he says. Promise me, you will do it. Say the words. I promise. (Pa says, choked sounding)" (Galgut 19).

Despite the deaths of her parents, sister, and brother, Amor remains consumed by the promise made to Salome, repeatedly asking about the house despite constant dismissal. For her, the promise transcends a mere legal obligation; it symbolizes betrayal, broken trust, and her family's moral failure. From the perspective of trauma theory, this fixation reflects repetition compulsion, as she unconsciously returns to the unresolved promise while avoiding the overwhelming grief of her losses.

Throughout the novel, Amor occupies a liminal space as a silent observer whose thoughts and emotions are largely ignored. Even during pivotal moments, such as her father's death, her absence goes unnoticed until someone asks, "But where is Amor?" (Galgut 151) This recurring invisibility underscores her emotional marginalisation, reinforcing the question of whether she was ever truly seen.

During Anton's sessions with a psychiatrist for his stress disorder, there is a glaring omission in his conversations—he never once mentions his sister, Amor. Her presence and absence seem to hold equal weight, signifying a pattern of neglect and disregard that characterizes her experience as the youngest child. The psychiatrist recognizes the significance of this silence, observing that "not once in all his sessions has, he raised her name", which may indicate either "how unimportant she is or perhaps the opposite of how much she matters to him" (Galgut 100). Anton's inability to acknowledge Amor reflects the family's long-standing marginalization of her and reveals the complex psychological dynamics underlying their relationships.

Amor's birth during a turbulent period in her parents' marriage reflects the instability that defines her childhood. Arriving amid marital conflict, she enters a fractured family where emotional insecurity and neglect shape her earliest experiences, laying the foundation for her lifelong trauma. As the writer notes, she was "the last-born, not planned", conceived during "the most

troubled period of the marriage” when her parents had already begun “keeping separate bedrooms” and there was “not a lot of loving going on” between them (Galgut 28).

The persistent doubt surrounding Amor’s identity intensifies her traumatic experience. Her father’s constant suspicion about her paternity, reflected in his repeated scrutiny of her features, creates an atmosphere of rejection and insecurity. His enduring uncertainty over whether Amor is truly his daughter leaves her deprived of the unconditional acceptance essential to a child’s sense of belonging, “He twists around in the chair and takes Amor’s face in his hand, turns it up towards him, looking at her features, searching for some sign that could only come from his body, his cell. Not the first time he has done it, she stares back at him out of her dark constellation, frightened” (Galgut 29).

The burden of psychological suffering emerges in her poignant plea before sleep overtakes her. Revealing bewilderment and inner distress, she murmurs, “I am here, Amor Swart, 1986. May tomorrow never come” (Galgut 35). This moving utterance signifies far more than a longing to escape reality; it conveys an intense yearning for death and an end to the anguish and uncertainty surrounding her fragile existence.

The impact of trauma on Amor is so profound that she begins to experience vivid hallucinations, imagining her deceased mother as if she were still alive. These recurring visions blur the boundary between memory and reality, reflecting the depth of her unresolved grief. Rather than mere hallucinations, they reveal trauma’s persistent hold over her mind, keeping the past painfully alive in the present.

Out of the corner of an eye she thinks she sees Ma’s face appear in the mirror but when she looks directly it’s gone. Instead, she can smell her mother; or mix of smell she thinks of as her mother, but are actually the traces of recent events, involving incense, blood, medicine, perfume and underline dark note, perhaps the smell of the sickness itself. Exhaled by the walls, hovering in the air (Galgut 23).

Astrid's fabricated account of being present at her mother's deathbed reveals the psychological burden of unresolved guilt. By constructing this false narrative, she shields herself from the condemnation she anticipates, particularly from her sister, while masking the painful truth of her absence. Rather than merely concealing reality, the lie exposes the depth of her shame, regret, and unresolved grief, illustrating how trauma compels individuals to reshape memory in an attempt to ease an otherwise unbearable emotional burden.

I was with her when she died, Astrid says at last, her voice vibrating because she's telling an untruth. She wasn't with her mother when she died. She was behind the stables, talking with Dean de Wet, ... So, the only people who were with Rachel Swart when her time came were her husband, aka Pa or Manie, and the black girl, ... I should have been there. So, Astrid thinks. That she was flirting with Dean instead adds only to her guilt (Galgut 23-24).

Astrid's extensive catalogue of fears—from alienation and natural disasters to the fear of being unloved—reveals the enduring psychological impact of trauma. Her paranoia that others can read her mind or that the world is merely performing around her reflects a fragile sense of self and persistent emotional insecurity. These irrational fears underscore the profound psychological scars left by her unresolved traumatic experiences.

She is prone to paranoid fear like these, suspecting something that her mind can be secretly read by people around her or that life is an elaborate performance in which everybody else is acting and she alone is not. Astrid is a fearful person. Among other things, she is afraid of the dark, poverty, thunderstorms, getting fat, earthquakes, tidal waves, crocodiles, the blacks, the future, the orderly structure of the society coming undone. Of being unloved. Of always having been that way (Galgut 24).

Astrid's tumultuous romantic history reflects a deep-rooted dissatisfaction and a search for fulfillment that eludes her within traditional relationships. Her first marriage to Dan DeWitt lacked the profound connection she craved, leading to its eventual dissolution. However, her subsequent

marriage to Jake also failed to satisfy her emotional needs, prompting her to seek solace in an extramarital affair with Mbeki, Jake's business partner.

Astrid's realisation that what befell her father could also happen to her forces her into a harrowing confrontation with her own mortality. Reflecting on her father's sudden death, she thinks, "I was with him only yesterday... he was alive and breathing, how is it possible that he's neither of those things now?". The awareness that "if it can happen to our father, it can happen to me" leaves her overwhelmed by the prospect of "this nothing, this state of Not", so that "she mourns herself in terror" (Galgut 102). The passage poignantly captures her internal struggle, where anxiety over mortality converges with grief and an acute awareness of human vulnerability.

As the final death chronicled in the novel, Anton's suicide marks the tragic culmination of a life burdened by responsibility, unfulfilled expectations, and unresolved trauma. As the eldest child, he is expected to care for both the family and the farm, yet the widening gap between his aspirations and reality gradually leads him into despair. Initially portrayed as a promising "golden boy", Anton dreams of studying English literature abroad and becoming a novelist. However, familial expectations, societal pressures, and repeated disappointments erode these ambitions, ultimately driving him to take his own life. "Anton inquires himself: Good God, who fucked with my face? Where is the golden boy I used to be, who hid him under this dented metal mask?" (Galgut 237).

Anton's turbulent emotional journey unveils a deep-seated struggle with the traumas that have shaped his life. He poignantly realises that he can deal with the tragedy, but it is the farce that he cannot handle, believing that he has wasted his life. encapsulates a profound sense of trauma-induced disillusionment and regret. The contrast between tragedy and farce symbolises the dichotomy between significant, life-altering events (tragedy) and the mundane, often absurd aspects of life (farce). Even the title of the novel which he is writing: "The Torments of Human Condition" (Galgut 239) itself reflects the central theme of trauma in the novel. It encapsulates the deep-rooted struggles.

Anton's tragic demise is not merely the consequence of successive traumatic events but also of a psychological fragility that predates his final collapse. His irrational response to his mother's death—claiming responsibility for it in the delusional context of saving the country—reveals a mind already struggling to distinguish guilt from reality. “I have lost my mother”, he says. “Lost her? I shot her with my rifle, to protect the country”. “You shot your mother?” (Galgut 38). This compulsive self-blame becomes a defining feature of his character, gradually intensifying under the weight of unfulfilled aspirations and repeated losses. Rather than trauma alone, it is the convergence of psychological vulnerability and accumulated suffering that ultimately precipitates his downfall.

The Progression from Defensive Responses to Self-Liberation

Salome's acquisition of the house marks the fulfillment of a long-neglected promise while symbolizing South Africa's gradual liberation from the enduring legacy of apartheid. As a Black servant finally receiving legal ownership of the home she has occupied for years, Salome's victory transcends individual achievement and represents the restoration of dignity, justice, and equality. Salome's house becomes more than a physical structure; it stands as a lasting symbol of hope, resilience, and the possibility of healing for both the individual and the nation. “It isn't much, she says. I know that. Three rooms and a broken roof. On a though 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 285).

Individuals respond to trauma through a range of defense mechanisms, some adaptive and others maladaptive. Adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking therapy, engaging in creative expression, exercising, practicing mindfulness, and relying on social support, promote healing and emotional resilience. In contrast, maladaptive mechanisms—including denial, escapism, emotional suppression, avoidance, substance abuse, lying, and reckless behavior—may provide temporary relief but often intensify psychological distress and leave trauma unresolved.

Both constructive and destructive strategies are used by the characters in this novel. Amor attempts to deal with her trauma through escapism, constantly fleeing from the painful realities of

her life. Astrid resorts to denial, continuously lying to avoid facing her suffering. Anton, tragically deals with his trauma by committing suicide, making the devastating choice to end his life. While other characters, like Ma, Pa, and Astrid, die due to external circumstances cancer, a snake bite, and a carjacking respectively. The only one who takes his own life voluntarily is Anton. Though these destructive mechanisms provide some short-term respite, all they do is exacerbate their injuries and obstruct their healing. The defense mechanism portrayed by Amor is escapism, where she attempts to flee from reality, clinging to the belief that avoiding certain truths will keep her world intact.

Amor convinces herself that if she does not enter the house, her world will remain unchanged and her mother will still be alive. Standing outside, she thinks, “If I go through the door it will be true and my life will never be the same again”, and consequently, “she delays outside” (Galgut 13). Her reluctance to cross the threshold symbolizes her refusal to accept the finality of her mother’s death. This pattern of escapism extends beyond this moment, shaping her response to trauma throughout the novel. She distances herself not only emotionally but also physically from her family, the family home, and even South Africa—the epicenter of her traumatic experiences—in an attempt to evade the pain of loss and change.

She had learned, or perhaps has always known that if you want to move forward, it’s best not to look back. All she’s done since leaving South Africa is keep moving forward, or at least keep moving, not always sure of the direction, changing rooms and cities and countries and people, all of which smearing past like a landscape at speed, something in her unable to stop (Galgut 105).

This passage encapsulates her relentless urge to escape from the shadows of her past, highlighting her belief that physical movement equates to emotional progress.

At the end of the novel, after fulfilling her mother’s promise by giving Salome the house formerly known as Lombard Place, Amor experiences a profound sense of solace. The act symbolises her liberation from the burden of a promise she has carried for four decades. Unlike her earlier

attempts to escape painful realities, she is finally at peace. With her family gone and her responsibility fulfilled, she leaves without lingering guilt or anxiety. When her sister-in-law, Desiree, finds her on the roof, seemingly topless, Amor calmly responds, “Are you ready to go?” and then, “In five minutes”. Her composed demeanor reflects her newfound calm and emotional release. She then “shrugs into her shirt, buttons it up, and feels normal again, maybe even better than before”. Leaving the urn behind, recognising that “there’s no point in bringing it along”, she starts “to climb down the roof step by step toward whatever comes next” (Galgut 293).

Astrid’s repeated extramarital affairs reflect her deep emotional dissatisfaction and unresolved trauma. Neither her first husband, Dan De Wet, nor her later relationship with Jake provides the love and security she seeks, prompting her to pursue relationships with other men, including President Mkebi, in search of emotional fulfillment. Rather than simple acts of infidelity, these affairs function as a coping mechanism for the loneliness and instability created by her fractured family and repeated losses.

Astrid’s pursuit of self-liberation is most evident in her religious confessions. Through her conversations with Father Batty, Astrid confronts the guilt and emptiness that define her life while expressing a sincere desire to abandon her evil, dark life. Although she repeatedly fails to break free from destructive patterns, her confessions reveal an ongoing struggle for redemption, making them not merely acts of repentance but earnest attempts to attain emotional and moral renewal.

She was here six months ago to confess all of it to him, the affair, and its sorted repercussions, and he’d made her promise she would end it. She had meant to, her promise was sincere, but she didn’t do it, not even close. Wasn’t ready for that step, as it turned out (Galgut 170).

Even though she falls short, Astrid’s confessions are a testament to her inner turmoil and the conflict between her desires and her moral compass. Religion, for her, becomes a sanctuary, a place where she can confront her failings and strive for redemption. It represents a beacon of hope and a path toward self-liberation.

As the final death chronicled in the novel, Anton's suicide marks the tragic culmination of a life burdened by responsibility, unfulfilled expectations, and unresolved trauma. As the eldest child, he is expected to care for both the family and the farm, yet the widening gap between his aspirations and reality gradually leads him into despair. Initially portrayed as a promising "golden boy," Anton dreams of studying English literature abroad and becoming a novelist. However, familial expectations, societal pressures, and repeated disappointments erode these ambitions, ultimately driving him to take his own life.

Anton's defense mechanism is notably constructive. Writing a novel allows him to process his traumas in a healthy way. In contrast, Astrid and Amor's defense mechanisms are more destructive. Astrid copes through extramarital affairs, while Amor relies on escapism and denial. Thus, Anton's approach stands out as a more positive and creative way of dealing with his trauma. Anton's situation is indeed challenging. Writing a novel becomes more than just a creative outlet for Anton; it's a lifeline.

The autobiographical nature of the novel reinforces the idea that writing is a crucial coping mechanism for Anton. By creating a character so similar to himself, Anton is able to explore and express his own experiences and emotions in a way that might be too painful or difficult to confront directly. The act of putting his thoughts and experiences into words might also help him to make sense of his situation, providing clarity and insight that he can't find elsewhere and offers relief through the fictionalization of his reality.

The accumulation of his grief and stress is monumental. His inability to become a father adds another layer of personal failure, even therapy and sessions with the psychiatrist do not provide the relief he desperately needs. On top of these personal losses Anton's external world is crumbling. His business is failing he is drowning in debt and his house is deteriorating. Every aspect of his life is in disarray and the prospect of putting it back together seems impossible. The weight of these unrelenting challenges make the idea of continuing to fight seems futile. In this state Anton views suicide as a form of self-liberation. It is his way of escaping the intolerable pain

and chaos that he can no longer bear. To him death appears as the ultimate release, the remedy that can finally end his suffering.

Conclusion

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* is analyzed by using the Trauma Theory. This study delves into the lives of siblings Amor, Anton, and Astrid, focusing on three key aspects: the nature of the trauma they face, their defense and coping mechanisms, and their journey toward self-liberation from this trauma. The siblings' lives are profoundly altered by the successive deaths of their family members. These traumatic events significantly impact each sibling, shaping their psychological and emotional landscapes. Because in a dysfunctional family, the children are always the ones who suffer the most.

Despite the lively and vibrant narrative of the novel, the underlying trauma the characters endure cannot be understated. Each sibling employs different strategies to cope with their grief and loss. Amor immerses herself in escapism and denial. Anton turns to artistic expression, using his creativity as an outlet for his pain. Astrid, meanwhile, finds comfort in extra marital relationships, relying on the support of those around her to navigate her grief. Through these diverse coping mechanisms, the novel illustrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of profound loss. The siblings' journeys highlight how trauma, while deeply affecting, does not wholly define them. Instead, their responses to trauma reveal their strength and capacity for healing, emphasizing the complexity of human emotions and the enduring impact of familial bonds.

The novel's depiction of liberation extends beyond the individual to encompass a national struggle for freedom. The narrative parallels the siblings' personal journeys with their country's fight against oppression, moving from the dark clutches of slavery towards a future of freedom and human rights. This broader theme underscores the transformation from a place where human rights were neglected to one where freedom and dignity prevail.

In conclusion, *The Promise* masterfully portrays the multifaceted impact of trauma on individuals. Through the experiences of Amor, Anton, and Astrid, the novel underscores the enduring effects

of familial loss, the diverse ways people cope with grief, and the potential for self-liberation and growth despite profound adversity.

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