

From Apartheid to Aftermath: Memory and Moral Transition in Damon Galgut's Selected Novels

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Abstract: *The end of apartheid in South Africa was a major political change, but its effects on people's minds, morals, and cultures are still felt in literature today. This paper investigates the depiction of apartheid and post-apartheid realities in novels by Damon Galgut – The Promise, The Good Doctor, and In a Strange Room. The study examines how Galgut's fiction engages with the enduring impact of apartheid by exploring themes such as memory, moral obligation, identity conflict, and socio-political transformation.*

Based on postcolonial theory and trauma studies, the paper uses critical points of view that highlight how complicated historical memory, moral ambiguity, and broken identity are in postcolonial societies. Researchers like Bhagat and Singh (2025) and Amimo (2021) stress how colonial structures continue to shape people's minds after apartheid, while Laboudi (2024) and Akyüz and Avcu (2025) stress how literature can help people deal with trauma and cultural change. Based on these insights, this study utilises a qualitative textual and critical analysis of the chosen novels.

Even with these contributions, most of the research on Galgut's fiction only looks at one part of it at a time, like identity, mobility, or socio-political issues. It doesn't look at all of his novels together in a full and integrated way. There is still a gap in critically examining how memory, trauma, and moral transition operate as interconnected processes that shape post-apartheid subjectivity. Moreover, inadequate focus has been directed towards the ethical aspects of moral consciousness and responsibility following apartheid. This study seeks to rectify these deficiencies by offering an extensive analysis of The Promise, The Good Doctor, and In a Strange Room, highlighting the interplay between historical memory, psychological trauma, and the formation of moral frameworks.

The investigation shows that Galgut's stories depict people caught between the weight of historical guilt and the uncertainties of a changing country. His characters frequently represent moral quandaries and existential dislocation, mirroring broader societal tensions delineated by Rahaman and Bhagat, Di Lillo (2022), and Kostelac (2017). Bialas (2026), Beyer (2015), and Mullaney (2010) all say that Galgut's simple style and introspective narration make the exploration of memory and moral awareness even deeper. The paper attempts to state that Galgut's fiction gives a nuanced critique of South Africa after apartheid, where the promise of change is still tied up with unresolved trauma and moral ambiguity. Ultimately, the study underscores the significance of literary narratives in understanding the ongoing negotiation between past injustices and present identities in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Post-Apartheid Literature, Postcolonial Identity, Trauma and Memory, Moral Transition, Damon Galgut, Socio-Political Transformation



I. INTRODUCTION

From 1948 to the early 1990s, the institutionalised system of apartheid in South Africa was one of the strictest and most oppressive forms of racial segregation in modern history. Apartheid was based on colonial ideas of racial superiority and divided every part of life—political, social, economic, and spatial—along racial lines. This led to deep inequalities and systemic injustices. The official end of apartheid in 1994 and the switch to a democratic state were major turning points in history. But the end of apartheid didn't mean that its effects were over. Instead, the time after apartheid has been marked by ongoing struggles with memory, identity, moral responsibility, and changes in society and politics. The legacy of apartheid continues to influence individual consciousness and collective identity, rendering it a primary focus in contemporary South African literature.

In this context, Damon Galgut's works hold a prominent position in postcolonial literary discourse. Galgut is a well-known South African novelist who writes about the moral and psychological problems that people face after apartheid. *The Promise*, *The Good Doctor*, and *In a Strange Room* are three of his novels that show how society is changing in a nuanced way, with tensions between past wrongs and present realities that are still not resolved. Galgut uses simple storytelling and deep character development to bring out themes of alienation, moral ambiguity, and existential uncertainty. This helps us better understand post-apartheid identity and change.

This study examines significant thematic issues present in Galgut's selected novels, encompassing memory, trauma, identity crisis, moral evolution, and socio-political transformation. Memory in these texts is not just a way to remember the past; it is also an active and often heavy force that shapes how we feel and what we do now. Trauma, both personal and communal, is evident in fragmented identities and emotional dislocation, illustrating the lasting effects of apartheid. The novels also look at moral responsibility in a society that is dealing with guilt from the past and the difficulties of coming together. Also, the tension between continuity and change in post-apartheid South Africa is explored through representations of shifting social structures and cultural identities.

The research problem examined in this paper pertains to the comprehension of how Galgut's fiction navigates the intricate relationship between historical legacy and contemporary identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Although current research has explored elements of identity, space, and narrative technique in his oeuvre, there is a necessity for a thorough analysis that incorporates memory, trauma, and moral transition within a postcolonial context. The main goal of this study is to look at how Galgut's chosen novels show the psychological and moral aspects of change after apartheid, with a focus on how memory and moral consciousness work together.

The research is based on postcolonial theory and trauma studies, which are necessary for looking at the cultural and psychological effects of colonial and apartheid legacies. Postcolonial theory facilitates the examination of power relations, identity construction, and cultural hybridity, whereas trauma studies clarify the depiction of memory, loss, and emotional disintegration. These frameworks work together to help us figure out what literature says about violence in the past and what it does.

This study is confined to a qualitative textual and critical examination of the chosen novels, emphasising their thematic and narrative techniques. By placing Galgut's works in larger postcolonial and socio-political contexts, the paper shows how they are still important to current discussions about identity, memory, and change. This study is important because it tries to add to postcolonial literary scholarship by showing how Galgut's fiction gives a nuanced critique of post-apartheid South Africa, showing how hard it is to deal with past wrongs and present realities.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Academic interest in the writings of Damon Galgut indicates an increasing focus on the intersections of identity, memory, and socio-political change in post-apartheid South Africa. Current research examines his fiction through various critical lenses, such as postcolonial theory, trauma studies, gender analysis, and narrative theory, thereby providing significant insights into the intricacies of his literary portrayal.

A central theme in contemporary scholarship is the examination of identity and performativity. Bhagat and Singh (2025) investigate gender identity as a performative construct in postcolonial contexts, highlighting the ways in which



identities are formed through social and cultural negotiations. Their analysis emphasises the instability and fluidity of identity in post-apartheid contexts, paralleling the fragmented and frequently ambiguous identities portrayed in Galgut's fiction. In a similar vein, Beyer (2015) examines constructions of masculinity, contending that male identity in post-apartheid literature is characterised by crisis and redefinition. This viewpoint is especially pertinent to Galgut's male protagonists, who often display emotional detachment, moral ambiguity, and existential dislocation.

Amimo (2021) examines the theme of mobility and multiplicity, using travel as a metaphor for identity formation in postcolonial literature. Amimo's focus on movement and displacement fits with the story structure of *In a Strange Room*, where travel is a way to explore a broken sense of self and existential doubt. This idea of multiplicity goes against rigid ideas of identity and shows how fluid subjectivity is in stories from after apartheid.

Academics have also looked at the social and political aspects of Galgut's work, especially when it comes to race, land, and national identity. Laboudi (2024) examines racial agency in *The Promise*, contending that the novel critiques enduring inequalities and the inability to effectuate authentic transformation. Akyüz and Avcu (2025) expand upon this argument by examining land conflict and unfulfilled commitments, positing that unresolved land ownership issues represent the unfinished transition from apartheid to democracy. These studies underscore the conflict between the principles of the "Rainbow Nation" and the realities of socio-economic inequality, a topic also examined by Di Lillo (2022), who critiques the formulation of national identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

The psychological ramifications of apartheid constitute a substantial domain of academic investigation. Rahaman and Bhagat stress how historical trauma affects both individuals and groups for a long time. They say that the legacy of apartheid still shows up in emotional fragmentation and moral uncertainty. Kostelac (2017) adds to this point of view by looking at narrative identity in *The Good Doctor* and showing how the way the story is told shows the main character's internal conflicts and moral dilemmas. These studies collectively highlight the significance of memory and trauma in influencing post-apartheid subjectivity.

Białas (2026) offers a more comprehensive critique of Galgut's work by placing his fiction within the framework of contemporary postcolonial discourse, highlighting its exploration of themes such as alienation, moral responsibility, and historical awareness. Białas contends that Galgut's minimalist style amplifies the depiction of psychological complexity and moral ambiguity, a perspective supported by Mullaney (2010), who offers a theoretical framework for interpreting postcolonial narratives through the lenses of memory, identity, and power dynamics. Mullaney's work is especially helpful for putting Galgut's fiction in the context of larger postcolonial discussions.

These studies provide useful information, but they usually only look at one part of Galgut's work, like gender, travel, land politics, or narrative technique. They don't fully connect these parts to a full analysis of memory and moral transition. Furthermore, there exists a paucity of scholarship that concurrently analyses several novels to delineate the continuity and progression of these themes throughout Galgut's body of work.

Consequently, the current study aims to fill this void by offering a comprehensive analysis of *The Promise*, *The Good Doctor*, and *In a Strange Room*, emphasising the interaction between memory, trauma, identity, and moral responsibility within the framework of post-apartheid transformation. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Galgut's fiction interacts with the lasting legacy of apartheid and its intricate aftermath by synthesising insights from existing scholarship and employing a combined postcolonial and trauma studies framework.

III. METHODOLOGY/MATERIALS

This study utilises a qualitative, interpretative research design based on textual and critical analysis to investigate the portrayal of memory, trauma, identity, and moral transition in the chosen novels (*The Promise*, *The Good Doctor*, & *In a Strange Room*) of Damon Galgut. These texts have been chosen because they are thematically relevant to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and because they critically address issues of identity, moral responsibility, and social and political change. These novels collectively illustrate various temporal and spatial dimensions of Galgut's oeuvre, facilitating a comparative and thorough examination of continuity and transformation in his literary portrayal of post-apartheid realities.



The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates postcolonial theory and trauma studies. Postcolonial theory offers the analytical framework to investigate power dynamics, cultural hybridity, and identity construction following colonialism and apartheid. Using Mullaney's (2010) framework, the study looks into how historical memory and socio-political hierarchies still affect individual and group identities. To understand the fragmented subjectivities in Galgut's fiction, you need to know about ideas like hybridity, marginality, and the negotiation of identity. Trauma studies provide a framework to examine the psychological and emotional remnants of apartheid. Rahaman and Bhagat's ideas about how historical trauma can have lasting effects help us understand characters who are emotionally lost, morally confused, and guilty.

The methodological approach entails thematic analysis integrated with a meticulous examination of the chosen texts. Thematic analysis concentrates on recurring motifs, including memory, trauma, identity crisis, moral transition, and socio-political change. These themes are not addressed in isolation; instead, they are analysed as interconnected facets of the post-apartheid experience. Memory is examined as both an individual and collective construct that affects ethical decision-making, whereas trauma is investigated regarding its influence on identity formation and narrative structure. Close reading techniques are used to look at narrative strategies like character development, symbolism, narrative voice, and structural fragmentation, which all help show how complicated psychological and moral issues can be.

The study is additionally informed by contemporary critical scholarship that influences its analytical framework. Bhagat and Singh (2025) offer a framework for comprehending identity as performative and fluid, utilised to investigate the instability of selfhood in Galgut's characters. Beyer (2015) also helps with the study of masculinity and identity crisis, especially when it comes to male main characters who are morally unsure and emotionally distant. Amimo's (2021) examination of mobility and multiplicity serves to elucidate the thematic importance of travel and displacement in *In a Strange Room*, wherein movement is employed as a metaphor for fragmented identity.

The socio-political dimensions of the analysis draw upon the research of Laboudi (2024) and Akyüz and Avcu (2025), which examines racial agency and land conflict to elucidate structural inequalities and persistent tensions in *The Promise*. Di Lillo's (2022) critique of national identity enhances these perspectives, contributing to the study's engagement with the idea of the "Rainbow Nation" and its limits. Kostelac's (2017) emphasis on narrative identity is especially pertinent for the analysis of *The Good Doctor*, as the narrative structure mirrors the protagonist's internal struggles and moral quandaries. Furthermore, Białas (2026) offers a more comprehensive critical analysis of Galgut's minimalist style and thematic preoccupations, underscoring the study's focus on introspection and moral ambiguity.

The amalgamation of these academic viewpoints facilitates a multifaceted analytical framework that links textual interpretation with theoretical understanding. Instead of looking at the novels as separate works, the study puts them in a larger postcolonial and socio-historical context, which makes the analysis more meaningful and in-depth.

The study's scope is confined to the three chosen novels, concentrating mainly on thematic and narrative analysis. It does not encompass empirical or reader-response methodologies, nor does it endeavour to provide a comprehensive examination of all of Galgut's works. The study's interpretative nature facilitates comprehensive analysis but also introduces a level of subjectivity, which is mitigated by meticulous interaction with established theoretical frameworks and academic sources.

In general, this method allows for a thorough and logical study of how Galgut's fiction shows the complicated relationship between memory, trauma, identity, and moral transition in post-apartheid South Africa. This helps us better understand how literature responds to changes in history and society.

IV. FINDINGS

The investigation of Damon Galgut's chosen novels—*The Promise*, *The Good Doctor*, and *In a Strange Room*—uncovers a multifaceted and interconnected array of thematic issues that elucidate the psychological, ethical, and socio-political aspects of post-apartheid South Africa. The results are grouped into four main themes: memory, trauma, identity, and social and political change.



V. MEMORY AS BURDEN AND CONTINUITY

This study's main finding is that memory doesn't stably store the past; instead, it is an active and often heavy force that shapes the present. In *The Promise*, memory is woven into the family's story, and the broken promise about land stands for historical wrongs. The repeated failure to keep this promise shows that the inequalities from the apartheid era are still present. This fits with Akyüz and Avcu's argument that broken promises are signs of incomplete change. Laboudi's focus on racial agency is also clear in how Black characters are pushed to the side when their claims to justice are still not met.

In *The Good Doctor*, memory is shown in a subtler way through the slow decline of institutions and the main character's inability to let go of the past. The hospital, which is falling apart, is a metaphor for the unresolved legacy of apartheid. In *A Strange Room*, on the other hand, memory is shown in a more broken and reflective way, with memories mixed in with the narrator's changing sense of self. In all three books, memory acts as a bridge between past wrongs and present doubts. This supports Mullaney's idea that postcolonial identity is shaped by historical power structures.

1. Trauma and Psychological Fragmentation

The results also show that trauma, both personal and group, has a big effect on how people act and how stories are told. Using Rahaman and Bhagat's work on psychological trauma as a guide, the study shows that Galgut's characters often show emotional detachment, alienation, and moral paralysis. In *The Good Doctor*, the main character's passive interaction with his environment signifies a profound psychological fragmentation stemming from historical disillusionment. This fits with Kostelac's idea of narrative identity, which attempts to state that a broken story reflects the main character's inner struggles.

In *The Promise*, trauma is passed down from one generation to the next, affecting family members who can't come to terms with their past. The story's episodic structure adds to this feeling of disconnection and unresolved tension. In *A Strange Room* shows trauma through feelings of loneliness and existential vulnerability that come up while travelling. The absence of stable emotional connections underscores the lasting effects of displacement and loss. These representations collectively emphasise the enduring impact of trauma in post-apartheid consciousness and its influence on the formation of fragmented identities.

2. Identity Crisis and Moral Ambiguity

A notable discovery of this study is the widespread experience of identity crisis and moral ambiguity that defines Galgut's protagonists. Bhagat's and Singh's idea of identity as performative is shown in the characters' changing and unstable identities as they try to figure out who they are in a changing political and social landscape. In *A Strange Room*, the narrator's changing roles and relationships show Amimo's idea of multiplicity, which attempts to state that identity is always changing through movement and experience.

In *The Good Doctor*, the main character's moral ambiguity is clear in how he goes along with things and doesn't have a clear sense of right and wrong, which is similar to Beyer's study of masculinity in crisis. The character's inability to make a firm decision shows that people are still unsure about their moral duties in a world after apartheid. In the same way, *The Promise* shows characters who know about past wrongs but don't do anything about them, which supports Białas's point about moral ambiguity in Galgut's minimalist style. In all three novels, identity is shown to be broken and dependent on both personal experiences and social and historical forces.

3. Socio-Political Transition and Disillusionment

The analysis also shows that there is a consistent criticism of the changes in society and politics that happened after apartheid, which is marked by disappointment and unmet hopes. In *The Promise*, the inability to redistribute land powerfully illustrates the disparity between democratic ideals and the reality of inequality. This finding corresponds with Di Lillo's critique of the "Rainbow Nation", which underscores the constraints



of national reconciliation narratives. Akyüz and Avcu's focus on land conflict is also shown in the book's portrayal of structural injustice and delayed accountability.

The Good Doctor shows how post-apartheid institutions are still stuck and not working well, which shows that systemic problems are still there. This suggests that political change has not led to real social change. In contrast, In a Strange Room places disillusionment in a global context, where the protagonist's feeling of being alone crosses national borders but is still based on struggles with postcolonial identity.

In general, the results show that the three novels have different settings and ways of telling stories, but they all show a society dealing with the effects of apartheid. Galgut's fiction consistently illustrates the tension between historical legacy and contemporary reality, highlighting the intricacies of memory, trauma, identity, and moral evolution. These patterns show that the changes that have happened since apartheid are not a straight line but an ongoing negotiation with confusion, fragmentation, and contradictions that have not been resolved.

VI. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS:

The study asserts that in Damon Galgut's literature, the themes of memory, trauma, identity, and moral transition are intricately interconnected processes that collectively shape post-apartheid subjectivity. Galgut's books show that apartheid isn't just a thing of the past; it still affects people's minds today. Memory functions not merely as recollection but as a moral impetus that exposes enduring inequalities and the divergence between democratic ideals and lived experiences. Trauma intensifies the connection between the past and the present, resulting in psychological fragmentation and moral paralysis among individuals and communities. In the post-apartheid context, this makes the effects of violence in the past even stronger.

The relationship between memory and trauma creates a long-term identity crisis that is marked by instability, fragmentation, and a constant struggle to define oneself. Galgut's characters show this instability by being lost, not doing anything, and not knowing what to do with their lives. This demonstrates that identity in a post-apartheid society is influenced by both historical and contemporary factors. These thematic intersections lead to the idea of moral transition, which is not clear or resolved, but rather vague and morally uncertain. Galgut challenges idealised narratives of reconciliation by revealing the limitations of socio-political transformation, particularly in relation to enduring structural inequalities and institutional inertia.

The research indicates that Galgut's fiction provides a critical reassessment of post-apartheid transformation by dismissing simplistic narratives of advancement. Instead, his work shows a complicated and unresolved postcolonial reality where memory, trauma, and identity are still mixed up, and it's hard to be sure of what's right. Galgut's interconnected framework not only illustrates the durability of historical structures but also demonstrates how literature can facilitate contemplation of the psychological and moral dimensions of social transformation.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how memory, trauma, identity, and moral transition are represented in the selected novels of Damon Galgut—The Promise, The Good Doctor, and In a Strange Room—within the broader framework of postcolonial theory and trauma studies. The analysis demonstrates that these thematic concerns are not isolated elements but deeply interwoven processes that collectively illuminate the enduring legacy of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa. By foregrounding the psychological, ethical, and socio-political dimensions of transition, the study confirms its central argument: that Galgut's fiction reveals continuity rather than rupture, exposing how the structures and consequences of apartheid persist within contemporary consciousness.

A significant conclusion derived from this study is that memory operates as both a burden and an essential ethical influence. In Galgut's novels, memory doesn't just help people remember the past; it also shapes their moral choices and the way things are now. This is in line with Mullaney's (2010) postcolonial framework, which stresses how historical power structures still shape how people see themselves. The symbolic meaning of broken promises, especially in The



Promise, supports Akyüz and Avcu's (2025) point that land conflict and broken promises show that change is not yet complete. The marginalisation of Black voices exemplifies Laboudi's (2024) focus on racial agency, underscoring the persistence of systemic inequalities despite political transformation. Memory serves as a repository where historical injustices persist in shaping contemporary ethical dilemmas.

Trauma further complicates this dynamic by shaping both individual subjectivity and narrative form. Drawing on the insights of Rahaman and Bhagat, the study underscores the persistence of psychological fragmentation, emotional detachment, and moral uncertainty in Galgut's characters. Trauma is not confined to a specific historical moment but extends across generations, especially in *The Promise*, which goes against the idea of a clear break after apartheid. In *The Good Doctor*, the broken narrative structure shows what Kostelac (2017) calls "narrative identity", where the form itself shows how the main character feels lost inside. These results support the notion that trauma is fundamental to comprehending post-apartheid identity, as it persistently influences both individual and collective consciousness.

The study also shows how unstable and changing identity is in Galgut's fiction. In line with Bhagat and Singh's (2025) notion of performative identity, characters in these novels navigate their self-conception amid evolving socio-political landscapes, leading to fragmented and provisional identities. Beyer's (2015) observation of masculinity in crisis complicates this further, especially in *The Good Doctor*, where the main character's moral paralysis shows a wider lack of confidence in moral responsibility. In *In a Strange Room*, identity is formed through movement, resonating with Amimo's (2021) concept of mobility and multiplicity; however, this study expands on this viewpoint by illustrating that mobility frequently exacerbates fragmentation instead of alleviating it. Identity, consequently, manifests as a fluid and precarious construct, significantly shaped by historical memory and persistent trauma.

The idea of moral transition is at the heart of these thematic intersections, but it is still not fully understood in post-apartheid South Africa. Galgut's fiction questions happy stories of reconciliation by showing how the so-called "Rainbow Nation" doesn't work, as Di Lillo (2022) points out. The enduring nature of inequality, institutional inertia, and ethical inaction indicates that political transformation has failed to yield significant moral accountability. Białas (2026) notes that Galgut's minimalist narrative style makes moral uncertainty even clearer, letting silence and absence show unresolved tensions. This adds to the ambiguity. As a result, the novels reject ideas of closure and instead show a world where things are always changing, contradictory, and disappointing.

In contributing to postcolonial literary studies, this research offers an integrated analysis that connects memory, trauma, identity, and moral responsibility within a single interpretative framework. It extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how these elements operate collectively rather than independently, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of post-apartheid subjectivity. Additionally, the study enhances trauma and memory studies by illustrating how literary narratives can capture the complexities of psychological and emotional aftermath in ways that transcend purely historical or sociological accounts. Galgut's fiction, in this regard, underscores the crucial role of literature in preserving, interrogating, and reimagining historical memory.

But this study does have some problems. Its emphasis on three chosen novels limits the breadth of analysis, and its dependence on qualitative textual interpretation introduces a measure of subjectivity. Subsequent research may enhance this investigation by exploring a wider array of Galgut's oeuvre or by undertaking comparative analyses with other post-apartheid authors. Interdisciplinary methodologies that integrate history, sociology, or cultural studies may enhance the examination of postcolonial identity and memory.

In conclusion, Galgut's novels provide a profound critique of post-apartheid South Africa by exposing the enduring nature of historical injustices and the intricacies of moral transition. They question simplified stories of progress and reconciliation by showing a more complex and often disturbing picture of a society that is still dealing with its past. These works examine memory, trauma, identity, and ethical ambiguity, affirming that the aftermath of apartheid is not a concluded chapter but an ongoing process—one that literature continues to illuminate with critical depth and insight.



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