

Marginalized “Aphasic”-On the Ekphrasis in Damon Galgut’s “Promise”

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Abstract—In the novel “Promise”, Galgut uses modern ekphrasis to depict the compressed living space of black South Africans through the visualization of scenes and characters, and to depict the forgotten image of “the aphasia” by placing the contradiction between “establishment promises” and “abandonment of promises”. It reflects the tragedy of black women in gender, class, and racial dimensions in South Africa during the transition period, and also expresses the author’s criticism of South Africa’s apartheid rule and reflection on governance after democratic transformation.

Keywords—Damon Galgut, “Promise”, Ekphrasis, Aphasic

I. INTRODUCTION

The Booker Prize-winning novel “The Promise” by South African novelist Damon Galgut is hailed as a “masterpiece” and “a testament to the flourishing of the novel in the 21st century.” The novel employs vivid visual descriptions and ekphrasis, a narrative technique that uses descriptive language to create images, to depict the transformation of a white family in post-apartheid South Africa and the marginalized situation of the black maid, Salome, during this process and address this ongoing struggle for land ownership in South Africa [1]. Galgut considers this work as a “reflection on the political situation in South Africa and its changes” [2]. Through ekphrasis, the novel transforms Salome’s living space and lack of recognition within the family into visual compression and silence, highlighting the triple marginalization of race, gender, and class. This visual narrative strategy not only enhances the visual impact of the central theme of “promises” being made and broken but also silently conveys the cries and injustices of the oppressed groups during South Africa’s democratic transition. This narrative strategy is not only a delicate portrayal of individual tragedy but also a profound critique of apartheid and a reflection on the complexity of the democratization process, as Galgut himself states, “When you write about any character, the implication is to give them a voice” [3]. This paper aims to analyze the subtle presentation of this theme in “The Promise” from the perspective of ekphrasis. Galgut uses “painterly vocabulary” to meticulously depict Salome’s character and her cramped living environment in the hearts of readers, creating a dual representation that intertwines language and images. These visual narratives are not only expressions of sympathy for Salome’s personal tragedy but also profound revelations of the underlying issues during South Africa’s social transition.

II. THE MARGINALIZED LIVING SPACE OF THE ‘APHASIC’: EKPHRASIS IN SCENARIOS

The interplay between the symbolic power of space and the marginalization of individual identity manifests in the physical living space, which not only serves as the material foundation for Salome’s marginalized identity but also visually reflects her limited racial status. The compressed living space poses the primary obstacle pushing Salome towards the fringes of society. In the novel, Salome’s daily life is confined to two opposing spatial scenarios: the mansion of the Swart family, symbolizing white power and class superiority; and the residence she nominally owns but cannot fully control in reality, originally promised to her by Rachel as a gesture of gratitude but eventually becoming a metaphor for her identity dilemma. By juxtaposing these two spaces, the novel profoundly illustrates the contradiction between “promise” and “betrayal of promise.” The Swart mansion, as the origin of the promise, carries Rachel’s gratitude to Salome and her faint hope for racial reconciliation. Meanwhile, the house promised to Salome serves as the material embodiment of the promise, symbolizing the recipient’s expectations for the future and her entire life. However, Salome’s limited role within the Swart household and the family’s ambivalent attitude towards the house as a symbol of the promise complicate the fulfillment of the promise. The symbolic power of space and individual marginalization interact in this process, exacerbating the instability of the promise and hinting at the possibility of betrayal. By repeatedly mentioning “Lombard’s house,” the author not only questions the ownership of space but also reinforces Salome’s marginal position within the power structure. “Space is the foundation for any power operation” [4]. The occupation of space is directly proportional to the possession of power. Through clever spatial arrangement, the author transforms the power mechanism into visual and psychological oppression, constraining Salome and the black female group she represents, stripping them of their voice and identity. This narrative strategy reveals the structural issues of racial oppression in South African society.

In “The Promise,” Damon Galgut employs modern ekphrasis strategies and framing devices to reveal the compression of Salome’s living space amidst the contradiction between “promise” and “betrayal of promise,” portraying her marginalized image in both physical and psychological spaces. Framing devices define and shape physical boundaries, creating clear representational

boundaries within the narrative space. Frames, as abstract concepts of specific objects like doors, windows, and mirrors, focus on the reproduction and perception of the world within the frame in the context of visual art, serving as an indispensable traditional perspective in ekphrasis.

In the novel, Salome's residence, "Lombard's house," and her workplace, "the Swart house," become invisible frames restricting her freedom, shaping her as an appendage of the family, like a silent portrait that can only observe but not participate. By contrasting Salome's life in these two spaces, the novel reproduces visual images in textual form, showcasing her dual marginalized existence. Physically, her residence symbolizes exclusion and isolation; psychologically, even while working at the Swart house, she fails to gain a sense of belonging and self-worth. This marginalization, through the juxtaposition of scenes, constructs an intertwined landscape of "verbal narrative" and "pictorial narrative" in the text, providing readers with a window into racial oppression and individual destinies in South African society. Numerous descriptions of the scenes of Salome's work (the Swart house) can be found in the novel:

In the distance, a common sight in Afrikaner communities: suburban bungalows built with pale red bricks and topped with iron roofs, surrounded by sun-bleached gardens. A climbing frame standing lonely on the vast brown lawn. Concrete bird baths, Wendy houses, and a swing made from half a truck tire [5]. ... It should have been a farm, not a hybrid monster of sorts. But look at the result. A huge, messy building with twenty-four doors to be locked up at night, a graft of multiple styles. Situated in the heart of the prairie, it resembles a drunkard dressed in bizarre attire... The useless land, full of stones... But it belongs to our family, not to others, and within that land lies the breeding ground of power [5].

This paragraph meticulously portrays Salome's workplace and residence, an old-fashioned farmhouse situated in the heart of the prairie. The narrator skillfully employs contrast, juxtaposing the ordinariness of "suburban bungalows" against the grandeur of the "huge building," particularly through the detailed depiction of "twenty-four doors," which not only highlights the impressive scale of the architecture but also creates a visual and psychological tension of vastness and isolation within the expansive natural setting. Notably, Aunt Marina's statement, "It belongs to our family, not to others, and within that land lies the breeding ground of power" [5], is not only a declaration of familial territorial ownership but also a profound revelation of white privilege and power under South Africa's apartheid regime. This phrase constructs a vivid mental image, enabling readers to intuitively sense the Swart family's identity as beneficiaries of the system and their persistence in power. This expression, though not directly addressing racial oppression, allows racial injustice to manifest through its metaphorical and symbolic nature. As for Salome, although mentioned as a member "hired along with the land" [5], seemingly occupying a place within this grand structure, she is actually marginalized and overlooked, her presence nearly obscured. This phenomenon deeply reveals the helplessness and tragedy of individual fates under apartheid, with Salome emerging as a typical victim of this unjust system. Rachel attempts to express emotional bonding by gifting the house,

treating Salome as family, yet in the harsh reality of apartheid, this "promise" appears feeble, and Salome remains unable to shed her label as an "outsider" in the Swart family. Her actual circumstances contrast sharply with Rachel's utopian vision, further emphasizing the profound impact of apartheid on individual destinies.

When Mom died, she was by Mom's bedside, yet everyone seemed to ignore her, clearly treating her as invisible... But Amor could see her through the window, so ultimately, someone did notice she was not invisible [5]; Salome stood by the sink as usual [5], watching him move back and forth along the kitchen counter, taking the stacked plates to the cabinet [5]. The hosts allowed her two minutes in the bathroom to change clothes. She then hung her own clothes in the corner of the storeroom, out of sight [5].

This paragraph elucidates Salome's specific situation within the vast residence with dozens of rooms, centering on her "territory" restricted to the kitchen—a space commonly regarded as a dumping ground for waste. The narrative's repeated mention of "invisible, unseen" constructs a visual metaphor, highlighting Salome's neglected and marginalized state in household chores, thereby reinforcing her transparency within the Swart family. Additionally, her need to use the bathroom to change clothes within a brief period allowed by the hosts, and her clothes hidden in the storeroom corner to avoid being seen, reveal the extreme deprivation and denial of private space, further consolidating her marginal position in the family space. As Foucault states, "Space is an important carrier and foundation for power operations" [4]. For Salome, the large house and its internal spaces serve as containers for the exercise of power by the white family, who marginalize her by controlling the space. Beyond her workplace residence, her living quarters are equally marginalized.

He looked down at the other side of the mountain where he lived, in that crooked little hut, the Lombard family's house [5]. She was dressed like that, sitting on a secondhand armchair (with the stuffing bursting out) at the entrance of her (oh, excuse me, the Lombard's) house [5]. From outside, it was indeed dirty and dangerous, with the ground trampled hard and bare by constant foot traffic, scattered with abandoned items and fragments of furniture. A few chickens pecked at the dust... The house itself appeared listless and dazed, with black eyes staring blankly, and the front door gaping wide open [5]. On the other end were two rooms with almost no furniture. One wall was covered with photographs cut from magazines and pasted with putty, depicting beautiful natural scenery and exotic cruise ships... Amor looked around at the cracked plaster. The cracked cement floor. The missing window panes. This was the house [5].

The description of Salome's living quarters—the crooked hut, the secondhand armchair with bursting stuffing, the bare ground, the cracked floor, the dusty and dim interior—embodies Galgut's photographic thinking akin to cinematic storytelling. The door of the hut, "gaping wide open," serves as a frame connecting the crooked exterior with the dilapidated interior, prompting readers to visually reconstruct and emotionally relate to Salome's loneliness. The author employs lighting, color construction, framing, and central composition from photographic techniques as the focus of visual narrative in depicting the exterior and interior of

Salome's house, using dim lighting and subdued colors to evoke a sense of dilapidation, desolation, and loneliness. Furthermore, parenthetical content in the novel, such as "Excuse me, the Lombard's" [5], reveals the author's irony towards the Swart family's broken promises and sympathy for Salome's forgotten and marginalized plight. The Swart family's delay in fulfilling their promise to Salome reflects moral conflicts among family members and mirrors South African society's struggles with racial reconciliation and social justice.

In the novel "The Promise," the author meticulously constructs an intrinsic connection between the scene's spatial setting and the core theme of "promises," reflecting Salome's marginalized identity between "promising" and "breaking promises" through contrasting the different spaces where the elements of "promises" reside. The spatial compression is not only the material basis for Salome's social marginalization but also a symbol of her socially restricted status due to race. According to Long Diyong's view, "Among various types of buildings, residences, due to their closest relationship with humans, often become 'spatial images' used by narrators to characterize characters" [6]. In the novel, the luxurious mansion of the Swart family contrasts sharply with Salome's cramped hut, further exacerbating her emotional isolation in physical space. Within the Swart mansion, Salome occupies only a small space in the kitchen, often overlooked, and this spatial narrative makes readers sense the difficulty in fulfilling "promises" and gradually exposes Salome's "silenced" state. As a black woman, Salome has become an abandoned member under apartheid, evident from the derogatory term "floppies" [5] used by whites to refer to blacks. Galgut, through his unique visual artistic perspective, employs image-laden language and visual narrative techniques, converting three spatial visual narratives from visual art to linguistic art, closely linking Salome's silence, marginalized state, and the oppressive atmosphere conveyed by her surroundings, profoundly revealing the intrinsic connection between social injustice and individual fates.

III. VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZED "APHASIC": EKPHRASIS OF CHARACTERS

In "The Promise", the character of Salome profoundly unveils the intricate tensions within familial power structures, racial identity, and gender roles. The Swart family members' ambiguous attitudes and evasive behaviors toward promises not only reflect their denial of Salome's identity but also reinforce her marginalized status under the dual oppressions of race and gender. Salome's identity is contingent upon the family members' fulfillment of promises, particularly in the interstice between Amor and Anton, where her social standing appears especially fragile and unstable. Through sophisticated ekphrasis strategies, especially the nuanced portrayals from Amor's perspective, the novel vividly recreates Salome's visual image and the intricate web of her social relations. Anton's character functions as a prism, refracting the moral dilemmas between promise-keeping and betrayal, as well as society's contradictory attitudes toward black women's identities. Galgut, through a complex narrative architecture, profoundly dissects the marginalization and aphasia of black women during South Africa's apartheid era. Although Salome is not directly

presented through language or soliloquy, the direct and indirect narrations of her appearance, attire, and demeanor collectively mold a typical image of a marginalized figure. Her story, through the transformation of visual images and the condensed expression of words, reveals the tragic fate under South Africa's apartheid, patriarchy, and class oppression, making her a victim of a specific historical period.

As a silent "other," Salome is marginalized within the Swart family's male-dominated discourse system, a phenomenon that mirrors the gender power dynamics in ekphrasis. In ekphrastic competitions, women are often depicted as beautiful symbols of irrationality, while men are endowed with rational authority. This manifestation of gender politics is a concrete practice of what Michel refers to as "paragonal" [7] ekphrastic competition, where, in the struggle for dominance between language and image, women are often relegated to a passive position, while men naturally assume the initiative. Ekphrasis exhibits a distinct gender bias: women are frequently portrayed as beautiful, irrational images, while men are naturally seen as symbols of rationality [8]. Within the Swart family, white male members hold the decisive power over the fulfillment of promises, while the promises and adherence of female members are marginalized; in black families, male members similarly possess more space for speech, further highlighting women's disadvantages in the gender power structure. Despite having been integrated into the family for decades, Salome is still regarded as an "invisible person" and a "maid," her existence described as "insignificant," making her a continuous object of the family's scrutiny, a quintessential portrayal of the "aphasia" state of black women in South Africa. The gender power dynamics in ekphrasis are also reflected in the differences in speech spaces within white and black families. Manie and Anton, as white men, hold the decisive power over the fulfillment of promises, while Rachel's promises and Amor's persistence are marginalized. In black families, Lucas has more speech space compared to women, a contrast that underscores women's disadvantages in the gender power structure. Through stream-of-consciousness techniques, Galgut presents Salome's image through Amor's perspective. Amor, as the "moral center," provides readers with a window into the characters' inner worlds, revealing the complex socio-cultural roots of Salome's marginalization. The presentation of Salome's marginalized status stems not only from gender and racial oppression within the social context but is also closely linked to the contradictions in Anton's own personality. Amor's role offers readers an objective perspective, allowing them to discern the most authentic aspects of the characters and understand the underlying reasons for Salome's marginalization through her gaze. For example, Amor's meticulous observations of Salome in the text:

The sturdy woman is wearing old clothes that Mom gave her years ago. A headscarf is tied around her hair. She is barefoot, with dirty and cracked soles. Her hands also bear scars, bruises, and scratches left from countless bumps. It's said she's the same age as Mom, forty, but she looks older. It's hard to say exactly how old she is. In daily life, her face shows little expression, as if wearing a mask, like a statue [5].

This description vividly showcases Salome's scarred, weary, and aged appearance, echoing the Swart family members' indifferent attitudes toward her. Ekphrasis in *Promise* serves multiple functions, acting as both the beginning and foreshadowing of plot development, while profoundly revealing character relationships and social realities. The metaphor of Salome "as if wearing a mask, like a statue" [5] not only mirrors her constraints and silence in life but also alludes to the vulnerability and powerlessness of women in the context of South African society. This numb, silent image not only foreshadows the unfulfilled promise but also symbolizes the incomplete realization of South Africa's promises in 1994, becoming a central image of the novel's theme of "promise." As a central figure in the theme of "promise," Salome's image, although not directly revealing her inner world, resonates indirectly in the text through flexible shifts in narrative perspectives and the laying of subtle clues. The indirect imagery of Salome enriches the text's layers, enhancing its visual impact and imaginative space. The variability of the narrator's perspective allows Salome to present a multidimensional image from different perspectives, particularly under Anton's observation, where she is reconstructed as a visual symbol. Anton, as the eldest son of the Swart family, whose upbringing echoes the realization of the "Rainbow Nation" promise [5], reflects the contradictions in the psychological state of the white South African community in the post-apartheid era. Salome's "reflection" and "back view" are not merely visual symbols but also profound symbols. "Shadow elements" such as "reflections" and "back views" carry rich symbolic meanings in painting: "Shadows often symbolize existence, death, vigilance, and unease [9]." The reflection on the windowpane, juxtaposed with the original figure, accentuates her presence and existence, while also hinting at her melancholy and helplessness as a marginalized family member. The "elusive back view," in turn, symbolizes the complexity of Salome's inner world and her silent protest against injustice. The use of these visual symbols lays the groundwork for the development of Salome's story of whether she will obtain the promised house, with Anton's perception of Salome's shadow and his indifferent attitude setting the stage for the story's turning point. Through the character of Salome, Galgut not only showcases the complex facets of marginalized figures but also reveals the deep-seated impacts of racial and gender issues in South African society. Salome, as a silent "other," whose image and fate become significant carriers for reflecting on political governance and the apartheid system, with ekphrasis serving as a key technique for her to express symbolism and reveal themes.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE BEHIND THE PRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZED "APHASIC": THE ROLE OF EKPHRASIS

In "The Promise", the discursive potential of Ekphrasis is manifested through the scenes and character portrayals in the text, revealing that the survival dilemma of "marginalized voiceless individuals" stems from the oppression faced by black women in the intersection of race, gender, and class. "Apartheid," a South African Dutch term, originally referred to institutionalized racial segregation, oppression, and exploitation. It is not only the name of the racial policy of the white South African regime in 1948 but also a historical

period that profoundly influenced South African society. Under this system, black groups, especially women, faced challenges in identity recognition and social orientation. They struggled between moral ethics and survival desires, with their voices and histories often marginalized by official discourse. Damon Galgut's ekphrasis technique, by depicting the living scenes of black women, showcases their double marginalization within the apartheid system. This narrative not only criticizes the injustice of apartheid but also reflects the complexity of South African society during its democratic transition.

In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak raises the question of "the right to speak for the subaltern classes, especially the subaltern women" [10], which coincides with the character portrayals in Galgut's work, revealing their silenced state in society. The ekphrasis in the novel, through the combination of visual art and text, provides a means of self-expression for marginalized groups. Galgut employs this narrative technique not only to showcase the plight of individuals under the breach of trust by the state but also to express his profound aspirations for racial reconciliation and social justice.

In "The Promise", Galgut delicately intertwines the fate of individuals with the democratization process in South Africa through the Swart family's promise to Salome and its subsequent betrayal and fulfillment. The novel not only showcases the micro-story of the Swart family but also profoundly reflects the macro-crisis of South African society at the racial, political, and gender levels. The title "The Promise" itself contains double meanings and irony, referring both to the family's personal promise to Salome and metaphorically to the social promise made during South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, a promise that held great hope but was not fully realized. Galgut bluntly points out the losses and challenges in South Africa's democratization process, stating: "This was the promise of South Africa in 1994. We had high hopes for it. There was a real opportunity to change the country, but it was wasted. Where we are now, economically and morally, is not what most of us expected [3]." This critical narrative provides readers with a perspective to understand South Africa's racial conflicts, the developmental dilemmas faced by black people after democratization, and the escalation of racial tensions. The apartheid system in the novel is the root cause of the deep-seated opposition between the black and white races. Through the depiction of marginalized characters like Salome, using racially discriminatory terms like "girl" and "Samoan nigra," and narrating techniques that associate blacks with negative imagery, Galgut showcases the profound contradictions of the apartheid era. At the same time, the novel also reveals that the democratization process did not significantly improve the living conditions of blacks as expected but may have exacerbated racial tensions. In the post-apartheid era, the story of Salome's son Lucas becomes a victim of social violence and racial grievances. His change from calling whites "boss" marks the awakening of black subjectivity, but this awakening has not been effectively echoed by real-world developments, instead deepening racial conflicts. Meanwhile, Lucas's attitude towards the Swart family's promise indicates that the delayed fulfillment is actually a betrayal. Lucas's tragic fate is a microcosm of

South Africa's unfulfilled political promises, reflecting Galgut's profound criticism of apartheid and his reflection on the democratization process.

Beyond his profound criticism of South Africa's apartheid system, the author also hints at the potential hope and possibilities within the democratization process. Amor, as the only family member with a conscience left, successfully fulfills the promise her mother made to Salome over three decades ago—returning the precious land to Salome when all other family members have left. The name Amor, inspired by the ancient Roman god of love Amor, and her virtuous actions, to some extent, reflect Galgut's aspiration for transcending real-world constraints. While kindness and benevolent actions may not be enough to heal South Africa's deep wounds alone, they are undoubtedly essential elements in the process of wound healing. Amor's final embrace with Salome "weaves an emotional bond that transcends material interests [5]". Their cross-racial, cross-class, and cross-generational affection adds a rare warm touch to the novel, transcending the superficial meaning of house-giving and promises. Subsequently, the author cleverly uses rain as an ekphrasis, depicting the falling rain curtain as a visual scene before the readers' eyes, "The rain came, like a cheap symbol of redemption in the story" [5], assigning the visual element of rain with the profound connotation of "redeeming rain." For everyone (including Salome), the rain falls fairly on everyone, regardless of race, class, or gender. It gently passes over the graves of each member of the Swart family, symbolizing a kind of "redemption" for the deceased. Although the deceased are forever etched in the tumultuous period of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democratization, a time marked by government distrust and hindered national development, the living will continue to move forward with genuine redemption. It is this redemption that reveals Galgut's deep expectations and visions for racial reconciliation and the country's future development in South Africa.

V. CONCLUSION

The book "The Promise" employs in-depth verbal imagery narrative of the character Salome to precisely dissect the harsh reality of triple oppression—gender, class, and race—that Black Women in South Africa faced during the country's social transition. Through meticulous depictions of Salome's daily life and work environment, the author skillfully concretizes her marginalized existence, profoundly showcasing her unspoken silence and struggles under multiple oppressions. This article focuses on two major dimensions: scene construction and character portrayal. By integrating the conflict between "promising" and "breaking

promises," it delves into the artistic characteristics of this verbal imagery narrative and its underlying significance. The character of Salome is not only portrayed as a direct victim of apartheid but also emerges as a vivid symbol of social injustice in the democratization process of the post-apartheid era. Her image, vividly recreated through the author's carefully selected "pictorial vocabulary," possesses both "visual impact" and "imaginative extensibility," demonstrating the unique charm of verbal imagery narrative. This creative approach not only reflects the author's profound criticism of South Africa's apartheid history and deep reflection on the democratization process but also subtly conveys a tender hope for the future of the country and its people between the lines.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jiang Lifu and Liu Wenwen jointly developed the research framework; Liu Wenwen wrote the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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