

## *Original Paper*

# A Literature Review on Damon Galgut and His Works

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### **Abstract**

*Damon Galgut is an important representative of contemporary South African literature. Over the past 20 years (2003-2023), scholars both internationally and domestically have conducted extensive research on his works from multiple perspectives, covering aspects such as socio-historical contexts, narrative techniques, and identity. These studies have revealed the multi-dimensional value of Galgut's works. While international research started relatively late but developed rapidly, focusing on his insights into South Africa's post-apartheid society and his unique narrative style, domestic research has gradually emerged in recent years, mainly concentrating on his narrative features and thematic ideas. Overall, despite the diverse perspectives, there is still room for further exploration. Future research could further explore the uniqueness and ideological depth of Galgut's creations and attempt comparative studies with other literary masters to enrich the research horizon of South African literature.*

### **Keywords**

*Damon Galgut, south african literature, post-apartheid society, narrative techniques and identity*

## **1. Introduction**

Damon Galgut (1963–) is a renowned South African novelist and playwright. Galgut began his writing career at the age of 17 and has since published nine novels. His representative works include *The Good Doctor* (2003), *In a Strange Room* (2010), and *The Promise* (2021). Galgut is adept at focusing on the social changes, racial relations, and complexities of individual identity in post-apartheid South Africa through his unique narrative style and modernist techniques. His works reflect a profound contemplation on historical memory and moral responsibility. His novel *The Promise* won the 2021 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

As an important voice in South African literature, Damon Galgut's works have not only sparked extensive discussions within South Africa but have also earned high recognition in the international literary community. His continuous focus on the social realities of South Africa provides a unique literary perspective for understanding identity, memory, and reconciliation in the post-colonial era. His rich experiences, diverse themes, and unique style have attracted in-depth research from scholars both domestically and internationally. This paper aims to review the current research and achievements on

Galgut's literary works at home and abroad, with the hope of providing references and insights for future studies, further promoting a deeper interpretation and understanding of Galgut's works, and enriching the research horizon of South African literature. On this basis, the paper will systematically review the research findings of scholars at home and abroad, offering valuable inspiration and direction for future research.

## 2. International Research on Damon Galgut's Works

The international academic research on Damon Galgut and his works started relatively late. Although Galgut's writing career has spanned many years, his international influence has only gradually emerged in the 21st century. His works *The Good Doctor* and *In a Strange Room* were shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2004 and 2010, respectively, and the eventual awarding of the Booker Prize to *The Promise* in 2021 brought him into the spotlight on a broader scale. In recent years, the research and attention on him in the literary world have reached an unprecedented level, with relevant studies increasing and deepening. At present, international research is mainly focused on journal articles, with particular attention to his three representative works: *The Good Doctor*, *In a Strange Room*, and *The Promise*. The research content covers several aspects:

### 2.1 Exploring South Africa's Social Transformation

The novel *The Good Doctor* by Damon Galgut, set against the backdrop of contemporary South African society, vividly portrays the transformation of South Africa from apartheid to a modern democratic society through the microcosm of a remote hospital. A review in *The Lancet* (2003) pointed out that the hospital in *The Good Doctor* symbolizes the lingering issues of apartheid, while the relationship between the protagonists, Frank Eloff and Lawrence Waters, reflects the clash between old and new values. Ken Barris (2005) analyzed how *The Good Doctor* projects the political context of the apartheid era into the post-apartheid period, but argued that its overemphasis on the past and simplification of reality prevent it from being fully categorized as a post-apartheid work. Mar á Jes ús and Cabarcos-Traseira (2005) explored *The Good Doctor* from historical and contemporary perspectives, suggesting that the characters represent different historical views and visions for the future. They emphasized the importance of confronting history as a key to building South Africa's future. Together, these studies reveal how *The Good Doctor* uses literary metaphors and narrative techniques to explore the challenges and dilemmas faced by South African society during its transition, highlighting the profound impact of historical legacies on contemporary society.

In addition to this, Damon Galgut's profound dissection of South African society has also sparked the research interest of many scholars, especially in the exploration of issues related to race, identity, and social transformation. Galgut's novels *The Impostor* and *The Promise* delve into the social transformation and individual predicaments of post-apartheid South Africa through rich symbolism and profound themes. Michela Borzaga (2020) analyzed the symbolic significance of the "house" in *The Impostor*, pointing out that the house is not only central to the plot but also symbolizes the characters'

psychological trauma and the loss of historical memory. It reflects the inner conflicts of the characters as they confront the past and reality, as well as the socio-economic and political context of post-apartheid South Africa.

After the novel *The Promise* won the Booker Prize, many scholars conducted in-depth research on it. Aretha Phiri (2023) analyzed the complex relationship between race, shame, and moral responsibility in the novel, exploring the intricate dynamics between white and black South Africans in the post-apartheid era. Yin Gao (2023) approached the novel from the perspective of affect studies, examining the emotions of shame, anger, and compassion exhibited by the Swart family throughout the promise-making process. Gao argued that these emotions are influenced by South Africa's gender, racial, and class politics. Hesna Laboudi (2024) analyzed the ideology of racial superiority and its resulting dilemmas in the novel from a racial perspective, discussing the impact of race on South African society and individuals in the post-apartheid period. Using Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject" and Homi Bhabha's theories of "representation" and "stereotype", Laboudi analyzed how the character Amor's story challenges racial norms and seeks a "third space" beyond the binary opposition of black and white. The novel reflects the complexity of South Africa's racial politics through the decline of a family and the stories of individuals, exploring the possibilities and challenges of achieving racial equality.

These studies collectively reveal Galgut's profound reflections on South Africa's social transformation, highlighting the struggles of individuals caught between history and reality, as well as the far-reaching impact of race, gender, and class issues on South African society.

## 2.2 Exploring Narrative Techniques and Themes

Damon Galgut is renowned for his seamless shifts in perspective and his masterful narrative techniques, making narrative studies of his works a focal point for many scholars. In his article, Mike Marais (2015) analyzed how Galgut explores concepts such as community, nationalism, friendship, and the future through his narrative structure and thematic content, offering critical reflections on the "new South Africa". Marais pointed out that the structural characteristics of *The Good Doctor*, such as its incompleteness and fragmentation, imply an attitude towards the future—one of waiting that is not constrained by preconditions. Mathilda Slabbert (2019) examined the novel *Arctic Summer* from the perspectives of the "community of feeling" and "emotional narrative form." Her article analyzed how the novel, through its narrative form and aesthetic style, depicts the creative and temperamental connections between Galgut and E.M. Forster, as well as how narrative and style forge emotional links. The article also explored themes of gender politics, friendship, and emotion within the novel, and how these themes create a trans-temporal community of feeling both within and beyond the text.

Damon Galgut's novel *The Promise* has garnered significant critical acclaim and extensive discussion due to its unique narrative style and profound exploration of complex social issues in South Africa. In her review of *The Promise*, Maureen Scharper (2022) analyzed how Galgut integrates South Africa's racial issues, family disputes, and religious conflicts into the novel through his distinctive narrative

style and structure, thereby creating a literary style reminiscent of William Faulkner. She noted that Galgut employs an omniscient perspective and a stream-of-consciousness-like narrative technique to delve into the characters' inner worlds and complex social relationships, revealing the hypocrisy and contradictions within human nature. Andy Carolin (2023) also mentioned that many newspaper reviews of *The Promise* focused on the novel's formal innovation, particularly its reconstruction of the third-person narrative perspective and its profound exploration of issues related to race, land, and justice. Maya Jasanoff, chair of the Booker Prize judging panel, emphasized in the press release announcing Galgut's win that the novel explores the broad metaphorical significance of "promise" in contemporary South Africa. She also highlighted its narrative style as echoing the classic modernist works of the early 20th century, noting that the novel offers a study of identity and masculinity in its characters.

While addressing South African social issues, Damon Galgut's works constantly challenge and redefine the concept of the "South African novel" through unique narrative techniques and reflections on literary traditions. Elleke Boehmer (2023) analyzed *The Promise* from the perspective of "national allegory," examining how its narrative style and themes reflect the complexities of South Africa's racial issues and national identity. Boehmer argued that Galgut's work, to some extent, conforms to the archetypal characteristics of the "South African novel"—a national allegory dealing with race and land issues—but also continuously deconstructs and challenges this archetype. She further explored how the novel, while depicting the social and political realities of post-apartheid South Africa, reflects on and redefines the brand of the "South African novel" through its unique narrative techniques and subversion of traditional allegory. Marek Pawlicki (2024), approaching from a narratological perspective and taking *The Promise* as his subject, combined Elleke Boehmer's postcolonial poetics with Derek Attridge's theory of resistance to examine how Galgut's novels accommodate and resist reading patterns associated with third-person narration, particularly the use of principles of detachment and narrative omniscience.

### 2.3 Exploring the Theme of "Identity and Identification"

Damon Galgut's works profoundly reflect the issue of identity in post-apartheid South Africa through a variety of narrative techniques and thematic explorations. Identity is a recurring theme in his works. Renate Lenz and Marita Wenzel (2016) analyzed how *The Good Doctor* examines the identity of white South Africans in the post-apartheid era through its narrative framework and themes, and how they seek their place amid social, political, and moral challenges. Galgut employs postmodern narrative techniques such as intertextuality and irony to reference and transform earlier texts, thereby reconstructing and interpreting them in different contexts. Sofia Kostelac (2017) explored Galgut and his novel *The Good Doctor* from the theme of "the construction of narrative identity," analyzing how the novel examines the complexity and uncertainty of white South African identity in the post-apartheid era through its narrative style and characters' self-reflection, and how the construction of narrative identity helps to confront and understand personal and societal changes. Maureen Amimo (2021)

examined Galgut and his work *In a Strange Room* from the perspective of “travel and the construction of multiplicity.” She analyzed how travel, as both an internal and external activity, helps the protagonist redefine the self by crossing and reflecting on boundaries, revealing the multiplicity and fluidity of identity.

#### 2.4 Exploring Damon Galgut’s Literary Creation and Influence

Damon Galgut’s works break through some traditional themes and narrative styles in South African literature. He does not confine himself to the mode of anti-apartheid struggle literature, but instead shifts his focus to the more complex and diverse social realities of the post-apartheid era, injecting new vitality and dimensions of thought into South African literature. His works enrich the themes and forms of expression in South African literature and, together with other South African writers, contribute to a diverse and multi-dimensional South African literary landscape.

In 1984, Damon Galgut completed his debut novel, *A Sinless Season*, which was successfully published when he was just 19 years old. This achievement quickly earned him initial acclaim. The following year, a review of the novel praised it for its plot, intensity, and imaginative power, comparing it to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. A review in *The Times* noted that in his 1995 work, *The Quarry*, Galgut combined the neatness and conciseness of J. M. Coetzee, with every sentence standing out. Although these early works did not yet bring Galgut widespread international attention, they undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for his future literary endeavors, accumulating valuable experience and inspiration. And then, Russell-Walling Eadward (2003) analyzed how Galgut and other new-generation South African writers transcended traditional protest literature in the post-apartheid era, exploring new themes and narrative styles, as well as their status and influence in the international literary community. Claire Messud (2004), in a review of *The Good Doctor*, compared this novel with Galgut’s other works and those of some South African writers, such as J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, highlighting the similarities and differences in themes and character development, which further underscored the uniqueness of Galgut’s work and his place in South African literature. In 2010, *In a Strange Room* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *The Irish Times* commented that in this work, Galgut explores a self, his own self. The “strange room” in the title is not a physical room; instead, it refers to the dreadful space within a person’s mind, the extent of whose dread depends on the individual.

In Sofia Lucy Kostelac’s 2014 doctoral thesis, she provided an in-depth evaluation of Damon Galgut and his works in the context of South African literature (2014). She examined the vicissitudes of his critical reception, which have seen him celebrated, ignored, and even explicitly discounted as a noteworthy South African author. Kostelac argued that Galgut’s works represent shifting degrees of discordance and concordance with an epochal metanarrative of South African literature and the progressive transformation of the field that it implies.

Damon Galgut’s works demonstrate an engagement with and dialogue of classical literary traditions in his creative writing, while also striving to carve out his own unique literary positioning and modes of

expression. Cornwell (2019) examined Galgut's novel *The Quarry* from the perspective of intertextuality, analyzing how it is influenced by Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The author pointed out that *The Quarry* clearly borrows from *Blood Meridian* in terms of narrative style and language. Although Galgut attempts to form his own unique narrative voice through "absorption and transformation", his text still fails to completely break free from McCarthy's influence. By exploring this intertextual relationship, the article reveals how Galgut engages in a dialogue with literary traditions in his writing and attempts to find new modes of expression within South African literature. Slabbert (2019) also argued that *Arctic Summer* reaffirms Galgut's status as a "marginal author" in terms of theme, form, and narrative approach, and makes an innovative contribution to South African literary culture, transcending the apartheid perspective and the particularities of South African life.

### 2.5 Exploring Masculinity from a Gender Perspective

In the majority of Damon Galgut's works, the protagonists are male, and the themes of the stories are unfolded through these male characters. Therefore, many scholars have conducted research on his works from a gender perspective. The portrayal of male characters and their masculine qualities is an important subject of study in Galgut's works. M. Crous (2010) explored the expression of masculinity and the subtle relationships between two white male characters in *The Good Doctor*, pointing out that under certain circumstances, heterosexual men may develop non-explicit homosexual intimacy. Carola Beyer (2015) comprehensively examined masculinity in Galgut's works in her master's thesis, covering topics such as manliness in the military, male friendship, and gender relations. She argued that the masculinity of these characters is fraught with conflict and ambiguity, and that with the collapse of the apartheid system, patriarchy and machismo are deconstructed in his works. Andy Carolin (2023) analyzed the decline of white male masculinity in *The Promise* from a gender perspective, emphasizing the changes in gender characteristics during the social transition in South Africa. He believed that the depiction of white male masculinity in the novel is a form of negation, revealing its lack of depth and strength. These studies collectively reveal the complexity and dynamic changes of masculinity in Galgut's works, and demonstrate the profound transformation of gender norms during the social transition in South Africa.

### 3. Domestic Research on Damon Galgut's Works

The domestic academic community's research on Galgut and his works also started relatively late, with attention beginning to increase only after his works were nominated for the Booker Prize. Although the number of related research papers that can currently be retrieved is limited, with only 16 in total, these studies have already focused on the three important works *The Good Doctor*, *In a Strange Room*, and *The Promise*. It is worth noting that among these 16 papers, only three are master's theses, two of which specifically conducted translation research on *The Promise*, while the rest are all journal articles. The content of these studies is extensive, mainly covering the following aspects:

### 3.1 Exploring Narrative Style and Thematic Depth

Damon Galgut's works, characterized by their unique narrative style and profound thematic depth, have attracted numerous scholars to conduct in-depth research and interpretations from various perspectives. Domestic scholars, in particular, have focused on the narrative techniques of his works, attempting to uncover more insights into literary creation and social reality.

After *In a Strange Room* was nominated for the Booker Prize, Qu Jie (2012) took *In a Strange Room* as the research object and explored the narrative characteristics and thematic depth of the work from multiple dimensions. She co-authored *In Pursuit and Loss* with Guo Guoliang, providing a detailed critique of the work. Additionally, she analyzed the uncertainty of the work from aspects such as language, plot, and theme, and revealed its postmodern qualities from the perspective of narrative viewpoint. Qu Jie is one of the earliest domestic scholars to research Galgut's works. Her research not only demonstrates the complexity of Galgut's works but also reveals his innovations and breakthroughs in narrative, laying the foundation for subsequent studies.

There was no research on the subject for the next few years until the publication of *The Promise*. Zheng Menghuai (2023) explored the transition in Galgut's works from racial liberation to the construction of social moral rationality, and then to borderless narration from a unique perspective. This transition not only reflects Galgut's keen grasp and profound reflection on the contemporary themes of the African continent through an "African vision", but also demonstrates South African literature's "global vision" in the new era, which is rooted in Africa and looks to the world. This research broadens our understanding of Galgut's works, showing that they have significance beyond South Africa and hold broader global relevance. Shi Hongju (2024) analyzed the postmodernist narrative techniques used in *The Promise* from the perspective of the farm's spatiotemporal narrative structure. She pointed out that the novel employs shifting narrative viewpoints, multiple narrative voices, psychological introspection, and metafictional narration, which lead the narrator to constantly question the various narrative voices and deconstruct the authenticity of the story. This narrative approach not only aligns with postmodernist characteristics but also creates the "cognitive mapping aesthetic" advocated by postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson, allowing readers to form a cognitive understanding of South African society during the transition period through fragmented narration. Shi's research reveals the high complexity and profundity of Galgut's narrative techniques and his adept use of postmodernist narrative strategies.

And then, in this year, Xu Lei (2024) also took *The Promise* as the research object, starting from the perspective of omniscient narration. Through the unique viewpoint of the "omniscient narrator" in the text, she explored the creative characteristics and intentions of the work in depth. She pointed out that Galgut, through the perspective of the omniscient narrator, demonstrates a profound understanding of a unique response between realism and postmodernism. This narrative approach not only enriches the layers of the work but also enables readers to understand the complexity of South African society from a more macroscopic perspective.

### 3.2 Exploring Thematic Ideas and Social Issues

Damon Galgut's works, characterized by their profound social insights and unique literary value, have become an important window for studying South African literature and its social context. In recent years, scholars have conducted in-depth research and interpretations of his works from various perspectives, revealing their significance during South Africa's period of social transformation. Peng Xiu (2010), in her analysis titled "When Exactly Does Dawn Arrive?", delved into the thematic ideas conveyed in *The Good Doctor*, revealing the arduous process of reform and the exposure and questioning of the hypocrisy of the South African government. This work, through its unique subject matter, showcases the social changes in South Africa under the new era context, reflecting the dilemmas faced during the country's period of social transformation. Lin Xingyu (2022), in his book review of *The Promise*, revealed how the novel uses the promise and betrayal between a South African white family and a black maid to reflect the historical changes in South African society, the evolution of racial relations, and the unfinished business of political promises. He argues that Galgut's novel engages in a cross-generational dialogue with other renowned South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee, jointly exploring South Africa's racial and land issues. These works not only reflect the historical scars left by apartheid but also provide a profound analysis of the social realities in the post-apartheid era.

And then, Jiang Meng (2023) provided a profound interpretation of the theme of "death" in *The Promise*, arguing that it symbolizes both "destruction" and "rebirth" in the text, echoing South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. She elaborated on the theme from four aspects: the scars of racial conflict, the decline of racial domination, the chaos during the transition period, and the hope for a just and promising future. This analysis revealed the profound connotations of the theme of "death" and praised the "Ubuntu" spirit, which embodies the concept of a "community with a shared future". The Ubuntu spirit, rooted in African traditional values, emphasizes the close connections and mutual care among people, advocating for unity that transcends racial, cultural, and social differences. Jiang Hui (2023) conducted an in-depth analysis of Galgut's literary creation from the perspective of his personal experiences and the historical context, with a particular focus on the thematic ideas and main characters of the novel *The Promise*. He pointed out that Galgut's works not only reflect South Africa's racial issues but also reveal the complexity and contradictions of South African society during the period of transformation through delicate narrative techniques. Shan Minmin (2024), in her master's thesis, used *The Good Doctor* as the research text and applied postcolonial trauma theory to explore the different ways in which the novel depicts the trauma of both white and black people. She argued that the work can inspire readers to reflect deeply on the situation of black people and further promote discussions on South Africa's racial issues.

These studies not only demonstrate the literary value of Galgut's works but also reveal their profound significance in exploring South Africa's social issues. Through the analysis of these works, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of South Africa's history and reality, as well as the challenges and



opportunities it faces during its transformation.

### 3.3 Exploring Literary Creation and Research Value

In recent years, Damon Galgut's literary creation and its research value have been extensively explored and widely recognized. In 2023, Professor Andrew van der Vries conducted a high-level interview with Galgut, which was meticulously organized and translated by Professors Wang Jinhui and Hu Xiaoran. This interview provided valuable insights into Galgut's creative background and experiences. Zheng Menghuai (2022) analyzed Galgut's novel creation from a literary perspective, suggesting that it presents three dimensions: "witnessing change, deconstructing morality, and analyzing interpersonal relationships." He pointed out that Galgut's exploration of non-realistic themes has showcased the unique charm and broad prospects of South African literature in the new era. This creative dimension not only reflects Galgut's keen insight into South Africa's social transformation but also his profound analysis of human nature, social morality, and interpersonal relationships.

These studies have provided important references for a deeper understanding of Galgut's creative style and ideological connotations, and have laid a solid foundation for further promoting the research and development of South African literature.

### 3.4 Exploring the Research Value of Translation

In recent years, Damon Galgut's literary works have garnered extensive attention in the field of translation studies. His unique narrative style and rich cultural connotations provide ample material for both translation practice and theoretical research. Cui Liyuan (2023) conducted a study on the translation strategies of dialogue in English novels from the perspective of communicative translation theory, using the third part of Galgut's novel *The Promise* as the research object. Her research explored how to accurately and naturally translate the dialogue in English novels into Chinese under the guidance of communicative translation theory, thereby reducing reading barriers for Chinese readers and enabling them to better understand the novel's content and the cultural background of South Africa. Yu Haowen (2023) focused on the translation of pronouns in English novels from the perspective of Skopos Theory, also using *The Promise* as the research object. His paper pointed out that *The Promise* features a unique narrative style that breaks away from the traditional focus on a single central character, employing a multi-perspective narrative approach. This results in frequent and flexible shifts in pronouns, posing challenges for translation.

It is evident that Galgut's works hold significant value for translation studies, offering excellent textual subjects for research in literary translation, particularly in the translation of novels.

## 4. Characteristics of Domestic and International Research

In summary, the extensive research on Damon Galgut and his works both domestically and internationally has shown an increasing trend in both quantity and depth.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the research on Galgut largely focuses on his three well-known works—*The Good Doctor*, *In a Strange Room*, and *The Promise*. These works have become the core of

research due to their profound insights into South Africa's social transformation, unique narrative styles, and explorations of themes such as race, gender, and identity. However, his other works, especially the earlier ones, have not yet received sufficient attention.

Secondly, most studies approach Galgut's works from the perspective of narratology, analyzing their narrative techniques, structural innovations, and shifts in point of view. Meanwhile, research on thematic content also holds an important position, especially in terms of reflecting on South Africa's social realities in the post-apartheid era, analyzing racial relations, and exploring issues of identity. These studies have revealed the multidimensional value of Galgut's works but have touched less on other potential research dimensions, such as literary style and cross-cultural impact. Foreign research is more diverse in its use of theories, covering postcolonial theory, affect studies, gender studies, and narratological theories. Domestic research started relatively late but has gradually gained momentum in recent years, focusing mainly on his narrative features and thematic ideas. The studies are mostly concentrated on the three works *The Good Doctor*, *In a Strange Room*, and *The Promise*, and are primarily in the form of journal articles.

Future research should strengthen the study of Galgut's early works to gain a more comprehensive understanding of his creative trajectory and stylistic evolution. In addition, in-depth analysis of his short story collections and less-studied works will help reveal the diversity and complexity of his writing. Given the rich cross-cultural connotations of Galgut's works, future research could explore their reception and dissemination in different cultural contexts from a cross-cultural perspective. Meanwhile, by integrating theories from multiple disciplines such as postcolonial theory, gender studies, and affect studies, further exploration of the ideological depth and artistic value of his works can be achieved. Lastly, there are many similarities and differences between Galgut's works and those of other South African literary masters (such as J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer) in terms of themes, narrative styles, and ideological connotations. Future research could conduct systematic comparative studies to reveal his unique position within the South African literary tradition and his dialogic relationship with other literary traditions.

## 5. Conclusion

With Damon Galgut's frequent award wins and the growing prominence of South African literature on the global stage, there remains vast room and significant value for further research not only on Galgut and his works, but also on his place within the broader context of South African English-language literary creation. Future studies could explore in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner the unique features of Galgut's writing and the profound ideas it conveys. Comparative studies with the works of other literary masters could also be conducted to uncover more commonalities and distinctive values. Such research would not only help us gain a fuller understanding of Galgut's literary contributions but also allow for a deeper exploration of the developmental trajectory and unique appeal of South African English literature. On the other hand, it would better demonstrate the complexity and diversity of South

African literature in the post-apartheid era, providing theoretical support for its dissemination and exchange on a global scale.

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