

## *Original Paper*

# Exploring Development in Studies on Damon Galgut: A Systematic Review

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### **Abstract**

*This paper offers a comprehensive review of studies on Damon Galgut, a distinguished South African novelist and playwright, at home and abroad. Encompassing his life, career, and notable works, with a particular emphasis on his awards, it explores studies on Galgut's writings from the aspects of themes, narrative techniques, psychological elements, and masculinity. Furthermore, it identifies existing research gaps, such as the neglect of his early works and the need for more in-depth investigations into various aspects of his writing. Overall, the article tries to facilitate a better understanding among Chinese readers of the latest research into Damon Galgut's works.*

### **Keywords**

*Damon Galgut, literature review, research gaps*

## **1. Introduction**

Damon Galgut, a South African novelist and playwright was born in 1963 in Pretoria and studied drama at the University of Cape Town. Throughout his career, Galgut received numerous awards, including the Central News Agency Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. After missing the Man Booker Prize twice, Galgut finally won it on November 3, 2021, becoming the third South African writer to receive this honor.

In 1982, at the age of just 17, Damon Galgut made his debut in the South African literary scene with the publication of his book *A Sinless Season*. At the age of 20, he was appointed as a resident playwright for the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT), during which he creates several plays, including *Echoes of Anger*, *No. 1 Utopia Lane*, *Party for Mother*, *Alive and Kicking*, and *The Green's Keeper*. He also contributes to the screenplay of the film *The Quarry* (1995).

Since the beginning of his writing journey, Galgut has been prolific over the years, producing eight novels and one collection of short stories. His notable works include *Small Circle of Beings* (1988), *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991), *The Good Doctor* (2004), *The Impostor* (2008), *In a Strange Room* (2010), *The Promise* (2021), and *Arctic Summer* (2021).

The 2021 Booker Prize recognized Damon Galgut's outstanding achievements in the field of novel

writing, putting him among mainstream African writers. His works are closely related to South Africa's social changes and explore themes like race, identity, and morality.

As we stand on the threshold of the 21st century and reflect on the studies on Damon Galgut, it becomes evident that the methodologies and perspectives employed are continually evolving. It is essential to systematically organize the study outcomes.

## 2. Studies on the Works of Damon Galgut Abroad

International scholars started researching Damon Galgut relatively early, concentrating on themes like apartheid, conflicts, emotional experiences, religious diversity, and identity during social transformation. They use an interdisciplinary method, combining psychology, sociology, political science, etc., to analyze his works. This offers a deeper understanding of his writings and South Africa's social economic and political context. Also, they study masculinity in the post-apartheid era, looking at male characters' identity crises and their moral and ethical struggles, as well as the complex relations among power, gender, and race. Galgut's works are seen as showing broader social changes and the challenges people face in adapting to a new social order.

### 2.1 Narrative Studies

The first area of focus is narrative identity construction. Individuals construct an internalized and evolving self-identity by narrating and building their life stories. Galgut helps readers understand his characters by weaving their past experiences, values, and beliefs into a coherent narrative, thus maintaining identity continuity over time.

Sofia Kostelac (2017) pointed out that *The Good Doctor* reframed post-apartheid disillusionment through narrative identity theory, arguing that ethical transformation for white South Africans hinges on self-critical, open-ended storytelling rather than utopian idealism or nihilistic resignation. Renate Lenz (2020) argued that narrative identity in post-apartheid South African literature was shaped through the protagonists' traversal of geographical and psychological boundaries, which facilitated a dynamic reconfiguration of selfhood by confronting the "other" and dismantling colonial binaries in *The Good Doctor*. Marek Pawlicki (2024) argued that the multi-voiced narrative in *The Promise* deconstructed fixed notions of narrative identity by foregrounding the racialized limitations of the white protagonists' perspectives, directing attention to the unspoken racial conflicts by sharing the same racial identity as the protagonists while attempting to transcend their viewpoint limitations.

The second is omniscient narrative studies. By accurately depicting characters' actions, dialogues, and psychological activities, a world close to readers is constructed. Ken Barris (2005) believed that the ostensibly omniscient narrative in *The Good Doctor* subverted the conventions of classic realism by systematizing absence, which means leaving some key events to readers to fill in, prompting readers to think about those neglected social phenomena or issues. Robert Muponde (2023) believed that *The Promise* tells the story through the perspectives of different characters, spanning forty years and involving memories and reflections over multiple time periods, especially the inner world of the Swart

and their reactions to death and promises, which enables readers to understand the relationships and conflicts between characters.

The third is the study of emotional narratives. Leela Gandhi's concept of "affective communities", as presented in her work *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Si ècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, holds significant implications for literary studies. Gandhi argued that there existed a form of transnational or relational solidarity among anti-imperialists in the nineteenth century, which rejected ambiguous notions of citizenship. Mathilda Slabbert (2019) explored the connections between sexuality, friendship, politics, and emotions in *Arctic Summer*, highlighting how the fragmented narrative reflects Forster's inner conflicts and suggests an inseparable relationship between personal history and collective memory and believed that Galgut challenged traditional narrative patterns surrounding love, desire, and friendship, positing that emotional connections can transcend barriers of race, class, and nationality, thereby enabling marginalized groups to find a sense of belonging. Yin Gao (2023) examined the emotions of shame, anger, and compassion that underpin the promise made, violated, and fulfilled by the Swart, analyzing how these feelings are influenced by factors such as gender, race, and class. This emotional lens provides a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and the complexities of their relationships within the broader social context.

The final area of focus is the study of travel narratives. Travel represents not only external geographical movement but also an internal journey of self-exploration. Erin O'Dwyer (2014) investigated how the narrative technique of shifting between different perspectives enhanced the identity exploration, and pointed out that through the protagonist's journey, the narrative captures the inner dialogues and emotional landscapes of the traveler, emphasizing themes of exile, loneliness, and self-identity. Maureen Amimo (2021) examined the complexities of travel narratives, particularly how "anti-travel" writing can reconstruct self-identity and argued that Galgut's works disrupts the typical binary thinking in traditional travel writing, revealing the struggles and anxieties related to race and identity through an analysis of travel experiences. The use of multiple narrative perspectives blurs the boundaries between the narrator, the traveler, and the author, showing the fluidity and complexity of self-identity. Damon Galgut also challenged conventional stereotypes of travelers, particularly the superiority often associated with white males. *In a Strange Room* redefines the concept of boundaries, questioning social and cultural limits and illustrating the possibilities of travel narratives within a postcolonial context.

## 2.2 Masculinity Studies

In recent years, masculinity studies have emerged as a prominent topic, attracting significant attention. Through various perspectives and methodologies, researchers explore the construction of identity, psychological states, and shifts in social status among male characters in post-apartheid South Africa. By examining the complexities of masculinity, scholars contribute to a deeper comprehension of the characters' experiences and broader implications of gender in Galgut's narratives.

As early as 2012, Jesse Arseneault examined the relationship between animals and humans in *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, particularly how this relationship reflects masculinity in the postcolonial

era, argued that the violence portrayed in the novel not only targets non-human life, but also represents an internal power struggle among humans, suggesting that white males attempt to maintain their authority by exerting control over other beings, and concluded that *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* critiques the violence under apartheid while also exploring the fragility and complexity of masculinity under social change.

Later, M. Crous (2010) delved into the relationship between the two main male characters in *The Good Doctor*, revealing the social significance behind their complex intimacy, and stated that the emotional bond between Frank and Laurence may be interpreted as possible homosexual undertones or a means for both characters to seek solace during times of crisis. Crous contextualized this relationship within the new South Africa, uncovering the inner conflicts faced by white males during the power transition—they struggle to retain former privileged status while confronting the change and personal crises.

Then, Carola Beyer (2015) analyzed how Galgut portrayed male characters grappling with identity in the context of South Africa's political and social transformations and explored themes such as militarized masculinity, interpersonal relationships, and the impact of apartheid on male self-perception. Her research highlighted the variability and contentious nature of masculinity in Galgut's works, providing insights into the complexities of male identity in a changing society.

Paul Mason (2016) analyzed male representations across three different works, emphasizing that these texts collectively showcase masculinities that deviate from mainstream norms, and that Galgut's writings frequently challenge conventional gender roles, encouraging readers to reflect on and explore diverse notions of identity.

From the critique of violence and control in *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* to the exploration of intimate relationships and identity struggles in *The Good Doctor*, these analyses reveal the multifaceted nature of masculinity in Galgut's works. These studies not only enrich the understanding of male characters but also contribute to broader discussions on gender, identity, and power in contemporary literature.

### 2.3 Psychoanalytic Studies

In 2014, Sofia Lucy Kostelac offered a psychological exploration of Damon Galgut's novels, focusing on the internal conflicts and emotional struggles of the characters. Her analysis uncovered themes of moral ambiguity, identity crises, and cultural exhaustion, reflecting the complexities of South Africa's social landscape, and highlighted the significance of memory and narrative in shaping psychological identity, providing a deeper understanding of Galgut's literary contributions to the study of the human psyche in a post-apartheid context.

Michela Borzaga (2020) described in *The Impostor* how houses functioned as a repository of memory and affective and mnemonic symptoms of historical amnesia, containing historical traumas and personal experiences that significantly impacted the characters' daily behaviors, and explored how the relationship between individuals and their dwellings was intricately intertwined and influenced by

broader social, economic, and political contexts, noting that a nation, despite claiming to be “new” and “open”, may regress into a state of “de-worlding” characterized by a loss of global perspective and inclusivity due to the neglect of past mistakes.

Besides, Valiur Rahaman & Bhagat Esha (2023) analyzed the neuropsychological impacts of apartheid policies in *The Promise*, highlighting how the characters unconsciously bore the traumas inflicted by apartheid, which shaped their identities, led to emotional repression and family estrangement, and resulted in the reproduction of racial discrimination within families, ultimately exacerbating feelings of anxiety, despair, and loneliness and perpetuating a cycle of collective trauma.

### 3. Studies on the Works of Damon Galgut at Home

Compared to the international academic community, research on Damon Galgut’s novels in China is still in its infancy. Currently, domestic scholars have not conducted in-depth studies on Galgut and his works. One of the earliest scholars to focus on Galgut is Peng Xiu. In 2010, he published a paper on *The Good Doctor* in Anhui Literature, which primarily introduced the plot summary, explored themes, and analyzed narrative techniques.

In 2011, Guo Guoliang and Qu Jie paid attention to *In a Strange Room*. They argued that the novel employs a unique dual narrative perspective and utilizes uncertain language and plot to reflect the complexity of human relationships and the longing for belonging.

From that point until 2021, there was little attention given to Galgut and his works within the Chinese academic community. However, following Galgut’s receipt of the Booker Prize for *The Promise* in 2021, interest in his novels, particularly *The Promise*, surged. Despite this increased attention, the overall enthusiasm for research on Galgut’s works remains relatively low. These studies focus on the following aspects.

#### 3.1 Thematic Studies

Thematic Studies in the novels of South African writer Damon Galgut in China presents a multi-faceted and multi-layered landscape. Scholars from various academic backgrounds have delved into themes such as race, moral reasoning, interpersonal relationships, postcolonial trauma, gender roles, and social transformation within Galgut’s works.

Lin Xingyu (2022) critiqued *The Promise* from the perspective of land issues, emphasizing that the novel continues the tradition of South African farm literature by addressing questions of land ownership and racial order, and through the story of a white family’s gradual decline and the eventual inheritance of the house by a black maid, the narrative serves as a metaphor for the disintegration of white rule in South Africa and the restoration of black citizenship.

Similarly, Jiang Meng (2023) focused on the theme of death in *The Promise*, arguing that “death”, as a metaphor, represents both destruction and rebirth, reflecting South Africa’s transition from racial supremacy to democracy, and discussed its meanings from four aspects: the traumas of racial conflict, the fall of white minority rule, the turmoil of transition, and a just and hopeful future, forming a

contemporary national allegory that embodies the “Ubuntu” spirit rooted in a sense of shared destiny.

Shan Minmin (2024) combined Freudian trauma theory with postcolonial trauma theory to analyze the manifestations of trauma among different racial groups in *The Good Doctor*, particularly the trauma of black people, revealing Galgut’s awareness of the current state of South African society and his belief in the power of writing to effect change.

Zheng Menghuai (2023) conducted a comprehensive study of Galgut’s works, uncovering the evolution of the “African perspective” from an early focus on racial liberation and the construction of social morality to a later emphasis on borderless narratives and a globalized viewpoint, reflecting the profound changes during South Africa’s social transformation and highlighting broader human issues through the lens of marginalized groups, thereby linking individual life experiences to grand historical processes.

Overall, the thematic studies conducted by domestic scholars encompass deep reflections on historical contexts and social changes, as well as concrete explorations of human nature, ethics, and cultural identity. Each scholar contributes unique perspectives and insights that enhance the understanding of Galgut’s works.

### 3.2 Narrative Art

Damon Galgut’s works have garnered significant influence both domestically and internationally, with Stephanie Merritt even predicting in her article titled “Move Over, Coetzee” that Galgut would emerge as a new figure leading the development of South African literature. This acclaim is closely tied to the unique narrative artistry present in his works. A prominent feature of Galgut’s writing is his distinctive narrative style, which has been a focal point in over a decade of research on his novels.

Qu Jie (2011) analyzed the postmodern elements in *In a Strange Room*, stating that the novel employs dual narrative perspectives and introduces uncertainty in meaning and plot to reflect the spiritual crises and identity issues faced by individuals in a postmodern society. Xu Lei (2024) analyzed the role of the omniscient narrator in *The Promise*, arguing that this narrative approach not only inherits characteristics of realist novels but also challenges conventional authoritative narrative models to some extent, revealing and resisting racism within South African society, and through the “silence” or “blank” within the text, the author prompts readers to reflect on history and reality, positioning the omniscient narrator as a highly self-reflexive narrative tool that serves both as a retrospective on the past and a projection into the future. Shi Juhong (2024) focused on the social and historical significance of the farm as a specific space in *The Promise*, believed that Galgut creates a unique narrative environment that allows readers to intuitively grasp the political ecology, capital dynamics, and changes in racial and class relations during that period by describing the social transformations in South Africa before and after apartheid within a concrete farm setting, and explored the emotional states and ethical consciousness of the characters, revealing the application of cognitive mapping aesthetics within this narrative structure.

### 3.3 Gender Roles Studies

Damon Galgut excels at portraying complex and contradictory characters, using nuanced prose to reveal their inner struggles and confusion while tightly linking personal destinies to broader historical contexts. Scholars have primarily focused their research on male characters, with Liu Heng analyzing the dominant masculinity of white men, while also exploring the gender roles faced by the female character during the apartheid era.

Liu Heng analyzed the depiction of white women's individual fates in *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, particularly through Ellen's experiences, showing her transformation from a housewife confined to traditional female roles to an independent woman pursuing personal growth, and ultimately reverting to a position dependent on men, reflecting the survival dilemmas faced by white women and the difficulty of achieving lasting independence at that time.

These studies reveal how patriarchal structures shape individual destinies. The struggles of these characters not only reflect the historical context of South Africa, but also offer insights into the broader human experience, demonstrating the connection of gender, identity, and power.

### 3.4 Translation Practice

As Damon Galgut's recognition in the literary world continues to grow, many of his works have gradually been translated into Chinese and published in China. Notable translations include *In a Strange Room*, translated by Li An and published by CITIC Press Group; *The Promise*, translated by Huang Jianshu and published by Guangxi Normal University Press; and *The Impostor*, translated by Zhu Yayun and published by China Friendship Publishing Company.

In 2023, four graduate students from Shanxi University explored the challenges and strategies in translation practice based on the novel *The Promise* from different perspectives. Shi Zhicheng focused on the translation of short sentences, emphasizing how the stream-of-consciousness writing technique disrupts traditional notions of time and space, leading to fragmented character narratives, and by applying the theory of functional equivalence, he proposed strategies such as merging sentences, adjusting word order, and making implicit information explicit to achieve functional equivalence with original text.

Yu Haowen analyzed the pronoun translation, particularly the use of personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and interrogative pronouns, and emphasized that due to the differences in pronoun usage between English and Chinese, it is essential to ensure coherence in sentences and effective discourse connections during the translation process, using methods such as omission and literal translation to convey the original meaning and maintain coherence guided by Skopos theory.

Cui Liai explored dialogue translation, highlighting the importance of dialogue in advancing the plot and shaping characters, and given the colloquial nature of the dialogue and the lack of clear punctuation, she employed Peter Newmark's communicative translation theory, proposing methods such as semantic extension and the addition of modal particles to accurately convey the speaker's intentions and character traits, thereby enhancing the reader's understanding.

Zhi Zhuoya investigated the English-Chinese metaphor translation in *The Promise*, a stream-of-consciousness novel on South African history, under Relevance Translation Theory, employing Newmark's translation strategies to address cultural-cognitive gaps through case analysis, and achieve optimal relevance by reconciling metaphor fidelity with communicative intent, emphasizing grammatical rigor and cross-cultural sensitivity in resolving implicit metaphors.

In conclusion, these reports provide valuable insights into the translation of *The Promise*, covering short sentences, pronouns, dialogue, and metaphors. Each of them has proposed effective strategies to address the challenges in translation. Their strategies, grounded in relevant theories, ensure translation accuracy and enhance reader's understanding.

#### 4. Existing Problems in Studies on Damon Galgut

With the evolution of the times and the influence of diverse ideologies, scholars have employed various theoretical frameworks to interpret his works from multiple perspectives. These studies not only deepen readers' understanding of the structure and themes of his novels but also expand awareness of African cultural contexts, showing a high degree of integration between academic research and social concerns. However, there are still some shortcomings in the research on Galgut's novels.

First, there is insufficient attention given to his early works including his plays. Compared to his later award-winning pieces, earlier works have received relatively little focus, which limits the understanding of his growth and developmental. Besides, current research often concentrates on *The Promise*, *The Good Doctor*, and *In a Strange Room*, with little exploration of the connections between these works.

Second, there is a lack of cultural studies. South Africa boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage, but existing research has not fully explored the cultural dimensions of his novels. While some studies touch on the cultural context, such as the impact of apartheid in South Africa, there is a need for more in-depth analysis of the cultural elements and their significance.

#### 5. Conclusion

The studies on Damon Galgut have made significant progress, both internationally and domestically. International scholars have provided in-depth analyses of his novels, focusing on themes such as apartheid, identity, masculinity, and psychological elements. Domestically, while research on Galgut is still in its early stages, scholars have begun to explore various aspects of his works, including thematic studies, narrative art, and gender roles. Research on Damon Galgut becomes more comprehensive and diverse in terms of research perspectives and methods. However, there are still areas that require further attention, especially with the booming development of South African literature and its emergence into the global spotlight.



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