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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **Vihanga Perera**

Situating the Jungle-village in Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) . . . . . 5

## **Marek Pawlicki**

"It Was a Brutal Land": Exploring the Personal and the Political in Damon Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings* (1988) . . . . . 17

## **Malgorzata Rutkowska**

"We Don't Know What We Want": The Ups and Downs of Global Travel in Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002). . . . . 35

## **Diana Ortega Martín**

"Life Would Never Feel This Good Again": The Use of Pastiche in Edgar Wright's *The World's End* (2013) . . . . . 53

## **Margarida Pereira Martins**

Plural Identity and Migrant Communities in Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018) . . . . . 69

## **Joanna Antoniak**

"Fearing your own queer self": Depictions of Diasporic Queer Experience in Grace Lau's Poetry . . . . . 87

## **REVIEWS**

### **Agnieszka Pantuchowicz**

Patrick Gill, ed. (2023). *An Introduction to Poetic Forms*. New York and London: Routledge . . . . . 109

### **Tadeusz Rachwał**

Jeremy Tambling, ed. (2023). *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic . . . . . 115

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## **“It Was a Brutal Land”: Exploring the Personal and the Political in Damon Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* (1988)**

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**Abstract:** This article is a critical discussion of Damon Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* (1988) from the perspective of Elleke Boehmer’s postcolonial poetics. The discussion concentrates on the story “The Clay Ox” and the eponymous novella of the collection. It is argued that both the story and the novella convey a tension between the personal and the political by describing the subtleties of human relationships while at the same time showing that even this intensely private dimension of the characters’ existence is shaped by forces that affect the entire nation. As it is shown, Galgut’s collection of stories is representative of white writing in the times of the interregnum insofar as it depicts isolated, conflicted protagonists, includes the theme of physical and mental disintegration, and explores the state of personal and political precarity.

**Keywords:** Damon Galgut, South African literature, postcolonial short story, South Africa, apartheid

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### **1. Introduction: Embracing the Personal and Emphasizing the Political**

In the year 1988, when South Africa was two years into the nationwide State of Emergency,<sup>1</sup> Damon Galgut published his first, and to this date only, collection of stories, *Small Circle of Beings* (1988). Galgut’s collection embodies some of the features that Stephen Clingman identifies in South African writing during the interregnum of the 1980s: “‘unreal’ time, the problematic self, closed environments, unstable vision, the press of an insistent but unknowable future, and apocalyptic presentiments” (637). Representative of late apartheid literature, *Small Circle of Beings* describes characters in various stages of inner conflict, shaped by the closed environments of their families, rejecting the present but increasingly apprehensive about the future.

The central thesis of this article is that *Small Circle of Beings* reflects the times of the interregnum not only in its depiction of isolated, conflicted, and insecure protagonists but also in its overriding themes of regression, disintegration, and destruction, all of which refer both to the personal lives of the protagonists and to the wider, socio-political situation in South Africa in the late-apartheid era. The comment on the relationship between the personal and the political brings me back to Clingman's reflections on South African fiction in the 1980s. Clingman's contention is that "the 'interregnum' in South Africa went through phases" (634) and that in this decade, when the end of apartheid was rapidly approaching, "fiction continued to tell its story in forms that ran not so much parallel to the political, but in tension and articulation with it" (646). This tension, which Clingman explores in the novels of Gordimer and Coetzee, is also visible in Galgut's collection: while the five pieces of short fiction included in *Small Circle of Beings* are intensely personal, two of them (the eponymous novella of the collection and the story "The Clay Ox") convey the impossibility of turning away from the legacy of apartheid, showing that politics is a major force in the shaping of individual lives. The reading offered in this article has at its centre the tension resulting from the simultaneous gesture of embracing the personal and emphasizing the political. The fact that the private dimension of his characters' lives is seldom, if ever, presented as a refuge from the world outside lends credibility to this interpretation; in Galgut's stories, the family, with its history of violence and trauma, is a place from which the protagonists seek, successfully or not, to escape.

The 'homelessness' of Galgut's protagonists – the fact that they are estranged from their immediate environments – has an intensely personal dimension also when it is considered in the context of Galgut's life. My aim here is not to explore the similarities between Galgut's stories and his family background but rather to view the isolation of his protagonists as symptomatic of his position as a South African writer in the 1980s. An insightful commentary on the situation of white writers in the 1980s can be found in Nadine Gordimer's 1982 lecture "Living in the Interregnum," in which she argues that "[t]he interregnum is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined" (1989, 269–270). Gordimer contends that the white South African who has discarded his identity as determined by social and political privilege will have to live in suspension insofar as he "does not know whether he will find his home at last" (1989, 270). Gordimer's answer to this predicament of white South Africans during the interregnum was to join the liberation struggle by devoting her works to the exploration of socio-political changes in her country. It is worthwhile to add that already in 1974, in an interview with Michael Ratcliffe, Gordimer emphasized that she was "a white South African radical" (1990, 145). In contrast to Gordimer, Galgut never referred to himself as a radical, but he did participate in anti-apartheid demonstrations: in an interview with Chris Harvey for *Penguin*, he recalls taking part in university

protests and being attacked by the police. He sums up this recollection with the words: “I think by my early 20s, I was quite aware of the inverted world that I belonged to” (Galgut 2022).

My suggestion is to read Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* from the perspective of Elleke Boehmer’s postcolonial poetics. Boehmer defines postcolonial poetics as “reception-based or readerly pragmatics” (2108, 2), whose focus is on how literary texts communicate their knowledge to the reader. She encourages readers and critics to abandon a stance of detachment and instead concentrate on our interaction with the literary text. In her conception of postcolonial criticism, works of literature – not only novels but also poems – are viewed as places where “the meanings circulate” (2018, 8). This understanding of the literary text brings her to the following conclusion: “Therefore, when reading, we do not have necessarily to add theoretical scaffolding to our experience of the text in order to decode it [...]. Rather, we must attend first and foremost to how the text communicates, to the denotations and implications it puts in motion. Our task, in effect, is to follow the text’s inferential processes, guided by its poetics” (2018, 8).

Boehmer defines her postcolonial poetics by putting emphasis not on what it is but what it does, or – to be more precise – what it enables the readers to achieve. In a passage discussing postcolonial aesthetic, Boehmer writes about it in the following way: “It allows us to look into the mystery that is not so much the other, generically speaking, as the opaque yet always situated other person” (2018, 35). Boehmer’s decision to substitute “the other person” for “the other” (a term as much entrenched as overused in postcolonial criticism) is liberating, but this is not the main reason why the passage has been quoted here; Boehmer’s reflection is significant chiefly because it emphasizes the workings of the individual mind, as conveyed in the postcolonial text and explored by the critic. While this kind of postcolonial poetics need not be discussed solely in terms of allusions and inferences – as Boehmer does in her study – there is a sense in which these notions are especially relevant in the discussion of the short story, which has been described in terms of gaps and silences, facilitating the imaginative and affective involvement of the reader. Inferences in Galgut’s stories may relate to the protagonists’ family situation – their family background, their relationships with parents and spouses, the influence of the family on their lives – but since this article explores the interplay between the personal and the political, the main focus will be on what is conveyed – both overtly and covertly – about the protagonists’ states of mind in the wider socio-political context.

## 2. The Impossibility of Escaping the Political: “The Clay Ox”

What I have earlier described as the tension between Galgut’s simultaneous gesture of embracing the personal and emphasizing the political is thematized in the story

“The Clay Ox,” which concentrates on a chance encounter between an escaped soldier and a woman planning to organize a bomb attack in Pretoria. It is worth noting that “The Clay Ox” is the only work in the collection which includes overt references to the political situation in South Africa: as we learn from the reference to the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), the narrator, an escaped soldier, must have been part of the South African Defence Force (SADF) fighting in the South African Border War. The fact that the woman he meets on the way is planning to organize a suicide attack on an army compound in Pretoria makes it possible to situate the story around the mid-1980s – a time of increasingly violent resistance to apartheid.<sup>2</sup>

On its most general level, “The Clay Ox” is about the impossibility of escaping the political forces that shape individual existence. The theme of escape recurs throughout the story, most emphatically in a passage in which the ex-soldier remarks that the escape from army headquarters was not motivated by any plan other than self-annihilation: “Flight had promised to accelerate my descent towards the thrilling detonation of my own extinction” (163). In contrast to the tone of fatalism in this statement is the hope of leaving behind politics and emigrating from his country. This vague hope of reaching an apolitical state of existence is nevertheless thrown into doubt by his solitariness (he offers the young woman the chance to join him, but she declines, choosing instead to press on with her attack), and, no less importantly, by his experience of fighting in the war. There are at least two passages in the story suggesting that the effects of war – the most dramatic manifestations of the political – are deeply imprinted on his psyche. Besides the quoted comment on “the thrilling detonation of my own extinction,” another significant passage can be found later in the story when the ex-soldier compares the hillocks that they pass during their journey to the Drakensberg Mountains to “the mass graves of men killed in fighting” (162). The recurring imagery of death, destruction, and disintegration, alternating with his strong desire to escape the war and politics in general, can be discussed in the context of Robert Jay Lifton’s analysis of trauma, specifically his comments on the survival syndrome. Lifton’s contention is that the near-death experience of survivors forces them to confront the moments in their lives which they associate with isolation and powerlessness: “The death encounter reopens questions about prior experiences of separation, breakdown, and stasis as well as countervailing struggles towards vitality; reopens questions, in fact, around all of life’s beginnings and endings” (170). Galgut creates the impression that his protagonist’s war experience remains suppressed, only to emerge as flashes of violent imagery. The ex-soldier’s escape from the army can be seen as his desperate attempt to find a life outside of history, and the same refers to his appeals – addressed to the young woman – to accompany him in his flight from South Africa.

The man’s feeling of despondency, which may be analysed in terms of his war experience, is also visible in his descriptions of the natural environment, specifically

the Drakensberg Mountains, where he and his female companion camp for two days. Described by the man as “huge and static and grim” (170), the mountains fill the man with awe but they also introduce an air of gloom, as he reflects on the reasons behind humankind’s fascination with landscape: “I’m quite prepared to believe that man’s lingering obsession with inhospitable regions like jungles, icelands and (dare I say it?) deserts, comes from spiritual equivalents to all these places in himself” (170). While this comment is formulated in existential terms, it is significant that it is made in the course of his last-ditch attempt to separate himself from the nefarious impact of politics on his life. The shelter offered by the Drakensberg Mountains does not insulate him from the insidious influence of ideological forces: while he may well be able to reach Durban and escape abroad, he will find it decidedly more difficult to shed the legacy of war.

The discussion of the impact of war on the ex-soldier brings us to the central topic of the story, namely his response to the injustices of apartheid. Unlike the woman, whose opposition to apartheid reveals her communist convictions, the narrator’s political stance is decidedly pacifist – a legacy, it seems, of his service in the army. The contrast between the two stances is at its clearest in an episode in which the man decides to give all his money to the impoverished children selling clay statues at the roadside. This spontaneous act of charity is criticized by the woman in terms that are evocative of the Marxist notion of class struggle: “Every cent you give them takes them further from desperation. They must be desperate [...] before the revolution will begin” (167). Situated on the opposing pole of this rhetoric is the man’s rationale for his actions. Rejecting the idea of political struggle, he formulates his own manifesto, in a rhetoric that is glaringly different from that used by the woman: “I understand only simple ideas. The most terrible thing about the Nazi era was that it made no exceptions. Not even for children. We *must* allow children to believe in things like happiness. If not in happiness, then in the *possibility* of happiness. I can put it no better than this (I don’t want to grow old). Desperation should be reserved for old age” (167–168; original emphasis). The simple language in which he expresses his beliefs conveys his opposition to the woman’s political rhetoric, alert to socio-political processes but blind to the plight of the individual and devoid of empathy towards the afflicted and the underprivileged. The child-like rhetoric that he adopts, so out of touch with the political climate of the 1980s, is reminiscent of an earlier passage in the story, in which he describes his difficult childhood – the short time spent with his biological father, followed by the physical and emotional abuse that he and his mother suffered from his stepfather. This mini-narrative of childhood as an idyllic time irrevocably lost stands in strong contrast to the rest of the story also because it is told in the present tense, creating a sense of immediacy, as if the man was reliving the times when he was victimized by his stepfather. Following this interpretation, the man’s refusal to grow old, voiced in the parenthetical sentence in the passage quoted, is not only an expression of his opposition to social injustice but also a reference to his family

history – a lingering and regressive attachment to idealised early childhood and the desire to turn the clock back to a time of innocence, before the desperation of his later years.

While the man's avowedly apolitical and pacifist stance does lead to tangible results (he gives money to the begging children), it fails to give him any sense of purpose in his life. This lack of purpose and direction is contrasted with the purposefulness and determination of the Dutch settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The settlers are referenced twice in Galgut's story: first, when the narrator, reflecting on their trek through the Drakensberg Mountains, calls them "part of our history" (165). The second, more important, reference is made towards the end of the story, when the narrator imagines "the bearded Voortrekkers in their wagons" (176) travelling over the Drakensberg to reach the platteland beyond them. In the same passage, he compares the great migration of the Dutch settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to his own and the woman's historical legacy: "Our heritage was no less ox-like in its solidity and stance. But then – so many oxen are made of clay" (176–177). While – as we saw – the narrator sees the Great Trek as "part of our history," it is quite clear that "our heritage" – his and the woman's heritage – is based not on the adoption of the social order proposed by the Afrikaners, built on the master-servant dialectic,<sup>3</sup> but on the rejection of this order. The possessive pronoun "our" in "our heritage" can be viewed as the man's recognition of their shared anti-apartheid convictions, but it should be kept in mind that there are clear differences between her radical and his escapist political stances; indeed, in contrast both to the *Voortrekkers* and to the woman, whose strong resolve to organize the bombing remains unshaken, the man is described as confused and directionless. If there is coherence in his actions, it can be found in his determination to flee the shaping force of politics in his life.

"The Clay Ox" can be discussed in terms of an interplay between past and present, collective and individual identities. Both the male and the female protagonists of the story are keenly aware of the need to reject the collective identity of their racial group, as forged through decades of white supremacy, in an attempt to shape a new identity, rooted not in the past but in anticipation of the future. It is worthwhile to note that the interplay between the individual and the collective identities can also be considered in the context of their differing political stances: whereas the woman, declaring herself as part of the revolutionary action (she is perhaps part of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* – the military wing of the African National Congress), has subjugated her individual goals entirely to the demands of the struggle, the man's chief goal is self-preservation. While he identifies himself broadly with the goals of the anti-apartheid struggle, this identification is nevertheless tenuous and undercut by what seems a doubt concerning the radical measures adopted by the woman and other revolutionaries. It is not only the case that the man refuses to contemplate giving his life for a larger cause – he rejects the notion that it is justifiable to sacrifice oneself and others to achieve a larger goal. More importantly, he refuses to see – and appreciate – the fact that the woman's planned act

of terror is a response to the terror of the state; pertinent here is Elleke Boehmer’s general comment on terror, as viewed from the postcolonial perspective: “*Terror* in this sense refers *both* to the violent operation of global systems, *and* to attempts to thwart, block, and subvert them” (2018, 70; original emphasis). Given those pacifist convictions, the man’s contention that “so many oxen are made of clay” (177) can be read as an expression of his criticism – the contention that violence cannot constitute a firm basis for a new social order.

Irrespective of their differences, the man and the woman share the same historical moment, presented – once again in symbolic terms – in the following words: “Above us the slow white torrent of stars wheeled imperceptibly across the sky. And down in the valley those red fires burned on, burned on” (177). The passage contrasts the romantic notion of the Trek (following the stars in search of new land) with the reality of the late apartheid, as represented by the “red fires” coming from the dwellings of the poor and the dispossessed. Those fires are described as points of reference for the two protagonists of the story insofar as they symbolize the legacy of apartheid, which will always – to some extent – determine their futures, irrespective of whether they decide to stay in South Africa or go into exile.

In Chapter Four of *Postcolonial Poetics*, devoted to the topic of terror in postcolonial writing, Elleke Boehmer posits that postcolonial writing “includes reflections on that chiasmic break into the now *and also* on attempt to go beyond the terror-stricken state, to investigate ways of continuing, to provide a fuller understanding of the painful losses as well as the eventual gains of such acts” (2018, 73; original emphasis). In Galgut’s “The Clay Ox,” the connection between the now and the after – in the shape described by Boehmer – is significantly absent. The only way of proceeding from terror (terror viewed both as the violence of the state and people’s militant reactions to it) to what lies beyond it is by rupture, understood as a decisive and dramatic severance from one’s legacy and one’s personal history; while in the case of the woman, this rupture takes the most radical form of suicide, the man contemplates his future only in terms of severance from his past – as was mentioned, he considers going into political exile, without the possibility of return (at least not under the existing regime). Nonetheless, the fact that the man’s plans of leaving the country are presented as a distant prospect puts into question even this way of moving forward. As a result, Galgut’s story conveys a state of lethargy – a sense of emotional and physical impossibility, which refers specifically to the socio-political situation of white South Africans during the interregnum.

### **3. The Intersection of the Personal and the Political: “Small Circle of Beings”**

Similarly to “The Clay Ox,” the political context is also significant in the interpretation of the novella “Small Circle of Beings,” in which the intensely

private sphere of the protagonists' interiority is intricately connected with the wider context of South Africa in the turbulent times of transition. Unlike Sofia Kostelac, who argues that the novella "deliberately obscures the overdetermined socio-historical context of its production" (73) and "does not gesture towards a larger socio-political reality" (78), I do not reject the orthodox interpretation that views the dynamics of family relationships as symptomatic of social relations; instead, in the discussion that follows I wish to elaborate on this point. Of equal importance is my argument that the social and political dimension of the novella is not only a question of allegorical interpretation – of grafting the political onto the personal – but is inherent to this work; in other words, the socio-political forces in the background of Galgut's novella have an effect on the protagonists' lives and should consequently be discussed at greater length.

"Small Circle of Beings" has at its centre a claustrophobic and destructive parent-child relationship, described from the point of view of the mother who, characteristically of Galgut's prose, is an alienated character, estranged from her immediate surroundings.<sup>4</sup> Since the unnamed woman is the narrator of the novella, it is from her perspective that we learn about her son David's battle with cancer, his gradual recovery, and the contemporaneous disintegration of her marriage, which falls apart because of her husband's infidelity. The decision to start a new chapter in her life leads to a disastrous liaison with a violent man, Cedric, who physically and mentally abuses both her and her son. Although the woman ultimately parts from her aggressive partner, this traumatic time leads to a crisis in her relationship with David, who decides to leave the family home. At the end of the story, the woman remains alone with her elderly mother, a silent and distant presence that nevertheless exerts a strong influence on her daughter's life.

Before a more detailed discussion of "Small Circle of Beings," I would like to make a reference to Elleke Boehmer's postcolonial poetics. In her understanding of "the heuristic power of literature" (2018, 3), Boehmer's emphasis is "on the verbal and structural dynamics, the poetics, through which our understanding of the particular postcolonial condition being represented (race, resistance, liberation, reconciliation, precarity, and so on) may be shaped and sharpened" (2018, 3). As I will demonstrate in the analysis that follows, Galgut's novella explores the postcolonial condition of white South Africans at a time of transition, when the patriarchal order of the family and the hegemonic structure of the racist social system continue to exist, but they fail, nonetheless, to give the protagonists a safe and stable sense of identity; in this reading, the insecurities and tensions of the protagonists – especially those of the novella's narrator – point to the tenuous nature of the socio-political system.

The socio-political context of Galgut's novella is created partly through occasional references to other races and social groups. Those subtle references – however infrequent – have the capacity to involve the reader more intensely in what Boehmer calls "the flow of implication" (2018, 8), which is evident whenever

the woman alludes to her servants and her relationship with them. From the few references made by the female narrator, it becomes evident that people from outside her social class inhabit the peripheries of her vision, but they do exert a degree of influence on her self-perception and on the way she views her immediate surroundings. In one passage, the woman remarks upon labourers toiling on farms adjoining her house: "Labourers work there among the trees, picking the fruit as if to feed an endless hunger. But it isn't theirs" (5). Uttered early in the story, the sentence, which concludes a longer passage, is likely intended to give the reader pause, since there is too little context to determine whether it is simply a statement of fact or whether it has a political dimension, subtly conveying her attitude to the exploitation of farm labourers. Even if the woman is alert to the social injustice that surrounds her – and the sentence quoted by no means makes this clear – she is incapable of imagining any change to the existing socio-political order. This becomes evident in the fourth and final part of the novella, where her servants Moses and Salome retire from the farm – a change that is greeted by the narrator with the following words: "It feels strange to say goodbye to them, this odd twosome who have expended their lifetime on a house and a garden that they do not own" (110). The dispossession of her black servants<sup>5</sup> is presented here as an obvious fact which can be glided over; indeed, in the same paragraph, the woman goes on to imagine that Moses and Salome's children will – like their parents – continue to serve her son David until they too become old and retire.

While the woman's perception is shaped mostly by her privileged social position, she is also intuitively aware of the racially and socially conditioned limitations of her perspective. This feature of her narration, and of her general approach toward the surrounding reality, is at its most pronounced in her strained relations with the servants. The constant presence of Salome and Moses clearly unsettles the woman, who is discomfited by Salome's reserved courtesy and unnerved by what she perceives as Moses's ominous sullenness. Her attempts to reach an understanding with Salome by giving her presents (what she calls "sheer impulsive charity" (7)) prove ineffectual as she realizes that the gifts may, in fact, be worthless to the beneficiary. Unable to negotiate the economic and social divide between her and her servants, the woman takes the situation for granted, allowing her ignorance to turn into suspicion. Imagining Moses and Salome alone in their house, after a day's work in her house and her garden, she finds herself wondering: "Do their tongues at last break loose and say mocking, malicious things about me, their ridiculous figure of a mistress, that keep them giggling long into the night?" (8–9). Characteristically, this awareness of being exposed and mocked is wholly absent from the mindset of the woman's mother, who, despite suffering from an unspecified mental illness, has retained the habit of ordering her servant about the house. As the woman reports, the old woman's daily routine is to follow Moses around the garden "in order to keep an eye [on him]" (11). It is through such tacit references that Galgut supplies historical and political context to his novella, pointing to the changing attitudes

between the earlier generation of white South Africans, deeply entrenched in their attitude of privilege and domination, and the later generation, represented here by the female narrator, which clings on to the social and economic privilege, closely connected to the “bourgeois imperial whiteness”<sup>6</sup> of her social class, but finds itself increasingly apprehensive about the future.

Galgut’s female narrator lives in a state of tension resulting from her acceptance of the political status quo on the one hand and, on the other, the intuitive and emotive revelation that the master-servant relation, so consistently cultivated by her mother, is no longer feasible or possible in her case. Faced with this impasse, the woman’s goal is to erase the emotions of confusion and apprehension by creating the safe and secluded space of everyday life, which for her is associated with her house and her garden. That this is not only a physical task but also an imaginative endeavour is evident from the beginning of the novella, where the woman juxtaposes the cultivated space of her garden with the chaotic and threatening forest, presented as perilous and unsettling. She refers to the natural environment outside of her garden as a “wild land” (4), a “jungle” (4, 28), which remains uninhabited, with the exception of a mysterious and half-mythical witch doctor, imagined by her – somewhat romantically – as a hermit living in a cave. Intrigued and vaguely fascinated by the mysterious rituals that she imagines the witch doctor to perform, the woman admonishes herself for her attraction to “these inscrutable dark people” (6), by whom she means both the doctor and those that visit him, including Moses and Salome. In her conceptual map, the forest becomes a mythologized space, which, consistently with the traditions of Judaism and Christianity,<sup>7</sup> is conceived primarily in terms of danger. This conception of wilderness works in opposition to what she perceives as the safe domain of her garden, which she imagines as a pastoral space of refuge, symbolizing such values as “simplicity, peace, [and] immemorial usage” (Coetzee 2007, 3).<sup>8</sup>

Considering the woman’s pastoral conception of the garden as a space of emotional and spiritual refuge, it is deeply ironic that this garden is almost solely cultivated by the silent, indifferent, and somewhat menacing Moses, whom she associates with wilderness. Moses is, in this sense, a stranger, “neither friend nor enemy” (Bauman 55),<sup>9</sup> who is paid to create a space of comfort for the woman and the other occupants of the house. Most ironically, the woman seems unaware of the fact that by virtue of his unsettling presence, she is unable to view her garden and her house as a wholly comforting and safe space. Her attempt to erase the stranger from the private space – a defensive strategy directed against her fear of change – is entirely self-defeating. Unlike her mother, the woman is deeply unsettled by Moses’s presence, as he embodies a vaguely defined fear of destruction and dissolution. As she writes, “I am, I think, afraid of him. I believe him capable of things, of deeds I try not to imagine” (8). The fact that Moses is described as part of her inheritance and a permanent fixture in the house underlines the futility of her attempts to forget or to marginalize him.

Another way in which Galgut explores the link between the individual realm of his protagonists' experience and the socio-political context is by analysing the pathologies connected with the functioning of the white, middle-class family. This dimension of the novella is evident in its third, penultimate part, in which the woman describes the violence and victimization to which she and her son are subjected by her partner, Cedric. The physical abuse begins with David, who is beaten by Cedric for what he sees as the boy's insubordination. Trying to mediate between her son and her partner, the woman explains away the beating as a form of discipline. When she becomes a victim herself, she plays down the seriousness of the abuse by viewing it as occasional and predictable, in this way stretching the limits of what she perceives as normal. She goes on to describe scenes of reconciliation in which both sides apologize, the woman taking the blame for the violence to which she was subjected. The effect of this self-manipulation is that she begins to view physical and mental abuse as a token of her guilt (in an attempt to present physical violence as potentially remediable), and even as an expression of his love for her.

The discussion of aggression within the family brings us back to Galgut's statement – made one year after the publication of *Small Circle of Beings* – that “what takes place in the family relates to what takes place in the state” (Galgut; qtd. in Kostelac 73). While the connection between state violence and family violence is more explicit in Galgut's first novel, *A Sinless Season*, the wider social context of the violence described in the novella should not go unnoticed. Resorting to aggression to build his authority in the house, Cedric represents the abusively patriarchal model of the family, in which the woman becomes an accomplice, only to reject that authority on the realization that the man's gratuitous violence will not cease. Significantly, even after parting from Cedric, she occasionally resorts to violence to impose her will on David. She conceptualizes violence as “a terrible force I am not capable of stopping” (102) and a “sickness [which] has continued” (114) beyond David's cancer, the latter description indicative of her tendency to think about her family in terms of dissolution and disintegration. This interpretation has been taken up by Sue Marais, who in her article on short story cycles published during apartheid, mentions Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings* alongside volumes by Denis Hirson and Peter Wilhelm, arguing that unlike black writers, whose works “project a sense of community,” white authors create works that “foreground notions of unrealized or failed community” (197). The fact that the dissolution of the family takes place in the context of physical abuse points to the analogy between the breakdown of the family and the disintegrating late apartheid state, fruitlessly seeking socio-political cohesion through the use of violence. The analogy is carried further by the symbolic scene in which the deranged mother sets fire to the house, almost succeeding in burning it down.

“Small Circle of Beings” ends with what seems like a double reversal of roles: after the departure of her husband and son, the woman turns to her mother,

developing an ambivalent relationship in which the roles of caretaker and caregiver become disconcertingly fluid. Acting in her capacity as the guardian and the caretaker, the woman washes her elderly mother, dresses her in a nightgown, and prepares her for bed, but then the woman suddenly reverts to the role of a child as she pleads with her mother to stay with her in the dark. The novella concludes with the image of the mother and the daughter lying alongside one another: “We cling to each other. In this way we lie, twined like lovers or enemies, inseparable in our embrace. We sleep” (117). The ending of the novella has been interpreted by Sofia Kostelac in terms of “consolation” (78), which the woman reaches after being freed from a failed marriage and her violent lover. As Kostelac writes, the woman finds herself “finally able to embrace her own mother, despite the uncomfortable alterity which she represents in her senility” (78). When considered in the context of the entire novella, there is, nevertheless, an ambiguity in this image of the reconciliation of the mother and daughter: while it may imply that the woman has claimed a victory over her powerful fear of illness and old age (the main justification for her shunning her mother throughout the story), the scene is described not in terms of development but rather of regression to the role of a small child, dependent on the parent. In this reading, the woman’s life is not characterized by progression, however halted and painful it may be, but by the circular logic of the return to her childhood (in this sense, the woman’s prediction about the end of her son’s illness and the return to their previous life – “We will be back where we began” (26) – reads like an ironic prophecy of the events that conclude the novella). “Small Circle of Beings” ends on an ambivalent note, making it impossible to state authoritatively whether the image of mother and daughter “inseparable in [their] embrace” is indicative of the woman’s emotional and spiritual development, or rather a reluctant regression to the close parent-child relationship. In this sense, the circular logic of Galgut’s novella is representative of South African writing in the 1980s, which Boehmer describes in terms of “a suspension of vision, a hemming in as opposed to a convinced and convincing opening up or testing of options” (1998, 44).

#### 4. Conclusion

Four years before the publication of *Small Circle of Beings*, in November 1984, Njabulo Ndebele delivered his lecture “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,” in which he argued that “the convention of the spectacular has run its course” (49) and that it was time to “rediscover the ordinary” through honest and subtle rendition of the protagonists’ experience. In this new conception of late apartheid writing, the focus should be on the quotidian reality of the characters’ existence, because it is everyday life that constitutes what he called “the *very content* of the struggle” (57; original emphasis). In Galgut’s conception

of writing, by contrast, the focus on everyday life does not invariably have wider resonances; indeed, the emphasis on the personal dimension of his characters' experience can be viewed as symptomatic of his desire to reject politics as a force that defines South African literature.

Galgut's focus on the personal dimension of his protagonists' lives is evident in the themes recurrent in *Small Circle of Beings*, such as the return to the family home, claustrophobic child-parent relationships, unresolved issues from childhood that plague characters later in their lives, and, no less importantly, the connected themes of illness, disintegration, and death. All those themes point to one feature shared by Galgut's protagonists: while they reject politics as a domain in which they can attain self-realization, they are also clearly unable to reach any kind of emotional or spiritual fulfilment in the family; in other words, they are neither at home in their country nor in their family environments. The alienation of his protagonists – the fact that they are always at a remove from the place in which they find themselves – enables Galgut to explore the dynamic of a given community from a detached perspective. This detachment creates the impression that his stance as a writer is that of an observer, whose goal is not to allow political or personal sentiments to determine his aesthetic choices. Galgut's detachment as a writer is reflected in his writing style, which is, as Robert Kusek has noted, “clean and sparse prose with no ornamentation” (109). Galgut's style is also cool and calculated; even in those stories that are narrated in the first person, the self-conscious stance of the protagonists leads to a language that is more analytical than emotional.

The tension between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective is present not only in those works by Galgut that were published in the times of the interregnum but also in his later works, which came out during the democratic transformations. While each of those novels deserves a separate analysis, one general comment can be offered: Galgut's protagonists look upon the personal as a refuge from the political, trying to create a life unaffected by their country's turbulent history and its challenging present, but those endeavours are often shown as ineffective and driven by unfeasible and egoistic goals. The very fact that Galgut's protagonists, for example Adam Napier in *The Impostor*, seek an intensely private existence is already a commentary on their political stance, all the more so that political events are present in the background – as they often are in Galgut's works, with varying degrees of intensity. Both in his apartheid and post-apartheid works, Galgut shows how history shapes the perception and everyday life of South Africans, doing so both by means of allegory and by a subtle exploration of the characters' interiority.

I would like to conclude this reading of *Small Circle of Beings* with another reference to Boehmer's *Postcolonial Poetics*. As we have seen, Boehmer claims that her focus is on “verbal and structural dynamics [...] through which our understanding of the particular postcolonial condition being represented (race, resistance, liberation, reconciliation, precarity, and so on) may be shaped and sharpened” (2018, 3). Among

the notions that she enumerates in parentheses, precarity comes across as especially relevant in the discussion of the postcolonial condition conveyed in Galgut's collection. Precarity characterizes the protagonists' attitudes both to their families and to the social (and racial) groups in their country. It is not only the case that Galgut's protagonists are unsure as to their position in these groups – although it is true that they struggle to find their place in their respective families and social milieus; more importantly, his protagonists often feel that their inevitable fact of belonging to these groups (if only by virtue of their origin, skin colour, and social status) puts them in a historically and politically precarious position. It would be a mistake to draw a clear distinction between the sense of personal and political precarity in Galgut's stories, as the two are intricately connected and mutually reinforcing.

## Notes

- 1 “Between July 20, 1985, and March 7, 1986, the government applied a state of emergency in many parts of the country. On June 12, 1986, it proclaimed what became an annually renewed, indefinite, nationwide state of emergency and arrested hundreds of antiapartheid activists” (Thompson 235). The State of Emergency was lifted on 8 June 1990.
- 2 As Clark and Worger observe, in the years 1984–1988 the intensity of bomb attacks, “especially of buildings (police stations, bars, restaurants) at which members of the security forces were known to gather,” increased considerably: “The number of such attacks rose from 45 in 1984, to 137 in 1985, 230 in 1986, 235 in 1987, and peaked at 281 in 1988” (104).
- 3 One of the leaders of the Great Trek, Piet Retief, offered the following statement in the *Grahamstown Journal*: “We are resolved, wherever we go, that we will uphold the just principles of liberty; but, whilst we will take care that no one shall be held in a state of slavery, it is our determination to maintain such regulations as may suppress crime, and preserve proper relations between master and servant” (qtd. in Thomson 134). As Thomson writes, while Retief (and other Boer leaders) accepted the abolition of slavery so as not to antagonize the British colonial administration, by undertaking the Great Trek they sought to establish communities based on the pre-British social order, founded on the clear and rigid division into masters and servants.
- 4 As Johan U. Jacobs writes in the context of Galgut's *In a Strange Room* (2010): “Alienation [...] characterizes all protagonists of Galgut's novels: solipsism of one kind or another is the dominant feature of their lives, and his narratives foreground the alienation of these protagonists and their efforts to break out of it” (91).
- 5 It is worth keeping in mind that in the 1980s, “[t]he Land Act and the Group Areas Act still excluded Africans from land ownership outside the Homelands and the African townships” (Thompson 228).

- 6 Alfred J. López juxtaposes “bourgeois imperial whiteness” with the “marginalized whiteness” of the impoverished and disempowered social classes. Referring to “bourgeois imperial whiteness,” he writes: “And certainly this dominant form of whiteness did and does come with all sorts of privilege and has had all manner of atrocities committed in its name” (18). Both the narrator of Galgut’s novella and her mother display attitudes characteristic of “bourgeois imperial whiteness,” with its unspoken acceptance of the social and political status quo. In this sense, they are not unlike many white South Africans during apartheid. As Mellisa Steyn writes, “[t]hroughout the apartheid era white South Africans knew they were racialized, and some of their earliest memories recount difference in how they were positioned relative to ‘others.’ What *was* taken for granted, however, was the ‘naturalness’ of being thus privileged” (122).
- 7 As J.M. Coetzee observes, “[t]he origins of this conception of the wilderness lie in pre-Israelite demonology, where the wilderness (including the ocean) was a realm over which God’s sway did not extend” (2007, 51). As Coetzee adds, wilderness later came to signify “a place of safe retreat into contemplation and purification, a place where the true ground of one’s being could be rediscovered, even as a place as yet incorrupt in a fallen world” (2007, 51).
- 8 As Coetzee writes, “[t]o pastoral art the West has assigned the task of asserting the virtues of the garden – simplicity, peace, immemorial usage – against the vices of the city: luxury, competitiveness, novelty” (2007, 3). It is characteristic that Galgut’s narrator opposes the garden not only to the wilderness but also to the city, which she perceives in terms of threatening novelty. Indeed, one of the reasons why she postpones taking her sick son to a specialist hospital is precisely because she fears the city.
- 9 I am referring to Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of the stranger as an unsettling, possibly threatening presence. As Bauman writes, the stranger’s ill-defined role – the fact that he is neither unambiguously an adversary nor an ally – disrupts social life, which is built precisely on this opposition: “And all this because the stranger is neither friend nor enemy; and because he may be both. And because we do not know, and have no way of knowing, which is the case” (55).

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