



PALIMPSEST AND SELF-REFLEXIVE NARRATION: HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN DAMON GALGUT'S THE PROMISE AND ZOË WICOMB'S PLAYING IN THE LIGHT

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the close relationship between palimpsestic memory and self-reflexive narration in *The Promise* by Damon Galgut and *Playing in the Light* by Zoë Wicomb, situating both texts within the theoretical framework of historiographic metafiction. Drawing primarily on Linda Hutcheon's formulation of historiographic metafiction, alongside insights from postcolonial theory and memory studies, the study aims to explain that both novels destabilize authoritative historical narratives of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. By following the fragmented narrative structures, temporal dislocations, and metafictional techniques, these works foreground the contractedness of history and identity. The metaphor of the palimpsest used here as a central organizing principle, by showing how suppressed histories particularly those shaped by racial violence, dispossession, and identity erasure persist beneath dominant narratives. Galgut's *The Promise* poses questions on the moral and political failures of post-apartheid reconciliation by revealing a fractured family saga, while Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* explores the instability of racial identity by showing the trope of "passing" and the recovery of suppressed genealogies. Both novels of South African fiction employ self-reflexive narration to reveal the limits of representation, highlighting the ethical dilemmas inherent in narrating trauma and historical injustice. Consequently, this study contends that these texts do not merely rewrite history but rather problematize the possibility of historical truth. By illustrating the history as layered, unstable, and mediated, they challenge readers to engage critically with the processes by which memory and identity are constructed, erased, and re-inscribed.

Keywords: *Damon Galgut, Historical Injustice, Palimpsest, Playing in the Light, Self-Reflexivity, South African Fiction, The Promise, Zoe Wicomb.*

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1. Introduction

Post-apartheid South African fiction is deeply connected with interrogating the nature of history, memory, and identity. While in this literary landscape, Damon Galgut's *The Promise* and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* stand out as meaningful contributions that challenge conventional narrative forms and historical representation. Both novels oppose linear narration and instead employ fragmented, self-conscious narrative strategies that carry the traces of the instability of memory and the contested nature of history.

Central to this study is the concept of the palimpsest, which is a manuscript that has been erased and rewritten, yet still bears traces of its earlier inscriptions, which were once erased. This metaphor of palimpsest is a powerful framework for understanding the ways in which both novels represented history as layered and recursive rather than being fixed and transparent. At the same time, the use of self-reflexive narration adds to these texts with historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing that foregrounds its own contractedness while dealing critically with historical events.

This article traces how Galgut and Wicomb employed palimpsestic structures and metafictional techniques to expose the limitations of historical representation and to foreground the ethical complexities in the process of remembering and forgetting in post-apartheid South Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

Historiographic metafiction challenges the assumption that history is a neutral or objective record of the past. Instead, it stresses that history is always created and passed by the language, shaped by ideological frameworks, and subject to reinterpretation by the readers. By incorporating the elements of metafiction such as unreliable narration, narrative intrusion, and temporal disruption, these texts show the constructed nature of both history and fiction.

The concept of the palimpsest complements this framework by highlighting the layered nature of memory and identity. As Sarah Dillon argues, the palimpsest is a powerful tool for understanding how texts, histories, and identities are constituted through processes of erasure and rewriting. In postcolonial contexts, this tool of metaphor takes on particular significance, as it reflects the overlapping and often conflicting narratives of colonization, resistance, and cultural transformation.

Postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, also adds to this study. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "third space" is particularly relevant to Wicomb's exploration of racial identity, while Spivak's idea of the subaltern brings to the surface the silencing of marginalized voices, which is the most important theme, central to both novels.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide an integrated framework for analyzing how *The Promise* and *Playing in the Light* deal with the process of writing history, memory, and identity through the lens of historiographic metafiction.

3. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *The Promise* primarily studied the themes of land dispossession, racial hierarchy, and the self/other dichotomy within the legacy of Apartheid, emphasizing socio-political injustice and failed restitution. The selected study effectively shows the material inequality and narrative silencing, but remains largely confined to thematic and ideological critique. However, it ignores the novel's complex narrative strategies, particularly its self-reflexive structure and temporal fragmentation. There is not sufficient engagement with the text as historiographic metafiction, as theorized by Linda Hutcheon, and with the idea of history as a palimpsestic layering of memory and trauma. This study deals with these gaps by analyzing the novel's narrative form, historiographic metafiction, and palimpsestic representation of history to offer a deeper epistemological critique for the readers.

Recent criticism by Elleke Boehmer (2023) deals with the narrative complexity of *The Promise*, highlighting its fluid shifts in consciousness and its self-reflexive engagement with readers. Boehmer situates the novel within the tradition of the South African national allegory, arguing that it both conforms to and subverts expectations of post-apartheid fiction through irony, fragmentation, and metafictional play (Boehmer 2023, 5–10). Similarly, focusing on Orientalism, critics show the novel's representation of racial hierarchy as a continuation of colonial "othering," where black characters remain marginalized and voiceless (Said 2003, 1–5). However, while these studies effectively deal with the themes of race, land, and narrative technique, they largely overlook the novel's deeper engagement with historiographic metafiction and its palimpsestic construction of history. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Galgut's narrative structure not only represents historical injustice but also destabilizes the processes of historical narration, memory, and truth, thereby giving a clearer epistemological critique of post-apartheid identity and representation.

Recent studies on *The Promise* emphasize its engagement with race, land, and identity, often drawing on Edward Said's concept of "othering" to explain the marginalization of black voices (Said 2003, 1–5). Critics such as Elleke Boehmer (2023) further tackle the novel's narrative experimentation, including its shifting perspectives and metafictional elements, situating it within the tradition of the South African national allegory. Similarly, readings influenced by Jacques Derrida's hauntology interpret the text as destabilizing identity through spectrality and fragmented narration (Derrida 1994). However, while these studies offer valuable insights into thematic concerns and narrative innovation, they largely remain confined to ideological and philosophical interpretations.

There is limited critical attention to how these narrative strategies function within a broader framework of historiographic metafiction and palimpsestic history. This study addresses this gap by examining how Galgut's narrative form not only represents post-apartheid realities but also questions the processes through which history, memory, and identity are constructed and understood.

(Dass 2011, 140) conceptualizes racial identity in *Playing in the Light* as fundamentally structured through processes of spatial dislocation and psychological "un-homing." He has stated that Marion's fractured subjectivity arose from the apartheid practice of "playing white," which produces identity not as a stable essence but as an ongoing condition in the state of becoming, of spatial and emotional estrangement. The domestic sphere, rather than functioning as a site of security, becomes the very locus of instability, thereby revealing how racial classification reorganizes the meaning of home itself into a space of anxiety, surveillance, and repressed memory (Dass 2011).

Furthermore, Dass focuses on Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" to demonstrate how hybridity in post-apartheid subject formation does not resolve racial contradiction but instead intensifies it through affective dissonance. However, his reading ultimately shows a critical tension that exists throughout the novel, while hybridity is theoretically framed as destabilizing essentialist racial binaries, in practice it remains entangled with structures of shame, concealment, and historical violence that continue to regulate colored identity. In this sense, race is not merely an identity marker but a discursive tool that displaces material belonging of the subjects and reconstitutes home as an unstable symbolic construct for the readers.

Although Dass provides a very strong account of the psychological and spatial dimensions of racialized identity, his analysis remains largely confined to affective and symbolic registers of the subjects. It does not fully theorize how these processes of "un-homing" are structurally produced through institutional power, narrative form, and historical systems of dispossession. This gap becomes significant when read alongside *The Promise*, where spatial exclusion is not only psychological but also materially inscribed through land ownership, inheritance, and legal-political erasure. The present study therefore, adds Dass's framework by shifting the focus from individual experiences of dislocation to the broader narratological and systemic production of self/other hierarchies within the context of post-apartheid literary representation in the novel.

Playing in the Light is extensively read as a narrative of intergenerational conflict, where the racial complicity of an older generation is reinterpreted by using the perspective of their children. The practice of "playing white" is thus framed as a historically constructed performance of identity penetrated in apartheid structures of privilege and classification. In this reading, generation becomes a key site by which racial identity is inherited, destabilized, and narratively reworked (Dass 2011). Drawing on Hans-Georg

Gadamer, critics further argue that Wicomb's use of "play" transforms identity into a performative and historical process, where the past is reactivated in the present through aesthetic form and what Gadamer terms contemporaneity (*gleichzeitigkeit*).

However, existing scholarship largely remains focused on philosophical and symbolic readings of identity as performance, leaving underexplored the material, spatial, and structural dimensions of racial "play." This study addresses this gap by analyzing self-reflexive narration and palimpsestic layering to reveal how narrative form itself becomes a site where history, identity, and racial memory are rewritten and destabilized by the author.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual analysis of selected postcolonial literary texts. The primary focus is on interpretive reading rather than collecting empirical data, allowing for an in-depth engagement with narrative form, thematic structures, and ideological implications within the texts under study. The methodology prioritizes meaning-making processes rooted in language, narrative strategies, and representational patterns.

The analytical framework used here is of Louis Althusser's concept of symptomatic reading, which enables the identification of underlying ideological structures that are not explicitly stated within the text but are embedded in its silences, contradictions, and narrative gaps. Using this approach, the study reads literary texts not only for what they express overtly but also for what they repress, displace, or render invisible in a narrative way.

By combining symptomatic reading with qualitative textual analysis, the study examines how ideology is regulated within narrative structures, particularly in relation to identity formation, racial discourse, and postcolonial power relations. This dual methodological approach allows for a critical interrogation of both surface meanings and deeper ideological formations, revealing how texts construct and destabilize categories of self, other, and belonging.

4.1. Palimpsestic Memory and Narrative Fragmentation in The Promise

Damon Galgut's *The Promise* gives a compelling way to explore the era of post-apartheid South Africa by using the lens of a palimpsest to see a collapsing Afrikaner family. The novel covers several decades, beginning in the final years of the apartheid era and extending into the democratic era after Nelson Mandela, consisting of all the silent historical details. At its core is the unfulfilled promise made by the family's matriarch, Rachel, to gift a piece of land to Salome, a Black domestic worker of the Swart family, a promise that symbolizes the broader failures of post-apartheid reconciliation, even after all the promises and all the measures.

The narrative structure that is carried in *The Promise* is the fragmented one, which is marked by sudden shifts in perspective, time, and narrative voice. Marion's state of reflection when she said "What story do I have to tell?" (p. 251) exposes the fragmented nature of the self-narration technique used in the novel. Her uncertainty in her narration signals a clash of representation; her identity cannot be narrated as a unified, linear whole in the complete version as she thought it. Instead, it emerges from the interruptions, doubts, and omissions that show the fragmented nature of the history. The narrative structure used in the novel resists the traditional autobiographical model used by the previous authors, presenting the self as incomplete in the process of becoming in the fragments. This narrative fragmentation reveals the palimpsestic nature of memory, where past events and present situations coexist in a state of tension by showing the traces of the past under the present in a unique way. The novel repeatedly flashes back key events that lead to changing the present scenarios, each time giving a new dimension of the situation that complicates the earlier interpretations by adding new hidden facts to the present.

The shifting criteria of the narrative voice again reinforce this sense of instability. The narrator moves directly between characters' thoughts, often without distinct demarcation of shifting the voice, creating a sense of disorientation that is deliberately done by the writer to show that uncertainty is the main attribute of history. Facts are incomplete and always open to new interpretations by the readers. This narrative technique opposes the authority of any single perspective, giving an insight that truth is always partial, shaped by multiple perspectives, and can be contested.

Salome's presence in the novel is particularly made significant by the author as to raise the voice of silence groups through her character. Mainly, she remains largely silent throughout the novel," she's not invisible after all" (P.21), her story operates as a suppressed layer within the narrative structure, like a palimpsestic trace that resists erasures in history, but the author has made her role significant in order to raise the voice of the submissive class of society. She is physically present, looking after Ma in her most vulnerable moments, the family treats her in the way as if she does not exist at all or if she is not a human, having all the desires. Her labor, emotions, and humanity are deliberately erased, yet they remain deeply inscribed within the household in the silent way. Like writing that has been covered over but never completely removed, Salome's existence persists beneath the Swart family's apparent history and became the picture of the class that was erased by the dominant groups.

This work also exposes the way in which apartheid's racial hierarchies continued to affect everyday relationships in minor or major ways. Salome did the most intimate and degrading tasks, while the family accepted her service as natural and unquestionable without rewarding her. Her invisibility in the novel is not accidental; it is socially constructed by the social elites. The command, "Let Salome do it," reflects the long history

of racial exploitation that structures domestic life, which was the same even after the post-apartheid time.

Importantly, Amor's recognition becomes a moment of palimpsestic revelation in the. When she sees Salome through the window, she begins to notice what has always been there but has been deliberately ignored. This act of seeing uncovers the hidden layer beneath the family's comfortable existence, which made the suppressed class live in compliance with all the injustices of the society. The past, once suppressed, resurfaces in the present by the authors narrative style.

Thus, Salome represents the erased history upon which the Swart family's privilege is built. Her silenced presence tells the readers that historical injustice can never be fully erased; it remains alive, waiting to be acknowledged and resolved by the subjects. Galgut uses this moment to reveal how personal memory and national history overlap, each carrying the traces of what society tries to forget in the deliberate way.

Moreover, the novel's narrative style in the dealing with death each section structured around a funeral of the main character shows the cyclical nature of history. Rather than progressing linearly toward resolution, the narrative circles back on itself, advocating the idea that the past continues to haunt the present in the distinct ways, and the past is not meant to be forgotten, if it is ignored then it will show its traces in the present in order to make the subjects able to interrogate the reality which was deliberately concealed.

4.2. Identity, Passing, and Palimpsest in Playing in the Light

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* again set the stage for the process of the exploration of racial identity and memory by the narrated the story of Marion Campbell, a woman who discovers accidentally that her parents had been passing as white during apartheid movement and her identity is not that what was showed to the world but was that which was hidden forcefully by them in order to get the status of upper class but the hidden identity was visible in traces like the palimpsest ways. This revelation of her truth destabilizes Marion's sense of self, laid her to the process of confrontation of the constructed nature of her identity and the hidden histories that hides her truth.

The novel's narrative structure reveals the very process of discovery, exploring the layers that with the time reveal the truth about Marion's family. The metaphor of the palimpsest is particularly appropriate here, as Marion's identity is revealed to be constructed upon erased and suppressed histories. 'The self was already a mended structure'. (P.146); Identity is showed as it is constructed in the process of becoming which is not fixed but is in the process of formation. In *Playing in the Light*, racial passing forces identity to become unstable, fragmented, and constantly reconstructed by the subjects. One cannot return to "old self" because passing has permanently altered him in the process of becoming. Subject's identity has become "a mended structure," patched

together like a broken wall having the traces of past and present mended together. The metaphor suggests that identity is not natural or in the whole; it is carefully repaired, layer upon layer, with each crack revealing the pressure of concealment in the way.

This image strongly relates with the concept of the palimpsest. Just as old writing remains visible beneath new inscriptions, John's former colored identity persists beneath his performed whiteness. The past cannot be completely erased; it continues to show through the cracks. His whiteness is therefore not original but overwritten, always in the state of vulnerability to be exposed to the society. Her journey of life becomes one of reading beneath the surface, uncovering traces of a past that had been deliberately obscured by her parents in order to get the respect in the society.

Wicomb's uses the technique of self-reflexive narration which further complicates the process of interpretation. The narrative structure draws the attention of reader to its own limitations, possess the question on the possibility of accessing an authentic past. This metafictional dimension used as a narrative strategy reveals the role of narrative in shaping identity, suggesting that who we are is inseparable from the stories we tell about ourselves this way, Wicomb demonstrates that identity is inseparable from narrative. Like the subjects are shaped not only by what happened, but by how those events are remembered, concealed, and retold by the subjects.

The theme of "passing" plays as a powerful critique of apartheid's racial classifications by the elite class. By exposing the performative nature of race, Wicomb challenges the idea of fixed identities and advocates that it is inherent in systems that enforces such categorizations in the society on the basis of races. In other words, passing can protect someone, yet it can also make the suppressed one complicit in injustice by making them the parts of the system. The novel therefore presents passing as both a necessary strategy for survival and also shows it an ethically troubling act for the subjects because it makes them complicit with all the unjustified acts.

Marion's eventual confrontation with her family's hidden past does not lead to a simple resolution but rather to a deeper understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions in the way that define her identity in the state of confusion. The novel shows that discovering who we are is a continuous journey, it is not that easy and simple, nor is something that ends neatly bringing all ambiguities to the resolutions. It also advocates that facing history is an ongoing cyclical process, because the past continues to influence the present.

4.3. Self-Reflexive Narration and the Limits of Representation

Both *The Promise* and *Playing in the Light* employed the self-reflexive narrative techniques that carries the act of storytelling. In doing so, both the novels challenge the transparency of narrative structure and exposes the processes by which meaning is constructed by the writers in the process of narration. In *The Promise*, the narrator deals

with the narrative structure, offering commentary that disrupts the illusion of realism. These moments of intrusion here are serve to remind the readers that the story is being told, not simply presented, thereby undermining the authority of the narrative voice.

Similarly, Wicomb's novel emphasizes the gaps and silences that characterize memory and history. "Why don't you write your own fucking story?" (p-251), Wicomb constructs the act of storytelling itself part of the narrative structure. Brenda acknowledges that she wants to write John's story because she finds it more fascinating than her own. This is self-reflexive narration like the novel draws attention of the readers to the process of writing, selection, and representation. It reminds readers that stories are not simply discovered; but they are just chosen, shaped, and constructed by the narrators.

Brenda's hesitation about writing her own life also shows the limits of representation. She believes her ordinary life is too "dull" to attract literary attention. This highlights a larger concern about whose stories are considered valuable and worthy of being told and whose story should not be told in order to get the maximum liking. Wicomb challenges this idea by exposing how literary value is often shaped by race, class, and public interest in the longer way.

Marion's angry response in the novel "Why don't you write your own fucking story?" possess an ethical question, can one subject truly represent another subject's experience? Her reaction shows the danger of revealing someone else's history, especially a history shaped by racial passing and secrecy in deliberate way. It shows her resolution towards writing the facts of own life, she as not encouraging her to write a constructed story which is based on the false interpretation.

Brenda's final reply, "I suspect you don't," is devastating reply. It reveals that Marion herself does not fully has the knowledge her father's story. This moment highlights one of the novel's central idea, which was the past can never be completely known or perfectly represented by the writers. Memory is in the fragments, and family histories are often constructed on silence, concealment, and repressions. No one has the accurate meaning of the knowledge about the complexities of life and the past events, as past cannot be fully captured no matter how one tries to get it.

The passage therefore carries the deep message that representation always has its limits. No single narrator possesses complete authority because there are multiple views in the narration. Every story is partial, shaped by perspective of different subjects, and open to revision. Wicomb uses this uncertainty not as a weakness, but as an ethical strength, acknowledging the complexity of recovering hidden histories. The narrative acknowledges its own inability to fully capture the past, revealing the limitations of language and representation. This self-awareness is a defining feature of historiographic metafiction, as it highlights the tension between the desire to represent history and the

recognition of its inherent unknowability. Which clearly means that history is subjective because of its construction.

4.4. Ethics of Memory and Post-Apartheid Responsibility

The link with historiographic metafiction in these novels is totally ethical. Both texts engaged with questions of responsibility, justice, and the possibility of reconciliation in the era of post-apartheid context by making the use of narrative power.

In *The Promise*, the failure to fulfill the promise is the metaphor for all the inequality and the inadequacy of symbolic gestures in dealing with the systemic injustice. The line, "But a promise is a promise," (p-115) shows the moral weight that the unfulfilled promise had carried throughout the novel. It is more than a simple commitment; it becomes a symbol of historical justice that the Swart family repeatedly postponed for many years, showing the broad injustices of post-apartheid time that no matter though the blacks got their rights but there was still the injustice in the society carried in on or another way. The novel advocates the idea that true reconciliation requires more than the mere act of acknowledgment; it needs a strict action and accountability of the subjects. There must be raised for their rights, subjects need to ask for their right they should not behave in a they were supposed to do in the apartheid time.

In *Playing in the Light*, the concealment of identity raises the direct questions about complicity and moral responsibility. The line, "Under the glaring spotlight of whiteness, they played diligently, assiduously; the past, and with it conscience, shrunk to a black dot in the distance," (p-146) powerfully carries the ethical cost of racial passing in *Playing in the Light*. In order to live within apartheid's brutal racial hierarchy, subjects had to perform whiteness with constant care and discipline in order to hide their real self. This performance needs more than a change of appearance; it needs the suppression of memory, community, and moral conscience of the subject. The past had to be pushed away forcefully because remembering it would threaten the privileges that whiteness provided. Wicomb told that by his narrative style that passing was both a strategy of survival and a form of ethical compromise. The family's success is linked to their act of distancing themselves from the very people and histories from which they emerged and the history they own. This shows the ways by which apartheid forced subjects into morally impossible choices, where survival often came at the cost of complicity with all the unjust ways.

In the post-apartheid context, ethical memory needs the resolution from the recovery of these buried histories. Remembering the past is not simply an act of recollection, but it needs an act of moral responsibility. True reconciliation can begin only when suppressed memories are brought back into view but in active way to stand and raise voice against it not to become part of it. While Marion's parents' decision to pass as white can be seen as a strategy for survival in the society where blacks were suppressed by the whites in the socially constructed ways, it also involves a string away of their heritage

which is a serious act of tacking away their identity from the subjects softly. Both novels thus mirror the complexities of ethical engagement with the past, stressing that memory is not only a matter of recollection but also an act of responsibility, and that it requires concrete steps to achieve resolution.

5. Conclusion

Both the novels of South African literature show that post-apartheid fiction mirrors the complicated relationship of memory, history and the subject's identity. By using the historiographic metafiction and palimpsest structures as the lens this article has showed that how the novels challenged the idea that subject can recover the past neatly the linear way. Instead history exists in the form of layers under the present, which is inscribed upon the both personal and collective life of the subject in the complicated way. The concept of the palimpsest and historiographic metafiction are the core concepts for the text. In both the novels past is overwritten by the present and the traces of past are visible in the hidden way. So, past is not passive but acts as an active agent which demands for the continual engagements and understanding. The technique of self-reflexive narration used in the article makes the article powerful for interrogating the historical truth. This gives an insight for the readers that history is formed by the narrative power in subjective way. Along with that both the novel carries the ethical responsibility by insisting that act of remembering is not only an intellectual exercise for resolution but it needs a moral responsibility of the subjects in order to culminate the existing injustices in the society. This tells the unfinished nature of the apartheid and requires active methods to bring resolution. Consequently, this work suggests that identity is not the complete whole but it is an ongoing process which is shaped by the conflicting memories and unresolved histories. In doing so these novels give the insight to the readers as resolution requires considering one's own responsibility towards history, memory and justice. Which requires active process of interpretation and reflection by the readers to get resolution.

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