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Understanding Rhetoric of Silence: Hope for Post-Apartheid Racial Discordance in Damon Galgut's *The Promise*

Shyam Sundar Khadka
Assistant Professor
Department of English, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University
Patandhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal
Email: shyamkhadka014@gmail.com
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Abstract

Traditional rhetoric is largely concentrated on the soundness of logical arguments with the goal of persuading the audience. Silence is often rendered as absence of meaning, thus regarded as a lack in the communication process. However, the purpose of this research is to analyze silence in Damon Galgut's The Promise as a rhetorical art with the goal of establishing understanding between the communication parties. Furthermore, it analyzes how the writer has established silence as a means to negotiate with the racial disharmony in South African post-apartheid society. To do this, the article builds upon the theoretical frameworks developed by Cheryl Glenn and Kennan Ferguson which foreground silence as a rhetorical art. The study finds that the novel presents silence as an alternative rhetoric through the silences of two major characters Salome and Amor. Salome's silence coalesces with her lack of agency whereas Amor deploys silence to constitute her individual space, disavow and resist the injustice of her family and come to terms with Salome's unprivileged condition. The research helps to understand how rhetorical silence can be useful in bridging the rift caused by racial discordance in particular and to initiate proper communication in situation of complex cultural antagonisms.

Keywords*:* Agency, alternative rhetoric, communication, individual space, injustice

Introduction

The Promise, winner of 2021 booker prize, narrates a story, which spans for thirty three years, of a South African Afrikaner family witnessing its gradual decline with the death of the family's matriarch Rachel aka Ma, the patriarch Maine aka Pa and their two children Astrid and Anton, weaved together through the promise that the family has made to their black maid Salome, which is never fulfilled until Amor, the youngest and the only surviving daughter, finally keeps the promise. Interestingly two of the major characters Salome and Amor are marked by their relative silences (Galgut).

It is curious that despite the novel's treatment of silence as a benchmark of the identities of Salome and Amor, there has not been any extended research on the nature of these characters' silence. Therefore, this study aims to investigate these characters' silence from rhetorical perspective, because otherwise rendering their silences as mere voicelessness seriously thwarts our understanding of the novel, given these characters strategically important roles in staging the complexities of race laden post-apartheid South African society. This research seeks answers for: What are the reasons behind silences of Salome and Amor? What rhetorical functions do their silences serve?

Literature Review

Pertaining to the recent publication of the novel in 2021, the research on this book is still at its inception, however, good enough to show popular research interests among scholars. Among them are related to the politics of Booker Prize (Boehmer), masculinity studies (Carolin) and politicization of emotions (Gao) but none of the researches has paid attention to the rhetorical analysis. Taking this point as a research gap, this paper explores the rhetorical meaning of silence in post-apartheid South African society.

Elleke Boehmer argues how Booker prize selection committee upholds "particular idea of South African novel" which "takes the shape of something approximating a national allegory that grapples – of course – with the theme, broadly, of the country's race problem: that is, with issues of apartheid and post-apartheid" (6). This means any literary work that represents a different South Africa with different themes and issues except that of racial antagonism might not stand much chance to be awarded with Booker prize.

However, Sofia Kostalec holds a different view than Boehmer, when she argues how the novel despite having certain overlapping with the tradition of South African novel writing, nevertheless stands unique in certain ways: "Galgut's refusal to disclose the terms in which the future might unfold for Amor or Salome is a deliberately queer negation of the rhetoric of futurity that has so relentlessly structured South African socio-political discourses since the late apartheid years" (3).

Moving away from the politics of Booker prize, Yin Gao sheds light on the novel's depiction of various kind of emotions such as anger, fear, denial and compassion form the framework of Affective theory. She argues that "the Africans' racial emotions and attitudes have been moderated and manipulated by gender politics, racial politics and class politics" and contends that the solution to these sweltering emotions lies in a "compassion-based African Ubuntu philosophy" (24). This philosophy which promotes understanding over persuasion can be an egalitarian approach to deal with racial issues.

Likewise, Andy Carolin explores the loosening grip of patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa. She posits that the three "constitutive forces of apartheid's patriarchies—including fatherhood, Christianity, and the security state" have lost their potency and resulted in the "decentring of white masculinities" (1).

Although brief, Nonhlanhla Dlamini makes composite commentary on *The Promise.* She attributes to the writer's identity positions of being both on the margin and at the centre "of racialized and gendered power" as "a white and queer male" that gave him a narrative voice which "indicts and places the Afrikaner at the heart of South Africa's delayed and convoluted political and economic transitions" (138). Moreover, she also observes the feasibility of reading the novel from the perspective of "speech act made by Rachel on her sickbed within earshot of her reflective/dissident daughter, Amor, and nonchalant husband" (139). Despite the novel's sophisticated presence, she nevertheless finds its lapse in "reimagining and normalising racial relations beyond apartheid architecture" (139).

Theoretical Framework

The research uses qualitative research methodology making a close textual analysis of the novel *The Promise* and avails to the rhetorical theories on silence by Cheryl Glenn and Kennan Ferguson as theoretical framework.

Silence is mostly understood as an absence of meaning, a binary opposite of speech. Thus, speech is privileged to silence resulting in those with speech exerting power over those without it. Cheryl Glenn in her ground breaking book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* mentions, "Silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience" (2). However, this long held belief of silence as a vacuum has been subverted by a number of scholars including Glenn herself, for whom silence is "a constellation of symbolic strategies" (xi). For her, silence of any kind, be it imposed or intentional can "reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power" (xi). Thus, it is a cliché to see silence as an oppressive tool; it can be as much a powerful means to resist power, exert control and dismantle hierarchies.

Moreover, Glenn in her article "The Language of Rhetorical Feminism Anchored in Hope" asserts that the aim of alternative rhetorical delivery such as silence is "understanding rather than persuasion" (340). She argues that persuasion as such relies on a divide between rhetor and the audience because without difference there is no need of persuasion. Thus, she believes in "a multiphased process of understanding, allowing time for all sides to listen, keep silent, consider, and weigh" (340).

Likewise, Kennan Fergusson rejects the monolithic understanding of silence as absence or meaningless speechlessness. Instead he foregrounds the resistant power of silence: "The very existence of silence thereby becomes a form of resistance, of non-participation in these practices of community building, identity formation, and norm setting" (6) He further adds that "silence does not merely reinforce or resist power, but can be used to constitute selves and even communities" (1). He recognizes the role of silence in continuing familial bond even amidst threatening disagreements among family members. Thus, he disagrees with those who see silence as "a threat to community, as failure and malfunction" (2). Thus, silence can function in myriad of ways, even in paradoxical ways. It can resist power or "can be constitutive" (11).

Analysis I: Whiteness and Rhetoric of Silence

Going through the novel, it is paradoxical that the novel, with the promise made to the black maid Salome at the centre, leaves her such a minimal space that she is almost on the verge of non-existence. Even when she is present, her presence is dubious pertaining to her silence almost all of the time. This can have a possible justification based on "the Marxist maxim that the most ideologically entrenched position is the one that appears invisible, unimportant, or natural" (110) as Krista Ratcliffe reminds us. However, Boehmer mentions about what the writer himself has to say about the speechlessness of Salome: "In virtually every interview about the novel Galgut has given, the question of black voicelessness – Salome's silence – has been raised. Galgut has addressed the matter in various interesting ways that always come back to the illegitimacy of 'speaking for'" (7). Thus, the writer's unwillingness to give much voice to Salome is the result of lack of authorial agency to speak on behalf of the subaltern character. If Salome speaks much, it won't be her voice but that of the author's because as a black maid she lacks agency. So, if the readers want to understand Salome, then they should do it from her silence.

In addition to the ethical concern, the writer's lack of authorial agency to speak on behalf of the subaltern character Salome can be linked to his recognition of readerly agency in the meaning making process of a text. On one occasion the writer comments that he has told us so little about Salome because as readers, we have not cared to know much about her: "if Salome's home hasn't been mentioned before it's because you have not asked, you didn't care to know" (285). Thus, it is ironical that the book which centers on Salome herself has so sparse information about her because as in everyday life, in fictional world too, people might not have much interest to know about an old black maid. So, the missing information

about Salome is rhetorical- to underscore her almost invisible position in South African white society and ironically in readers' world too.

Relating to the silencing of the blacks, Bell Hooks conflates it with the historical subjugation of the colored people by whiteness, which only allowed whites-the subject position and blacks-the object position. Being the objects, the black slaves-later turned servants could not speak, as objects would have no agency. She explains: "black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better-less threatening-servants" (340). Whiteness reduced the blacks into mere working machines having no volition, emotion, thought and speech.

Just after Ma dies of cancer, the narrator narrates the absence of Salome, ironically amidst her presence: "She was with Ma when she died, right there next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible. And whatever Salome feels is invisible too" (19). Salome's silence is negative; her inability to speak is back grounded on the racial injustice with its historical roots in slavery. Her silence is not voluntary but compulsive. However, even her enforced silence is not devoid of meaning, it is metaphorical and has the power to debunk the contradictions inherent in racial power structure. When Desiree realizes that Salome has Amor's phone number but remained quiet about it, she complains "But why didn't you tell me?" to which Salome replies "You didn't ask me" (259). Desiree is worried about the blame that people will lay on her for not letting Anton's death known to Amor. Desiree thinks that it wouldn't have happened only "if the stupid maid had just spoken up" (259). For her incompetency of not being able to timely inform Amor, she takes it out on Salome. Salome's inability to partake in the conversational discourse without being asked and the consequent trouble faced by Desiree due to Salome's silence reveals the problematic nature of such racist rhetorical tradition even for the whites. This also reveals the hypocrisy of the whiteness to simultaneously impose silence on blacks and explain the same silence as a proof of their stupidity.

The novel doesn't see speech and silence as binary opposites but as productive counterparts that complement each other. To borrow Dlamini's words, "The narrative intertwines with and blurs the sacred/profane; life/ death; physical/ghostly realms; religiosity/spirituality/ secular; hetero-/homosexual; black/white binaries in ways that make the narrative explicitly 'ordinary' as opposed to political" (139). With the same token of deconstruction, the narrative also destabilizes the binary between speech/silence and presence/absence. The novel makes it clear that silence is discernible, what's required is just the attention to

comprehend the meaning ingrained in silence: "there is no silencing the voices … But whose are they, the voices, why can't we hear them now? Shhh, you'll hear them, if you pay attention, if you will only listen" (10). No systemic oppression can completely silence voices; every shushed voice has a meaning if there is intent to listen.

Even if silences are imposed, they nevertheless are strategic – strategy for survival. Hooks asserts that for the blacks, "Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility" (340), which inculcates among other things turning deaf and mute. To look into the whites' eyes, to talk back with the whites would mean equality, which was an offense for the colored people to which there would be brutal punishments. However, when it comes to silence, there is no unanimity between form and function-absence of speech doesn't mean absence of voice/meaning. Desiree comments about Salome: "It's because they're always around, like ghosts, you almost don't notice them. But it's a mistake to think the same applies in reverse, they're always watching and listening, helping themselves and each other. They know all your secrets, everything about you, even the things other white people don't know" (249). Even though Desiree recognizes the blacks' presence, it's not to empower them but rather to further marginalize them as keeper of secrets, as looming threats to the whites. However, her comment sheds light on how presence and absence with their affiliations to speech and silence respectively are largely matter of cultural constructions and not objective realities.

Analysis II: Rhetorical Silence, Understanding, Individual Space and Resistance

Carolin explains "the dissolution of formerly consistent Afrikaner identity" (6). This also implies the dissolution of Afrikaner familial structure, represented by the Swart family, which is an integral part of Afrikaner identity. There are myriad of factors which led towards the downfall of this white family but one of the crucial factors is its negation of silence as a rhetorical art and its over estimation of verbal rhetoric. Ferguson discusses about the role of silence in maintaining harmony in the family amidst disharmony as family is constituted of members having different and even conflicting motivations and orientations. So, silences bind them together in the moments of intense disorientation. For Ferguson, silences "are often a useful strategy to enable domestic continuity in the face of radical discontinuity" (2).

When Rachel passes away, Maine's elder sister, Tannie Marina, the family's female patriarch, goes to pick up Amor from her hostel. The context demands of her mourning over Rachel's death resorting to silence over verbosity. However, she has a strong disgust over Rachel's decision to return back to her Jewish religion. The narrator reports the talk she has with Amor, "how Ma has betrayed the whole family by changing her religion. Correction,

by going back to her old religion. To being a Jew!" (5-6). Her distaste of her sister in law changing her religion is not over yet, even in the aftermath of her death. Finally, her hatred reaches its climax when she says it loud to her husband Ockie, "the wife is out of picture at last" (12) in the presence of Rachel's youngest daughter Amor. This is a question of ethical crisis faced by Marina as an individual but more by her patriarchal Afrikaner lineage in its promotion of speech irrespective of the circumstance when being silent is the best possible response for the rhetoric situation at hand. At its best, such an abuse of speech brings the family's role to provide emotional support to its members under question and at its worst leads to the disintegration of family.

In addition, the nonalignment with silence and the resulting collision between family members is evident when Anton is absent in "low-key festivity just a day after Ma has died" (57) to be with his girlfriend Desiree. Mad at his son, Manie scolds him, "Your mother died yesterday, but you have time for wine and loose women. Nice" (58). Anton retorts instantly, "Loose women?...Your sins too, dear father. The women and the wine" (59). This further deepens the rift between father and son, resulting in Anton's decision to leave the family behind, which he does not return back to until the last moment of his father, but then too without any love for his dying father.

Thus, this weakening of the familial bond, which eventually leads to the dissolution of the Swart family, has its root in the denial of silence as a rhetorical means to negotiate their misunderstandings, differences, disagreements and conflicts, especially when they relate to sensitive issues such as manners, ethics and sexuality. Glenn and Ratcliffe bring into prominence the constitutive role of silence and listening: "the arts of silence and listening offer people multiple ways to negotiate and deliberate, whether with themselves or in dyadic, small-group, or large-scale situations" (3). Contrary to the other members of the Swart family, Amor, the youngest and the only one to survive in the Swart family, dwells on silence most of the time the novel runs through. The nature of her silence evolves over time from enforced silence to intentional silence as she grows from a girl child of 13 to a middle aged woman of 45.

Her early phase silence is the result of lack of agency of a teenage girl. When aunt Marina objects to her mother's resorting to Judaism, the narrator speaks on Amor's behalf, "What is Amor supposed to do about it? She's just a child, she has no power" (6). Likewise, Amor is the one who is present when Pa makes promise to Ma that he would give the Lombard Place to Salome. Later on she wants to talk about it with Pa, however, this time too she fails. Pa asks to Amor, "What are we actually talking about?" She wants to say, "(Salome's

house)" but this time too "when she speaks he can't hear her" (28). Thus, her silence is imposed upon her by her dad and her family, which seizes power from her and renders her to the margin of the conversational power structure.

Furthermore, Amor reflects upon the gendered nature of speech, which empowers men with voice but downcasts women refusing its access. She is amazed by the way her brother has access to speech anytime the way he wants: "Amazement, in a way. That he could speak like that. Could say what he did. It must be wonderful to be a man!" (64-65). In contrast, "she's used to being treated as a blur" (65). Amor ruminates on her helplessness on not being able to articulate herself when Pa acts against his own promise of sending her back to hostel: "She knows better than to argue, she can hear from his voice that it's useless. Even though he promised, and a Christian never goes back on his word, her needs are minor, she doesn't matter" (83). Glenn and Ratcliffe posit, "speaking out has long been the gendered signal of masculinity, silence has long been gendered "feminine," as a lamentable essence of weakness" (4). Thus, Amor's early affiliation with silence has to do with her cultural position of belonging to a feminine gender and the vulnerability of her tender age.

However, in the later phases, she resorts to intentional silence, which makes her silence all the more rhetorical. Her reservation to partake in her family's affairs symbolizes her disavowal and resistance of her family's injustice against Salome and her engineering of an individual space, impenetrable by those who do not share her life's philosophy of altruism. Ferguson asserts the role of silence in the construction of personal space: "Silence is a ceasing of participation, a discovery of self by cutting off external stimuli" (6). He further posits silence as a means of resistance, "silence is a more overt refusal to participate in the normative linguistic practices" and it "can prove to be powerful not only as isolation, but for the social function of self- or group-withdrawal as a resistance" (7).

Amor's disinclination to be in touch with her family is evident when her elder sister Astrid says, "Really, Really wish you'd get a cell phone, like a normal person" (163). Instead of being in communion with her family and be the part of family nuisance and injustice, helping the needy is her life's ultimate purpose. She works in HIV ward in a hospital as a nurse because "Amor is driven to do it, something compulsive in how she seeks out suffering and tries to ease it" (168). Her brother Anton agrees that "Kindness, that's her thing" (209). Thus, the silence she holds against her family allows her to resist power that her family could exercise in making her agree with their decision not to give Salome the Lombard place. It's the silence that has yielded power in Amor. Anton reflects about her

transformation, “Part of the change he can see in her face, something fixed and unyielding. Not how she used to be. That weakness is gone” (219).

One thing of particular interest in Amor is her decision to forsake the share of her property she inherits from the family on the condition of transferring the ownership of the Lombard place to Salome. This altruistic behavior at the cost of self sacrifice is a huge transformation in Salmoe, given her fascination with racial hegemony, however slight, during her early years. When she meets Lukas, the son of Salome, a black boy of thirteen, of her same age, his “sweat sticks cloth on skin” (20). After having some talk, the boy “jumps over to her rock” and she says, “Urgh … You need to wash” (21).With that white egocentrism, she must have undergone through a lot of transformation except the usual maturity that comes along with age to recognize others’ needs as more valuable than her own. Glenn in her essay “The language of rhetorical feminism, anchored in hope” claims that it’s the power of rhetorical silence that fosters empathy and understanding. She argues that silence offers “the spaciousness necessary for the rhetor to acknowledge her own embodied experiences and perspectives as well as those of her counterparts” (340). Thus, it’s Amor’s silence which allowed her to reflect and meditate upon the marginalized position of Salome and the injustice of her family against her. She doesn’t see herself much different from Salome when it comes to being rendered invisible. So, in this sense, she sees herself as one with Salome and her cause inseparable from the black maid’s. When Pa makes promise to Ma, both Salome and Amor are present but both of them are non-existent for the couple. Amor reflects: “They forgot I was there, in the corner. They didn’t see me, I was like a black woman to them” (19). Thus, Amor’s silence is not an absence of meaning but resonates with the deepest meaning of humankind-understanding and compassion. Unlike in a commonplace rhetorical transaction, Amor and Salome do not stand apart but feel coherently unified and the rhetorical delivery is not persuasion but understanding. Her faith in creating common space, which can foster togetherness on the ground of respect and equality, is evident when she engages in a silent dialogue with her dead brother: “Yes, she can live here, on this side, and Anton can have the other. It’s possible to share brother, see” (275). This stands on the opposite pole with what Marina has to say about the Lombard place, “Useless ground, full of stones, you can do nothing with it. But it belongs to our family, nobody else, and there’s power in that” (12). Marina’s postcolonial white ideology blinds her to the need of sharing and creating space for coexistence in post-apartheid South Africa, whereas Amor feels the need of common space for harmony to prevail in the land. Again Glenn posits the role of silence to work through a solution to a problem, “What better way to reflect calmly on an issue, think through a solution, or compose a response than to

remain silent?" (340). Thus, speech is not always the key, sometimes it is meditative silence that helps us to reflect on others' underprivileged conditions and develop empathy that promote harmony and peace in the society.

However, there can still be skepticism at the self sacrificing model of Amor which emanates from her silence as the safe landing space for post-apartheid South African society. The land which she hands over to Salome can be taken back as "there is a land claim lodged against the farm," which can turn her gift into "a poisoned chalice" (281). More important is the hatred borne by Lukas for all the whites in general without any positive discrimination, which epitomizes the growing racial bitterness. He makes heated charges to Salome at her offering, "Three fucked-up rooms with a broken roof. And we must be grateful?" (285). Nevertheless amidst the prevalent racial antagonism, Amor's honest attempt, if not optimism, harbors hope. Glenn in "The language of rhetorical feminism, anchored in hope" applauds the role of rhetors of alternative rhetorical arts such as silence in harnessing hope amidst difficulties, "In a deliberate turn from proof-driven logic, persuasion, and domination, these rhetors show us how to remain open to diversity; to challenge to our beliefs; to change either alone or with our audience; and to realize opportunities for coalescing and understanding" (341). Thus, Amor seeks out to bridge the rift of racial discordance finally keeping the promise her family has made to Salome long time ago knowing that it may not be enough to appease Lukas's disbelief in renewed race relation. However, her deep understanding of Salome's problem, which gets across to her because of Salome's silence and her own silence, has transformed her into an empathetic human, which provides the book a hopeful closure.

Conclusion

This study argues that the silences of two major characters Salome and Amor are not vacuums in the communication process, but are symbolically meaningful and mean as much or even more than verbal rhetoric. For this purpose, the research examines the silences of these characters built upon the rhetorical theoretical frameworks developed by Glenn and Fergusson. It analyzes the causes of their silence and functions their silences serve in rhetorical transactions. The study finds out that their silences are not meaningless absences but reverberate with meanings and implications. However, due to their different cultural positioning despite being of the same feminine gender, their silences have varied communication functions. Salome's silence is largely imposed by whiteness to systemically render her existence invisible. Nevertheless, her silence, does not mean voicelessness, it can reach out to Amor voicing the injustice she has undergone through. At times, her silence also reveals the inherent contradiction of the racial power structure. Amor's early stage silence as a teenage girl coincides with the silence of Salome, an epitome of denied agency due to her feminine gender and her vulnerable age. However, as she grows older, she uses her silence to create her own individual space separate from her family, to exert control over her family, and to reflect upon, understand and empathize with Salome's disadvantaged

condition. Thus, unlike in traditional verbal rhetoric, the outcome of the communication exchange between these two characters is not persuasion but understanding.

The research emphasizes that silence can be as important a rhetorical art as verbal rhetoric. No systemic oppression can completely silence the voice because voice can be independent of speech. The rhetoric of silence recognizes speechless rhetors as valid participants in rhetorical transactions, where their silent voices can be understood and their problems addressed. This faith in understanding, empathy and compassion fostered and valued by rhetoric of silence can provide a peaceful resolution to the complexity of racial problems of post-apartheid South African society. Except in troubled race relations, the rhetoric of silence can have important implications in pedagogy, gender studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies to listen to the voices of those who are silenced or choose to remain silent.

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