

# The Singularity of Damon Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings*<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

This article offers a close reading of Damon Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings*, a novella which attracted little interest upon its initial publication in 1988 and remains one of the most critically neglected works in his oeuvre. I suggest that the novella's neglect sheds light on some of the reading protocols which governed the reception of local writing in the late apartheid years and continue to inform definitions of what "properly" constituted South African literature during this period. I examine a number of key paratexts which attempted to legitimise *Small Circle of Beings* within the field of anti-apartheid writing, typically by using a "mimetic" or "historicist" conception of allegory which insisted on Galgut's ineluctable submission to his heavily politicised context. In a discussion which takes its cue from Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, I endeavour to "resist the allegorical reading" of *Small Circle of Beings* in this article and provide an analysis of the novella which preserves, rather than resolves, its many indeterminacies, including its ambiguous chronotope. I suggest, more broadly, that attending to the "singularity" of a novel like *Small Circle of Beings* enlivens us to the heterogeneity of apartheid-era South African writing, which is often retrospectively defined in monolithic terms.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bied 'n noukeurige lesing van Damon Galgut se *Small Circle of Beings*, 'n novelle wat min aandag getrek het by die aanvanklike publikasie daarvan in 1988, en steeds een van die krities mees geringgeskatte werke in sy oeuvre is. Ek voer aan dat die miskenning van die novelle lig werp op sommige van die leesprotokols wat die resepsie van plaaslike skryfwerk in die laat apartheidsjare oorheers het en steeds inhoud gee aan definisies van wat "na regte" die Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur gedurende hierdie tydperk uitgemaak het. Ek bestudeer 'n aantal sleutel-paratekste waarin gepoog word om *Small Circle of Beings* binne die

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1. This article has been extracted from my PhD thesis, submitted to the University of the Witwatersrand in 2014, entitled "Damon Galgut and the Critical Reception of South African Literature". My grateful acknowledgement and thanks are owed to my supervisors, Prof Michael Titlestad and Dr Ashlee Masterson, for their valuable feedback on this study.

veld van anti-apartheid-skryfwerk te legitimeer, tipies deur die gebruik van 'n "mimetiese" of "historisistiese" konsepsie van allegorie wat nadruk lê op Galgut se onvermybare onderwerping aan sy hewig verpolitiseerde konteks. In 'n bespreking na die voorbeeld van Derek Attridge se *The Singularity of Literature* poog ek in hierdie referaat om die allegoriese lesing van *Small Circle of Beings* te weerstaan en 'n ontleding van die novelle te gee wat die vele onbepaaldhede daarvan, insluitende die dubbelsinnige chronotopos, handhaaf eerder as oplos. Ek doen breedweg aan die hand dat aandag aan die "singulariteit" van 'n novelle soos *Small Circle of Beings* ons begrip aanwakker vir die heterogeniteit van Suid-Afrikaanse skryfwerk uit die apartheid-era, wat dikwels by nabetraging in monolitiese terme gedefinieer word.

This article offers a close reading of Damon Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings*, a novella published during the height of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle but which makes no reference to the controversial political realities which shaped its author's context. It describes, instead, the suffering of a young boy from the perspective of his mother, who is forced to witness her son's deterioration after he develops a malignant tumour in his throat. It is ostensibly a strongly autobiographical narrative: Galgut, too, was diagnosed with cancer in his early childhood and spent a number of years battling the illness. In its sustained meditation on private, familial trauma, the novella marked a significant departure from Galgut's debut work, *A Sinless Season*, a metaphysical crime thriller which had been published six years earlier and which had been enthusiastically received by critics, who judged him "one of the most promising literary discoveries in South Africa" (Von Hirschberg 1983: 23). *A Small Circle of Beings*, however, failed to attract any significant interest, from reviewers or scholars, and it remains perhaps the most neglected of all of Galgut's works.

In this article, I suggest that the novella's neglect by critics sheds light on some of the reading protocols which governed the reception of South African writing in the late apartheid years and continue to inform definitions of what "properly" constituted local literature during this period. I examine a number of key paratexts which attempted to legitimise *Small Circle of Beings* within the field of anti-apartheid writing, typically by using a "mimetic" or "historicist" conception of allegory which insisted on Galgut's ineluctable submission to his heavily politicised context. In a reading that takes its cue from Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, I endeavour to "resist the allegorical reading" (2005: 35)<sup>2</sup> of *Small Circle of*

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2. For a critique of Attridge's analysis of allegorical reading, see Chris Thurman, "Places Elsewhere, Then and Now: Allegory 'Before' and 'After' South Africa's transition" which elegantly complicates the distinction between an allegorical reading and one that responds to a text's "singularity". Thurman notes that "one may be doing justice to the singularity and inventiveness of a literary work by responding to its invitation to allegorize, to its quality of what we might call 'allegoricity', because in doing so we are working through the operations of its meaning – irrespective of whether we

*Beings* and to preserve, rather than resolve, its many indeterminacies, including – as I outline below – its ambiguous chronotope. I suggest, more broadly, that attending in this way to the “singularity” of a novel like *Small Circle of Beings* enlivens us to the heterogeneity of apartheid-era South African writing, which is often retrospectively defined in monolithic terms. My approach, it should be noted, is facilitated by historical hindsight and the distance we now have from the political and cultural debates which were quite rightly fixated on overthrowing apartheid. It is offered, then, less as a corrective interpretation than an augmented one, which leverages retrospection in order to respond to those aspects of the novella which did not readily cohere with the hegemonic imperatives that shaped the context of its production.

The description of the 2005 reprint of *Small Circle of Beings*, published by Atlantic Books, promises us a collection of short stories which will “[transport] us to 1980s South Africa where politics begins at home”.<sup>3</sup> In the title novella, however, 1980s South Africa is never explicitly cited as the story’s setting, which, in fact, remains unspecified throughout the narrative. Indeed, *Small Circle of Beings* is a work of curious omissions: the protagonist herself is unnamed but for the odd reference to her unmarried surname, as is the precise nature of the illness which threatens her son David’s life. This is not to say that the novella is definitively not set in South Africa, but rather that there is a blurring between the fictional events and their extra-textual referents, which frustrates our efforts to read *Small Circle of Beings* as expressive of a historically definitive time and place. In order to impute a late-apartheid context to the novella, as the distributors do, we have to apply a number of interpretative mechanisms which prove especially revealing of the modes of literary evaluation that informed and, I would argue, constrained the reception of Galgut’s early writing. Indeed, as I explore in this article, a reading which too readily reconciles *Small Circle of Beings* with the socio-historical context of its production, is likely to miss its astute reflections on the peculiarly and painfully disorienting effects of

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arrive at some stable allegorical scheme” (2009: 99-100). Importantly, however, as Thurman’s discussion acknowledges, Attridge’s comments refer specifically to a “mimetic” form of allegory which serves to fix what might be very ambiguous connections between text and historical landscape and thus problematically reduce a novel’s referential ambit. Thurman offers Stephen Slemon’s conception of postcolonial allegory, which stresses that history is “contingent upon fiction”, as an alternative.

3. The description can be found in the blurb for *Small Circle of Beings* on amazon.com. See <http://www.amazon.com/Small-Circle-Beings-Damon-Galgut/dp/184354461X>. My citations in this article refer, however, to the original edition of the text, published in 1988 by Lowry Publishers.

illness which, the novella suggests, render the material realities of the world external to the suffering of the sickened body both inaccessible and uncannily insubstantial.

A restrained, unassuming work about the private betrayals and bereavements of an individual domestic life, *Small Circle of Beings* did not readily articulate, at the time of its publication, with South Africa's heavily politicised literary culture: the National English Literary Museum (NELM) archives have only three local reviews of the novel on record and it has not, to the best of my knowledge, received any published scholarly attention. Although it was thus primarily received with plain disinterest, the novella did prompt the ire of at least one critic, who – predictably – remonstrated Galgut for his disengagement from the socio-historical realities of his immediate context. Writing for the *Southern African Review of Books*, Marianne Puxley conceded admiration for the collection's stylistic achievements (describing herself as “a little in love” (1988: 25) with the elegance of Galgut's prose), but expressed dissatisfaction with what she viewed as its considerable ethico-political failures. Her review is worth quoting at some length, exemplifying, as it does, the “widespread assumption”, as Derek Attridge notes, “that any responsible and principled South African writer, especially during the apartheid years, will have had as a primary concern the historical situation of the country and the suffering of the majority of its people” (2005: 33).<sup>4</sup>

Being a little in love, I could have overlooked any flaws in Galgut's world all too easily. However, I feel bound to raise an eyebrow at Galgut's restricted field of vision. In four out of five stories, his characters lack any broad social or political context.

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4. Louise Bethlehem has comprehensively outlined the pressures which were placed on South African writers to “bear witness” to political realities during the anti-apartheid struggle and which promoted a commitment to the tenets of a narrowly conceived mode of documentary realism. This position was not, as Bethlehem shows, without its detractors, including the important contributions of scholars like Njabulo Ndebele and Lewis Nkosi, who criticised the formal impoverishment of much of the political realism that was being produced by local writers, as well as in the scholarship of critics like Tessa Dovey and David Attwell, who offered a number of theoretical *ripostes* in their work on J.M. Coetzee to uninterrogated assumptions about the operations of fictional mimesis. Nonetheless the “rhetoric of urgency” (Bethlehem 2004: 94), which imbued writers with a form of socio-political agency, able to reveal historical “truths”, remained a powerfully hegemonic imperative throughout the anti-apartheid struggle, as Attridge's comments here suggest. See Bethlehem, “‘A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger’: The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid”.

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Some would regard it as unfair, in a literary review, to censure an author for what he doesn't deal with. Some may even think it's refreshing to find a South African writer who is not seeking to capitalize on the presently marketable aspects of the situation in South Africa. [...] One doesn't, after all, dismiss contemporary British novelists who don't refer to Thatcherism. Nevertheless, any current writing that doesn't comment, even obliquely, on apartheid, must inevitably invite some criticism.

The "small circle of beings" that Galgut writes about are whitefolks. In the title novella black people are shadowy, servile figures. The white woman narrator shows no understanding of, or sympathy with, her servants. [...] This really points up the difficulties of writing from a perspective that is not one's own. Without evidence to the contrary, it is tempting for the reader to assume that the author concurs with his character's views.

(Puxley 1988: 25)

Puxley's review bluntly outlines the aspects of Galgut's literary sensibility which, by the late eighties, had failed to earn him much symbolic capital in the field of South African literature: the solipsism of his narrative perspective, his choice of "marginal" subject-matter and, most significantly, his ostensible failure to expose and critique political oppression. For other critics, however, his work could still be rescued for ethico-political purposes and thus legitimised within the corpus of anti-apartheid writing. In an admiring review of the novella, for example, the South African poet, Douglas Reid Skinner, argued that

*Small Circle of Beings* is about the complexity of the relationship and division between inner being and social being, individual and history, self and other. It is written from within, from felt experience, and out of an inner history that subtly represents outer history: as the family, so the society. Far from being "disengaged" from its historical time and place, it most emphatically explores the human conditions of that time and place.

(1989: 67)

Implicit in Skinner's review is what Clive Barnett – in his analysis of the "institutional and rhetorical conventions" (1999: 287) which shaped the reception of South African writing during the late apartheid years – has termed a "mimetic conception of allegory" (1999: 293), which insists that a referential relationship necessarily exists between a text and the socio-historical context of its production, no matter how vaguely delineated its spatio-temporal setting. From this perspective, Galgut's preoccupation with familial scission and strife represents an indirect, but not unprincipled, exploration of South Africa's socio-political realities. This approach – which also inheres in the description of the novella as a story in which "politics begins at home" – thus allows the reader to locate evidence of Galgut's political commitment in what is perceived as his ineluctable submission to context. Despite its deliberate fictional veiling of South Africa as its explicit

extra-textual referent, as well as its reticence towards temporal qualifications, the novella can, nevertheless, be celebrated as an exemplary expression of its author's "time and place" (Skinner 1989: 67) and thus admitted into a recognisable and morally sound tradition of anti-apartheid writing.

The deployment of the mimetic conception of allegory, as Barnett's discussion shows, was especially effective in securing J.M. Coetzee's credibility as a principled anti-apartheid writer, serving to "re-anchor" those works in his oeuvre which lacked a definitive socio-historical setting to South Africa as "a stable extra-textual referent synonymous with racism" (Barnett 1999: 293). In his response to the reception of Coetzee's work in these terms, Derek Attridge has argued "against allegory" (2005: 32) in his analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and asked how we might respond to apartheid-era texts in ways that resist the instrumentalist thinking implicit in this mimetic or, in his terms, historicist approach. This discussion forms part of Attridge's larger critique of literary instrumentalism, which is expanded upon in *The Singularity of Literature*, the companion work to his study on Coetzee. While acknowledging the "valuable insights that this mode of reading has produced and no doubt will continue to produce" (2005: 33), he warns that, by measuring a text's responsiveness to a pre-determined set of criteria, the instrumentalist approach also risks reducing the literary work to "a fixed linguistic structure" (2005: 10), unamenable to reinterpretation across diffuse and unpredictable contexts. His response is to refocus attention on the "performative" character of the literary "event"; that is, on "its potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion" (2005: 10). In an argument which draws on the literary philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, amongst others, Attridge argues for our "hospitality" towards the "singularity, inventiveness, and otherness, as these manifest themselves in the event or experience of the work" (2005: 11). A reading which responds to a text's singularity is, then, one that does not rely on recourse to established meta-narratives or pre-texts, but "takes into account as fully as possible, by re-staging them, the work's own performances – of, for example, referentiality, metaphoricity, intentionality, and ethnicity" (2005: 9).

Significantly, Galgut himself deployed the mimetic conception of allegory in his attempt to defend *Small Circle of Beings* against charges of political indifference in "Reality and the Novel", a lecture which he delivered to the National Reading Circle in Welkom in 1989 and which would later be published in the South African literary journal, *New Contrast*. In this talk, Galgut attempted to critique and enlarge the dominant understanding of politically responsible writing under apartheid, in order to defend himself against accusations of "avoiding socio-political issues, of writing about personal obsessions that have nothing to do with the country at large" (1990: 15). Like Skinner, he claimed that, in his writing, socio-political concerns

are not ignored, but only metonymically displaced by the dialectic which necessarily exists between individual and social reality. In strongly rhetorical terms which rendered the misinterpretation of his work an expression of political naïvety, he claimed that “[w]e who are opposed to the government curse their stupidity and blindness. But it is just as blind [...] not to believe that what takes place in the family relates to what takes place in the state” (1990: 55). These comments evince Galgut’s keen awareness of the logic through which his writing could be legitimised in the context of anti-apartheid literary culture, but do little justice to his sensitivity towards those aspects of private human experience which do not leave a trace on the wider, socio-historical world. In my close reading of the novella below, I argue – contrary to Galgut’s own directives in “Reality and the Novel” – that *Small Circle of Beings* deliberately obscures the overdetermined socio-historical context of its production in apartheid South Africa, in order to direct our attention to a singular, rather than a collective, form of suffering.

The question of how exactly *Small Circle of Beings* should be positioned in relation to Galgut’s late-apartheid context is complicated by its dramatisation of events which so clearly resonate with his own life and his childhood battle with cancer. Indeed, at the level of plot, the novella arguably invites us to apply Galgut’s biography as the primary framework for our reading, thus resolving the ambiguity of its spatio-temporal setting and rendering the text amenable to the historicist reading outlined above. Importantly, however, he chooses to narrate the story, not from the perspective of the ailing child – which we would associate with Galgut’s own – but from the point of view of his mother, a socially withdrawn woman who seeks out a life of rural isolation. The narrative displacement curtails the autobiographical reading and we see Galgut at work with a mode of writing that first invites.

By displacing the events of Galgut’s life as our stable frame of reference, the novella inhibits our efforts to re-historicise its vaguely delineated setting and directs our attention, instead, to the intensely private world of its narrator, who is presented from the outset as a woman altogether estranged from her socio-political context. Indeed, she labours to create “a life removed” (Galgut 1988: 21) from human society in the rural home which, we learn, has belonged to her family for generations. In her references to the servants, Salome and Moses, who have worked for the family for decades, Galgut hints at the larger socio-historical inequalities which support the narrator’s privilege, but are excluded from serious examination in her own narrative. An isolated and withdrawn figure, her preoccupations are primarily with the domestic routines of daily life on the farm and her role as mother and wife to David and Stephen respectively. It is from this hermetic world, wholly constituted by the “small circle of beings” which makes up the nuclear family, that she derives her sense of safety and identity.

The novella primarily concerns itself with the dissolution of this fragile nucleus and the subsequent crisis of subjectivity which it engenders in the narrator. The effect of David's illness is to further contract her already acutely circumscribed world, until she becomes alienated even from the sanctuary of her family home. Fissures soon appear in her marriage to Stephen, whose emotional reticence she can no longer abide in the presence of David's abject suffering. It soon becomes apparent that little more than the hypnotic routines of everyday life cemented relations within the family:

There was a time when we would all eat together, assembled in comfortable silence in one corner of the kitchen. I suppose it's a blessing to be free of obligations like these. Now, after eating, Stephen comes through and joins me. He sits on the opposite side of the bed, leaning forward in his chair, hands between his knees. Neither of us speaks, to each other or to David.

(1988: 46)

David's disease annihilates their quotidian lives by rendering its pleasantries and obligations untenable, without which the couple prove unable to communicate and Stephen eventually becomes an unrelatable figure, regarded as "someone long lost" (1988: 73) by the narrator. The sense of radical defamiliarisation engendered by David's illness is also registered in spatio-temporal terms. As his condition deteriorates, the narrator's already hermetic life on the farm is reduced to the "most solitary of confinements" (1988: 44) in David's bedroom which, in turn, is contracted to an intense focus on his body which is in a state of constant rupture: "He bleeds from every orifice, tiny private trickles of blood that stain the sheet" (1988: 40). During the hours of vigil at David's bedside, time is also rendered indeterminate: "There is no longer such a thing as day or night: in the narrow room it's easy to be unaware of what takes place outside. I am always here" (1988: 44). Unable to assuage or even fully comprehend the ravages waged on her son's body, the narrator is consigned to a moribund passivity, narrated as an interminable and objectless waiting: "I wait and wait and wait, till it seems I have heard no other sound in forty-two years than the dragging wheeze of David trying to draw breath" (1988: 47).

The severity of David's condition eventually necessitates a move to the city; a locale which is understood by the narrator as the prototypical site of isolation and alienation and as the antithesis of the "safety" she has crafted for herself in her rural home. Here, she resides in "a series of strange rooms" (1988: 72) during David's hospitalisation. In these spaces of acute unfamiliarity, she registers the extent of the internal ruptures and emotional seclusion wreaked by David's illness:

I want to cry, but I can't. Tears have become more difficult for me of late, requiring too much effort. But a crack has opened in me somewhere as I sit listlessly on the bed and stare, unseeing, at the smoky square of the television



set and the figures moving on it. The crack inside me widens. It's the first night I've spent utterly alone, in my life.

(1988: 73)

This, then, is the central movement which the narrative traces; not a centrifugal one, from "inner" to "outer" history. During this time of introspection, the narrator becomes witness to her own negation by: her husband, who has an affair during her time in the city; her own mother, whose senility renders her unable to recognise her daughter; David's doctors, who treat her as "a meddler, a busy-body" (1988: 65) and, finally, the illness itself, which consigns her to a tortured passivity. The evisceration of self, entailed in these multiple traumas, is registered in the affectlessness of the above passage; increasingly, the narrator loses the capacity to react with appropriate emotion to the multiple losses catalysed by her son's illness. Her divorce from Stephen, too, passes as a "gentle affair" (1988: 72), contrary even to her own expectations: "I'd imagined that ten years would make an awful racket and thunder when they finally tore apart. But it's not the case at all. They fall from us gently, those years, slipping off our shoulders and melting into the dark" (1988: 69-70).

As these personal and emotional losses mount, the narrator becomes increasingly focused on her role as David's mother; perhaps the only aspect of her identity which has remained relatively stable since the onset of his illness. Witnessing his suffering has, however, prompted her to imagine him in regressive terms, with the physiological dependencies of an infant prior to individuation:

Chains do exist. People are bound. Nine years ago I gave birth to this boy. Over the months – eight and a half of them – the weeks, the days, that I carried him, he became part of me in elemental, cellular ways. [...] He continues to live in me, not yet discharged. I am his haven and his prison. He will never leave alive, despite the evidence of this child, nine years of age, who is crying now in my arms.

(1988: 22)

The assertion of this primal mother-child bond becomes a way for her to mitigate the unrelatability and inexpressibility of the pain<sup>5</sup> which regularly consumes David, rendering it shareable and mutual, rather than psychologically and physically isolating: "The sound of his cry is in tune with something in me, so that for a moment we sing out together: high, lonely and in pain" (1988: 67). This gesture of mutuality – of a shared and

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5. For an extended discussion on the antagonistic relationship between language and pain, see Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.

communicable pain – is, however, counterpointed by its antithesis: the apprehension that empathy cannot abate David's pain and that his suffering severs him from the comfort of the maternal bond: "There is a seam in him that is unravelling, somewhere in the deep dark places under the sheets that cover him. I can't reach there with hand or prayer" (1988: 38). Similarly, the narrator's fantasies of regressive re-integration with David are countered by stark images of his alterity in illness, made visible in the physical abnormalities produced by the cancer: "I look at David one day and see him, with a jarring shock, as a stranger might. How much he's changed. How pale he is, how thin he's getting" (1988: 30).

The narrator's attempt to share empathetically in her son's pain thus always gestures towards its own impossibility; towards the irreducible alterity of David's illness and the incommunicable nature of his suffering. This aporia is also reflected in the metaphors employed by the narrator in her efforts to comprehend the nature of his illness, which is rendered entirely opaque by the scientific discourse of the doctors. Since these men, we are told, "[speak] a language I cannot understand" (1988: 33), David's exact medical diagnosis is never conveyed to the reader. We learn only of a "growth" developing in his throat, imagined by the narrator as "a living swelling thing that has bred in his body and that now feeds on him. I see it as a creature with a face. In the gloom, its tiny animal eyes regard me steadily" (1988: 32). Later, upon examining the tumour itself during consultation with David's doctors, it appears altogether less menacing: "It's an innocuous thing, this growth; not at all what I had imagined. Tiny and red and almost harmless, like a small sea creature trapped where it does not belong" (1988: 34). Both comparisons make the same substitution to describe opposing concepts: the image of a "small creature" is used to suggest both the tumour's aggression and its innocuousness. In short, the metaphoric operation stumbles: it fails to augment meaning through substitution and, instead, works primarily to indicate that the concept of the "growth" and David's illness more broadly cannot be wholly accommodated by the narrator's cognitive apparatus. We thus witness the loss of an "innocent" relationship to language, in which the signifying chain can be relied upon to produce the reassuring illusion of stable referentiality. This loss is perhaps most apparent in the term "growth", which has transmuted to denote precisely that which negates David's development.

In its brief third and fourth sections, the novella shifts its attention from the immediate trauma of witnessing David's deterioration to the enduring psychological and emotional wounds it inflicts on the narrator. In these sections, the threat of his illness has abated; his cancer goes into remission and the pair return to their rural home, where the narrator attempts to re-establish the routines which filled her days "before the sickness began" (1988: 87). "So we are all restored to what we were before", she claims, once the house has been cleaned and the garden tamed. "There is a routine in

our lives which keeps us safe" (1988: 87). The remainder of her narrative, which stages a series of inversions, discloses the extent of her self-delusion. Her home, once her anchor and sanctuary, is now revealed to be the very site of her negation: "This house has been the scene of my undoing. While I sat with David in the hospital [...] other people occupied this area. Without my knowledge or consent they performed actions that unpicked the seams of my life" (1988: 89). Stephen's reticent but benign presence is replaced by that of Cedric, a quick-tempered and violent man, whose irascibility the narrator mistakes for passion. Her bond with David, too, is damaged by Cedric's cruel interference and now the once sterile and alienating hospital is re-envisioned as a space of familiarity and intimacy: "We no longer speak, this boy and I. The equality we had achieved in bedrooms and in hospitals is gone. I see now, for the first time, that he is not as small and gentle as he was" (1988: 101). But the most bitter of these reversals proves to inhere in "that small circle of beings, the family" (1988: 112), which finally fails to provide either intimacy or identity, but operates instead as a nexus of negation, violence and estrangement for both David and his mother.

In the absence of the threat of death posed by David's cancer, the narrator concedes to feelings of resentment about the multiple losses she incurred during his illness and admits to being a "bitter woman" (1988: 92). In defiance of the asymmetry of the ethical relation, she now seeks reciprocation from David for past sacrifices (1988: 100, 121) and confesses the "resentments I hold despite myself. I must blame [David], I suppose, for what he did to me: the husband I lost, the lover that I gained" (1988: 123). Nonetheless, her own narrative reveals that his illness only made visible the fissures that already existed in her relationships and, importantly, within her own identity. The narrative technique, too, indicates a problematic lack of agency by denying her a name and, as a result, the authority which a first-person narration might otherwise connote. This exclusion also prohibits us from identifying with her through anything other than the roles in which she endures some form of negation; whether as Stephen's (ex-) wife, Cedric's (victimised) lover or even as David's (now estranged) mother. As such, she remains an almost spectral presence in her own narrative or, as she phrases it herself, a woman "full of shadows" (1988: 92), "riven from inside" (1988: 115).

The narrator's discourse thus constantly signals the limits of self-revelation through narrative by rehearsing a double gesture of assertion and negation: as she claims presence and authority for herself through the apparatus of her first person narration, so the narrative simultaneously stages her undoing. Galgut does not try to resolve these tensions by imagining her restoration: she remains at the novella's conclusion a wounded and afflicted figure, "mourning" (1988: 116) her many losses. Yet *Small Circle of Beings* also indicates that, in the experience of profound loss, there may be something to be gained ethically: by the end of the narrative, the protagonist is free of a

loveless marriage, as well as an abusive lover, and is finally able to embrace her own mother, despite the uncomfortable alterity which she represents in her senility: “[S]he lies down beside me, a thin and parched white figure who is soft, at last, to my touch. We cling to each other” (1988: 127).

This final image of consolation through the maternal bond is especially significant, given the estrangement that exists between the pair throughout the novella. The narrator’s mother, also denied a first name, haunts the periphery of the narrative and acts to unsettle the façade of safe and agreeable domesticity which her daughter labours to create in their home. In her senility, she comes to represent everything which the narrator herself works to keep at bay: filth, decay and the disturbing possibility of a loss of self and identity (1988: 13, 15). Senility has dehumanised her in the eyes of the narrator, who admits that “[i]t is difficult for me sometimes to regard her as entirely human, despite the evidence of her four limbs and her face” (1988: 11). After witnessing David’s illness, however, she comes to a different understanding of her mother’s condition; not as the opposite of her own rationality, but rather as its repressed condition. Her mother’s “madness” ultimately comes to represent a “reversed” but not untrue perspective on the events in the narrative:

[My mother] wanders each day on the lawn about the house, surveying her domain from her fierce and shattered face. She comes to me one day and takes me by the hand. Did I know, she whispers, that David is terribly ill? “No, Mother,” I say. “That was long ago.” “No,” she says. “That was now.”

Time is a meaningless affair to her. She moves without effort between past and present. But it occurs to me that there is a vision in her madness: for yes, the sickness has continued, growing without sound in the combustion of our hearts.

(1988: 124)

In the absence of a rational chronology, the idea of healing and progress through time proves factitious and these comments thus resonate truthfully with the narrator’s sense of an enduring pain. David’s illness, it appears, has made her more accommodating of alterity; not only to her mother and her senility, but also to the possibility that this “otherness” exists within herself: “I value her presence now, why I cannot say. It’s a comfort for me to have her there, an older, dimmer version of myself, a reminder to me of what I may become” (40).

*Small Circle of Beings*, then, is not an expansive text; it does not gesture towards a larger socio-political reality but is, instead, a novel of painful contraction which stages its protagonist’s withdrawal from society and even family into a difficult and largely unresolved self-reckoning. In hindsight, it makes what appears to be a very modest and human claim: that, in the experience of acute individual suffering and bereavement, our historical

horizons are likely to recede from view. That approaching such subject-matter, traditionally so comfortably within the novel's ambit, should have seemed ethically wanting – even from the perspective of its author – strikingly reveals the extent to which the category of the literary was circumscribed under apartheid. Revisiting the novella more than twenty five years after its original publication, however, also reveals that not all apartheid-era writing was, in fact, politically saturated, despite the strongly historicist logic which governed its circulation and which Galgut himself had internalised. Indeed, contrary to his own claims about the novella, *Small Circle of Beings* quietly asserts the significance of an individual, apolitical life and its legitimacy as a subject of fictional investigation.

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