



# He wrote a letter home to myself: Tracing the epistolary in Damon Galgut's *'In a strange room'*

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This article considers Damon Galgut's *In a strange room* as a work of contemporary epistolary fiction. Recent studies of epistolarity argue that the epistolary tradition remains identifiable and apparent even once woven into other genres. Though not strictly an epistolary novel, *In a strange room* addresses the same thematic concerns that exist in all epistolary writing – exile, loneliness, unrequited love, self-identity and trial. This article asks the same three questions that all epistolary fiction invites: To whom, for whom and why does Damon write? The epistolary mode is considered with reference to Jacques Lacan's gaze theory. The gaze sets up an inherent secret, revealing the truth only in the final dénouement. In epistolary work, it anticipates the voyeuristic reader, compelling him or her to watch. The gaze can be found in only one of Galgut's three novellas. It is for this reason that *In a strange room* makes for difficult reading. It is also why the novel is so confounding and compelling, presenting as it does the internal dialogue of a lonely man.

**Hy het 'n brief huis toe geskryf aan myself: Epistolariteit in Damon Galgut se *In a strange room*.** In hierdie artikel word Damon Galgut se *In a strange room* as 'n werk van kontemporêre epistolêre fiksie beskou. Onlangse studies van epistolariteit voer aan dat die epistolêre tradisie identifiseerbaar en opvallend bly, selfs al word dit ook met ander genres verweef. Hoewel *In a strange room* streng gesproke nie 'n briefroman is nie, fokus dit op dieselfde tematiese kwessies wat in alle epistolêre geskifte voorkom – ballingskap, eensaamheid, onbeantwoorde liefde, eie identiteit en beproewing. Hierdie artikel vra dieselfde drie vrae wat alle epistolêre fiksie uitlok: aan wie, vir wie en waarom skryf Damon? Die epistolêre skryfwyse word ondersoek met verwysing na Jacques Lacan se teorie van die blik. Die blik stel 'n inherente geheim op waarvan die waarheid eers in die finale ontknoping geopenbaar word. In 'n epistolêre werk word voyeuristiese lesers veronderstel en word hulle gedwing om toe te kyk. Die blik kan in slegs een van Galgut se drie novelles aangetref word. Dit is die rede waarom *In a strange room* moeilik lees. Dit is ook die rede waarom die aanbied van die interne dialoog van 'n eensame man in die roman so verwarrend en dwingend is.

## Introduction

Damon Galgut's *In a strange room* is a strange work on all accounts. It is non-fiction presented as fiction, blends first and third person and is written by a writer who calls himself Damon (Galgut 2010). The book is also unusual in that it is a triptych of novellas, namely: *The follower*, *The lover* and *The guardian*. As Galgut told the Australian broadcaster, Ramona Koval (2011), every human interaction has one or all of these attributes: [I]t seems to me that these three kinds of relationships define the primary forms of connection that human beings can have.

Yet Galgut's purpose is transgressive and destabilising. He sets out to question normal societal relationships, challenging the ties that exist between people and the borders that exist between countries. Damon's ties are fragile and wisp-thin. At the end of a relationship with a man he claims to have loved, Damon has only the scrap of paper on which the lover wrote his name:

They write down each other's addresses. The only piece of paper he has is an old bank statement ... Now years later as I write this it lies in front of me on my desk, folded and creased and grubby, carrying its little cargo of names, its different sets of handwriting, some kind of impression of that instant pushed into the paper and fixed there. (Galgut 2010:88)

In her landmark works on epistolarity, Linda S. Kauffman (1986, 1992) shows that the elements of the epistolary tradition remain identifiable even when woven into other genres. In *Special delivery*, Kauffman (1992) begins her study with Ovid's *Heroides*, continues with *Letters from a Portuguese nun* (De Lavergne, comte De Guilleragues 1669), moves on to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (2009) and then finally explores modern and contemporary literature such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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(1958), Alice Walker's *The color purple* (1982) and Margaret Atwood's *The handmaid's tale* (1985). *In a strange room* fits within this canon.

It should be noted that Kauffman gives great weight to the distinction between epistolary mode and genre. In *Special delivery*, she comes to the conclusion that mode should be the preferred term. The concept of mode allows her to define the epistolary as an incomplete and fractured form with loose boundaries that make it resilient and adaptive, able to combine with and influence other kinds of writing and of continued and continuing relevance over centuries (Kauffman 1992:xiii–xiv).

She argues that *The handmaid's tale* has the 'postmark of epistolarity' because, like the other contemporary epistolary works in her study, it '... memorializes and mines all the classic conventions of epistolarity' to look forwards and backwards 'Janus-like', in '... remembrance and prophecy' (Kauffman 1992:223, xiii). This position guides my own analysis too.

What is important is that the epistolary characteristics remain identifiable and apparent – exemplifying what is epistolary at the same time as confounding the generic conventions of the particular work. Though Nabokov, Walker, Atwood and Galgut all approach the materiality of their epistolary production in different ways, their work can be firmly sited within the epistolary mode. They sit in clear conversation with other authors who have exploited epistolarity's seductive style.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the threads of epistolarity through Galgut's oeuvre or the South African canon. Rather, as an Australian academic, I have positioned the discussion in an international context, drawing on key works considered by the epistolarium. For students of South African literature, it would be of interest to consider how the epistolary tradition has influenced contemporary South African novel writing, particularly in terms of mode rather than genre.

## Epistolary motifs

*In a strange room* does not attempt to reclaim the epistolary genre. It is not written in letter form or meant for a specified addressee. The manuscript does not contain epistolary references or features. Yet the same thematic concerns that exist in all epistolary writing are present: exile, loneliness, unrequited love, self-identity, transgression, trial. We can also ask of it the same three questions that arise in all epistolary fiction: To whom, for whom and why does Damon write? (Kauffman 1992:xxii)

*In a strange room* can be seen as Galgut's private epistolary therapy – comprising, in effect, letters to himself. Each novella within it is a journey as Damon recalls three different trips. The first is with a German backpacker named Reiner. The second sees him follow a group of backpackers through

Africa and on to Europe. In the third, he travels with a female friend to India, discovering only after they set off that her mental illness threatens to derail their journey.

*In a strange room* is travel writing redolent of a series of letters home. The narrative shines with recounted scenes, descriptions of landscape, snippets of conversation and interactions with fellow travellers:

The stars are seeding themselves in bright beds overhead, the earth is huge and old and black. It's long past suppertime when he arrives at the edge of the little village and goes up the deserted main street, the shops and restaurants shuttered and barred, all the windows unlit ... (Galgut 2010:5)

Like every epistolary narrator, Damon is a *writer*. He unfurls himself across the page, defining 'the self' in relation to the other(s) he meets on the road. Though we are never told that Damon is a white South African, in *The follower*, the whiteness of Damon's skin is apparent against Reiner's all-black attire. In *The Lover*, the other is the young Swiss, Jerome. Jerome has '... a beauty that is almost shocking, red lips and high cheek-bones and a long fringe of hair' (Galgut 2010:73). Damon falls in love with him. Though Damon never describes his own looks or background, we see in his character everything Jerome is not. Jerome represents wealth, beauty and the old world. Damon represents the uncertainty and harshness of New-World South Africa – alienation, racial politics and barren landscapes. His social isolation is a metaphor for his homosexuality, and travel becomes an escape as he struggles to live within society's rules. We also find this metaphorical use of character in Viktor Shklovsky's seminal 1923 epistolary novel *Zoo, or letters not about love*. Alya, the object of Shklovsky's admiration, represents the extravagance and beauty of Western Europe just as Shklovsky himself is the exiled, alienated man.

*In a strange room* is transgressive in its writing style. In *Zoo*, Shklovsky draws attention to the bogus nature of the love letter as a type of writing. He includes stories, gossip, news reports and journal entries in his letters; it belittles love and helps fabricate the romance in inauthentic terms. This fact heightens the lovers' sense of isolation and rejection, displacing the romantic notion that letters 'stand in' for the absent lover with a sense of perpetual absence. In a similar way, Damon's correspondence with Reiner is made purposely inauthentic by Galgut. Whilst Reiner's letters are scant on facts, Damon writes 'too freely' (Galgut 2010:18). When they see each other later, the meeting is awkward and stiff. Their letters have created a relationship that does not exist in real life (Galgut 2010): 'They are unsure of how to greet each other. He opens his arms and the other man accepts the embrace. But not entirely'. (Galgut 2010:19)

Like Shklovsky, then, Galgut also seeks to expose the inauthentic basis of such writing. His narrative mode subverts the usual formal requirements, switching from first person to third person, and sometimes even second, within the same paragraph. It also undermines the distinction



between fiction and non-fiction. As Galgut told Koval (2011) of a book that was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for fiction, all the stories are factual:

[T]here is nothing made up in these pieces, these are pieces of recollection, these three journeys I made at different points in my life. This first journey into the mountains in Lesotho with Reiner took place in my 20s ... The second and third journeys took place in my 30s, the first in my early 30s and the second one in my late 30s. (n.p.)

As the narrator shifts between third and first and occasionally second person, the changing narrative mode turns the novel into a treatise on memory and self-identity. As one reviewer noted:

How quickly, [Galgut] seems to tell the reader, significant moments become distant memories, how quickly our actions become those of someone we barely remember or recognize. In the books we read and in the lives we lead, how easily I can become he, and he can become you. (Langer 2010:C13)

This type of self-analysis and internal reflection is another key characteristic of the epistolary mode. The non-fictional underpinnings of *In a Strange Room* makes this all the more potent – much like Shklovsky's letters to Alya in *Zoo* blur the boundaries of fact and fiction, past and present and memory and forgetting. To Ramona Koval (2011), Galgut described the experience of writing as 'confessional, an act of therapy and a self-examination':

[T]he real subject of this book for me is memory, and I've tried in the narrative to recreate the voice of memory or to convey something of a quality of the voice of memory, and the most distinctive thing about memory perhaps is the fact that one does switch between first and third person. If you're remembering events from some years back, some of those events are incredibly vivid to you, and you can be right back there in that moment, you are the first person reliving that instant again. And then with time intervening, very often you're looking at yourself as a stranger from outside, as a third person, as a he or a she doing something. So I tried to be true to that shift in the writing of the book. The writing of the book was also an act of memory, so as the memory came to me and as I felt myself to be in or outside the memory, I tried to set it down that way. (n.p.)

The exploration of memory and failed memory is underscored by Galgut's decision to give the central character his own name, Damon. From the first pages, we see the author and narrator as one person, though they do not always speak with the same voice. With his conspicuous shifts between 'I' and 'he', Galgut sees himself from differing points in time. Occasionally, it is 'I' remembering a past event that happened to 'me'. At other times, writing in the third person, Galgut views Damon as a former self – distant, gone, almost an unknown. He encourages the reader too to see him from these various viewpoints. Each different position is dependent on time. The use of the 'I' makes the memory seem sharper. The third person activates distance and attaches itself to older memories:

I wander around and come back, then wander again. A large part of travelling consists purely in waiting, with all the attendant ennui and depression. Memories come back of other places he

has waited in, departure halls of airports, bus-stations, lonely kerbsides in the heat, and in all of them there is an identical strain of melancholy summed up in a few transitory details. A paper bag blowing in the wind. The mark of a dirty shoe on a tile. The irregular sputter of a fluorescent bulb. From this particular place he will retain the vision of a cracked brick wall growing hotter and hotter in the sun. (Galgut 2010:27)

Similarly, in the passage below, the use of the possessive pronoun in the last sentence makes the memory crystallise:

This isn't an answer to the question but he doesn't ask again, it's obvious that he is perturbed and somehow this has made him weak, he nods and changes the subject but in his mind he cannot let go of the lined exhausted face of the woman in the sauna, the way she held *onto our arms*. (Galgut 2010:30, emphasis added)

The use of the first person changes in each story. It is used sparingly in *The Follower*, with the emphasis on the third person. This story is the earliest of the three, and it is from that person that Galgut (2010) seems to feel most distant:

The figure is a man about his own age, dressed entirely in black. Black pants and shirt, black boots. Even his rucksack is black. What the first man is wearing I don't know, I forget. (p. 3)

*The Guardian* remembers the most recent journey, and the first person is used more liberally. The effect is less jarring and more compelling. The first person allows us access to the character Damon – we are not kept at arms-length by the forced use of the third person. Instead, the occasional use of the third person has the effect of slowing down the narration, allowing the narrator and us the opportunity to reflect. In the following scene, Damon is talking to Anna's girlfriend in the days after Anna's attempted suicide. His first person account of the telephone conversation is stark, urgent and emotional. In the next paragraph, he chooses the third person to recall, in more forensic and impartial detail, the scene in which he reads Anna's diary. The pace changes with the shift to the third person:

Now I spill out all the details, everything that's been kept under wraps. We seem to have arrived at some confessional core, where there are no more secrets, no more concealments. It may be in this conversation, or perhaps in another soon afterwards that I walk with the phone into the middle of an empty field next to the hotel and bawl. I'm sorry, I tell her, I'm sorry I said I could look after her, I had no idea what I was taking on.

He returns to Anna's journal and spends hours reading it, from the very first page. He feels no compunction about delving into her private thoughts and feelings, if she has brought us to this moment of truth, well, let it embrace her too. What he finds there is sad and shocking. It's as he realized in the end, her act was not a momentary impulse, on the contrary, it was a goal she yearned for from the outset, one she worked herself up to by degrees. (Galgut 2010:159)

The trial motif is strong in the novel. Like Nabokov's *Lolita*, Galgut's writing eschews 'to-the-moment' writing and reflects on a time already past. The writer Damon stands apart from his young, naïve self, presenting the evidence and giving his verdict. However, unlike the prescient writing



in *Lolita*, which gives the impression of a trial unfolding, Galgut's novel has the feel of a sentencing. The book, as critic Langer (2010) notes, is fatalistic and sombre:

Dialogue is presented without quotation marks, always filtered through Damon's interpretations. Question marks do not appear at the ends of questions, assuring both a flatness of delivery and certainty of tone (p. C13)

This at first seems to be a stylistic choice. With closer consideration, however, it gives each story a sense of inevitability. Unlike in the case of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, we have little opportunity to consider Damon's guilt or innocence. This is because, as Langer (2010:C13) suggests, Galgut '... never allows the reader to escape Damon's perspective'.

Longing and desire, as well as exile and loneliness, are recurring themes in *In a strange room*. Just like Shklovsky's *Zoo*, the book is not a story about love. Not only that, but it touches on the brutal sexuality of gay men without ever describing it. In *The follower*, Reiner holds a strange fascination for Damon. He does not fall in love with him but several times finds himself '... in some way offering himself' (Galgut 2010:12). Homosexuality is never made explicit, yet Reiner comes across as strong and menacing. In *A Strange Room* presents homosexuality as the love that dare not speak its name. We are told only that '... neither makes the move, one is too scared and the other is too proud ... the moment is past' (Galgut 2010:14).

The love between Damon and Jerome is similarly unconsummated, futile. Galgut himself describes this affair as '... a prolonged moment of love in my life which hadn't been the case for quite a long time' (Armistead 2010). In the novel, however, Jerome speaks no English, Damon speaks no French. They can share only a few words and are never intimate.

On Jerome's death, we encounter the letter motif again. Damon's own letter to Jerome is returned to him along with a 'stiff single card' with the signature of 'a stranger' that tells him of Jerome's death. The details of the accident are scant, and a stranger has been asked by Jerome's mother to convey the message. Even in death, the letter does not build real relationships. The letter, sent by a stranger, seems to put paid to any possible future relationship with Jerome's family.

Ultimately, *The lover* can be read as a love letter to Jerome. Damon/Galgut writes the things that he was not able to say, imagines future encounters he wishes he could have had and chastises himself for failing. His words are those of a man who is about to be sent away:

Jerome, if I can't make you live in words, if you are only the dim evocation of a face under a fringe of hair ... it's not because I don't remember, no, the opposite is true, you are remembered in me as an endless stirring and turning. But it's for this precisely that you must forgive me, because in every story of myself alone, it's all I know, and for this reason I have always failed in every love, which is to say at the heart of my life. (Galgut 2010:106)

Impotence is mirrored in the final story, *The guardian*. Damon and his lesbian friend Anna are mistaken for lovers. She is in a lesbian relationship, but she has an affair with a Frenchman in India. She also suggests having sex with Damon, who declines. Lack of physical intimacy is repeated in each relationship, in each novella. It is the thing that Damon wants but which he fails to realise time and time again.

## Epistolarity and the Lacanian gaze

All fiction is pleasurable and voyeuristic. In epistolary fiction, however, desire is inherent. Epistolary fiction purloins the letter and transforms it into a framing device that accentuates the voyeuristic and the secret. It positions us not just as spectators but as detectives, sleuths and scopophiles who gaze through the keyhole and watch as the action unfolds.

The seductive power of epistolary literature can be situated within Jacques Lacan's gaze theory. The gaze sets up an inherent secret, revealing the truth only in the final dénouement. It anticipates the voyeuristic reader, compelling him or her to watch. For the gaze to exist, there must be a third element. The gaze, says the eminent Lacanian scholar Slavoj Žižek (2005), is never dual:

[I]t is never a simple confrontation between a subject and an adversary. A third element is always involved (the King in 'The Purloined Letter' ...) that personifies the innocent ignorance of the big Other (the rules of the social game) from which we must hide our true designs. (p. 72)

The 'third gaze' belongs to the innocent third party, the other, who sees all but does not understand what he sees. In Edgar Allan Poe's famous story 'The purloined letter' the other is the king who must be kept ignorant of the Queen's affair and thus of the existence of an incriminating letter. In the story, a government minister steals the letter, presumably intending to blackmail the queen. At the moment of the theft, the Queen cannot make a fuss for fear of alerting her husband the King. She calls in the chief of police, who calls in the detective Dupin. Dupin finds the letter in the minister's possession but becomes embroiled himself when he writes a cryptic note to the minister, alerting him that he has been found out. Lacan's analysis of Poe's story has particular relevance for any discussion of epistolary literature because, in it, he explains the workings of the gaze.

In his seminar on 'The purloined letter', Lacan argues that the 'itinerary of the signifier' determines the actions of the characters (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988:29). The letter operates as a signifier, not a signified. It does not invoke a certain concrete meaning. Rather its meaning changes according to each person, determining what each character will do next. The characters' actions are '... determined by the place which pure signifier – the purloined letter – comes to occupy in their trio' (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988:32).

Lacan describes three gazes (or glances) within 'The purloined letter'. The first is the gaze of the king (and later the police) who sees nothing. The second is that of the queen (and later the





minister) who '... sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides' (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988:32). The third gaze refers to the minister and finally the detective Dupin who see '... that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it' (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988:32).

Lacan elaborates with reference to the proverbial ostrich. The first glance, he says, has its head stuck in the sand, the second believes that it is invisible, '... all the while letting the third pluck its rear' (Lacan in Muller & Richardson 1988:32). The king – the other, the symbol of law and social order – must not know of the existence of the letter, or the queen's indiscretion will be revealed. What is important is not the King's actual gaze but rather how the king's gaze causes the queen, the minister and Dupin to act (Žižek 1992a:214).

The importance of the signifier is that it *signifies without being significant*. Thus in his analysis, Lacan reads for *lack* rather than *presence* of meaning. That the letter's content is never revealed is precisely what interests Lacan.

Lacan, the ultimate detective-analyst, will also occupy the third position when he comes to reveal Dupin's fraud. As Muller and Richardson (1988:62) note: 'It is the analyst's (Lacan's) function to discern for us the symbolic structure of the entire tale and to reveal its import for psychoanalysis.'

Identifying the gaze is not a random academic exercise. In epistolary writing, it allows us to examine the textual relationships that exist between characters and beyond, to the relationship between author and reader. This allows us to identify the narrative structures and to see the epistolary mode as a frame which positions and plays off various characters according to their knowledge or power and presence or absence. From this place, we can explore more significant questions: To whom and for whom does the epistolary hero or heroine write? Where do the characters fit within the gaze? What influence does this have on the reader? What influence does it have on contemporary literature? Crucially, Lacan (in Muller & Richardson 1988) also asks:

To whom does a letter belong? Might a letter on which the sender retains certain rights then not quite belong to the person to whom it is addressed? Or might it be that the latter was never the real receiver? (p. 41)

Slavoj Žižek (1992a:214–215) explains the concept of the third gaze in far more detail than Lacan ever did. He identifies it as the gaze belonging to the ignorant, innocent onlooker. It is that of the husband excluded from the gaze of the wife and her lover; it is that of the small child who does not understand the lovers' feud. It is important to make the distinction that, as readers, we do not hold the third gaze; this is reserved for the players in the narrative. However, our role as voyeurs is intended and anticipated, and we are compelled to watch in guilty, furtive pleasure.

Interestingly, there is no third element in Galgut's first chapter. The action happens between Damon and Reiner.

They are alone on the road, and no-one else observes them. Thus Damon writes from a place where there are no rules. He and Reiner exist outside the gaze of the big other. The social game is different when you travel, he suggests – you have little information about the people you meet, and your life is pared down to the basics. As he told the Australian broadcaster, Ramona Koval: 'You need shelter, you need food, and your travelling companions take on a very special significance, none of these things we really reflect on in our normal lives' (Koval 2011).

Likewise, the social isolation and alienation that Damon feels as a white, gay, South African male set him outside the social dynamic. Homosexuality still exists outside the bounds of 'normality' just as the troubles of South Africa still exist outside of the normal world order. It is not a question of the big other 'not seeing'. Rather, there *is* no big other because surely, if God did exist, He would intervene to put an end to the alienation and discrimination of homosexuals? And surely, if a fair and equitable world order existed, someone or something would step in to end the horrors of human suffering in Africa? No, Galgut seems to say, no-one is out there, no-one is watching. For if they were, how could this happen?

Similarly, in *The lover*, the gaze is dual. There is only Damon and the man with whom he is in love, Jerome. Perhaps Christian, Jerome's French friend, could be the innocent third? Or Jerome's sister? Or his mother Catherine? If Catherine were to stand in opposition to a homosexual relationship between her son and an older man, her role could be that of the unseeing third. Or if Christian were Jerome's lover, he could be innocent and unaware of Jerome's unfolding love affair with Damon. The narrative does, however, not present us with such intrigues. Only once does Damon wonder: '[W]hat is your relationship with Christian, what bond has kept you going all the way from West Africa' (Galgut 2010:81).

The language barrier means the question is never asked, and the story does not advance this line. In fact, any possibility of a third is thwarted by the narrative. None of the other characters take their place as a third. Christian does not appear to have a sexual relationship with Jerome, Jerome's sister Alice is warm towards Damon and his mother Catherine is welcoming. Though there are others in the story of Damon and Jerome, there is no indication that they are watching or observing. As readers, we are offered Damon's perspective only. This is made even more evident due to the oppressive narrative mode. Regardless of whether Galgut is writing in first, second or third person, we can never escape from Damon's head, as the following quote shows:

He is never alone with Jerome. Once or twice, when Christian has gone off to swim and Alice gets up to join him, it seems he and Jerome will be the only ones left there on the sand. But it doesn't happen. Christian appears at the last moment, coming up dripping and panting from the lake, throwing himself down on his towel. But if he's laying claim to the younger man he doesn't show it, in fact it's Christian who suggests ... that he come along with them to Tanzania (Galgut 2010:83)



The third novella, *The Guardian*, makes the most compelling reading. This is because, for the first time, we are offered the dialectic of the gaze. Damon is no longer an itinerant traveller. He is an established author who travels to India to write. He stays in the same village, in the same room, in the same hotel. Each year, he meets the same people. Though there is still some fragility to his existence in India, he is anchored in a way that was neither possible nor appealing to his character in the previous novellas. Into this dynamic, he brings his friend Anna. Anna takes the role of the devious actor, Poe's minister. She is mentally unstable, refuses to take her medication and indulges in alcohol and illicit drugs. Damon is the Queen in the scenario. He sees Anna's behaviour and her sexual affairs, but he cannot tell Anna's girlfriend back home. The girlfriend, then, is in the position of the king – naïve, innocent, trusting.

Unlike many epistolary novels which make use of an unreliable narrator<sup>1</sup>, there is no trickery in Galgut's storytelling. We know from the outset that Anna will spiral out of control. Even her death, when it comes, is no real surprise. Similarly, in the first two parts, we know that Damon's interest in Jerome will never come to anything and that his dangerous fascination with Reiner can never grow into love. The fatalism in Galgut's flat writing style contributes to this sense. Galgut is not the detective-analyst here. Rather he is the sentencing judge. There is nothing to find out, it is already all there. It has already come to pass, and Galgut's task is to lay it bare.

In *The guardian*, the first sentence foreshadows Anna's fall: 'Even before their departure, when he goes to meet her flight from Cape Town, he knows he's in trouble' (Galgut 2010:127).

Despite this, Anna's actual death happens 'off-screen' and is reported with little fanfare:

The message comes just a few days later. Anna is dead. One the day after Jean's departure she took a massive overdose of pain-killers while she was alone in her apartment. Her sister became concerned when she didn't return phone calls and got a locksmith to open the door and found her lying on her bed. There is more, but the words are blotted out by the fog that has filled the room, erasing time. (Galgut 2010:178)

We are given only the briefest postscript, when Damon visits Anna's girlfriend's house and sees her ashes. The scene in the end is comic, rather than horrifying:

He stares at the bag and pokes it with his finger. Shakes his head in amazement. It seems bizarre, to the point of bitter laughter, that a human being can be reduced to this. (Galgut 2010:179)

Unlike in classic epistolary novels, our spectatorship is not anticipated. The novel does not suture us in such that we are caught looking through the keyhole, as occurs in Samuel Richardson's seminal novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In *a strange room* does not address any challenging questions to

its readers. It does not care what we think of homosexuality or human rights issues in South Africa. Occasionally we are addressed as fellow travellers – invited to consider the nature of travel, travel as a metaphor for real life, travel as an escape hatch into a more primordial existence. Yet we know that each of these journeys is already over before they have begun. Galgut does not invite us to join him on his journey, only to observe his internal musings from a distance.

This is the perverseness of *In a strange room*. There is nothing secret or covert in the story, everything is laid bare for us to see. This indeed was Galgut's purpose. As he told Ramona Koval (2011), his intention was to 'not hold back':

I had to face up to myself in a certain way early on in the writing of this book and say if I'm going to be telling these stories, there is no point in holding back from the truth, so don't spare anybody, including yourself, in the writing of the book. That was the basic rule I tried to follow.

Žižek notes that pornography is the genre that 'reveals all'. *In a strange room* is not sexually explicit. It does, however, lay everything bare, including the excruciating desire and impotency that Damon feels. Like pornography, it does not offer us a position from which to 'look awry'. In Lacanian theory, the gaze is always objective – the object of our gaze is in fact already gazing back at us. In pornography, the gaze is subjective – the gaze rests with us, and we gaze at the image that reveals all. In other words, there is no blot, no mysterious point from which our gaze is sutured in, from which our spectatorship is anticipated or from which it gazes back at us. As Žižek (1992b) explains:

[T]he spectator himself...effectively occupies the position of the object. The real subjects are the actors on the screen, trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators, are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze. (p. 110)

Seething, subversive sexuality lies at the heart of *In a strange room*. Sexuality is present yet absent, and that is Galgut's brilliance. In laying everything bare, there is no need for fantasy. Also, it is through fantasy that we learn to desire. Yet Damon's desires are not condoned by society. He offers only a single reading position – his own – dispelling any charm of romance. As Žižek notes, the paradox of pornography is that, in showing all, it misses the opportunity to show the real intimacy of the relationship. Thus Damon chases each love interest across countries, across the world, each time laying himself bare and each time failing, only succeeding in compounding his loneliness, isolation and sense of alienation. Even in his platonic relationship with Anna, there is a sense of impotence. She is a woman who could be his wife, but he rejects her as he has rejected all women and with it the normalcy and stability of marriage and a family.

What then of the narrator Damon? Is there an element of thirdness that can be identified in the gaze that exists between the younger traveller Damon and the later writing Damon? Again this gaze is dual. Galgut eschews the role of the Lacanian psychoanalyst, in effect eschewing the intersubjectivity that Lacan seeks to explore in 'The Purloined Letter'. His quest

1. Nabokov's (1958) *Lolita* uses an unreliable narrator, as does Lionel Shriver's (2003) traditional epistolary novel *We need to talk about Kevin*.



is for an understanding of his own private truth, and he is not interested in being psychoanalysed. He does not want to undergo '... the symbolic integration of our traumas, by way of narrating them to the analyst who epitomizes the big other of intersubjectivity' (Žižek 1992a:262). There is no big other and Damon or Galgut is ultimately uninterested in other people. He thus rejects the notion of an expert – a psychoanalyst or a detective – who will come in and cure him. His talking cure is a letter-writing cure. His letter is written to himself alone.

## Conclusion

Whether *In a strange room* succeeds as a novel is a moot point. Galgut himself has acknowledged that he does not intend to write again in this kind of experimental style (Koval 2011). Yet the work was shortlisted for a Man Booker Prize – surely an indication of the strength of its construction. I would argue that the absence of the gaze structure is a significant reason why the book makes for difficult reading.

As an example of epistolary literature, however, *In a strange room* is a profound and moving piece of work. One feels very strongly the presence of Viktor Shklovsky – as though in his loneliness Galgut is able to dialogue with another lonely man. As Kauffman has suggested, epistolary literature dialogues with itself: '*Shklovsky writes to Rousseau, Nabokov to Poe, Barthes to Werther ...*' (Kaufman 1992:xix). Galgut draws heavily on the same tradition that inspired Richardson, Shklovsky, Nabokov and Alice Walker. The epistolary tradition is in good hands.

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