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Exploring National Histories through Familial Narratives: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *The Promise* and *Riverrun*

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Abstract: Literary texts frequently operate as cultural archives through which national histories are preserved, contested, and reinterpreted within intimate social spaces, particularly the family. In postcolonial contexts, where official historiography often privileges dominant narratives, familial discourse becomes a crucial site for negotiating memory, identity, and power. This study investigates how national histories of South Africa and the Philippines are discursively constructed through familial narratives in Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) and Danton Remoto's *Riverrun* (2022). Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and sociolinguistic theory, this qualitative research examines how ideology, silence, authority, and identity are mediated through family interactions against the sociopolitical backdrops of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, selected narrative excerpts were analyzed at textual, discursive, and social practice levels. The findings demonstrate that both novels position the family as a microcosm of national trauma: *The Promise* foregrounds racialized land ownership, deferred justice, and the persistence of colonial discourse, while *Riverrun* exposes how authoritarianism, Catholic morality, and heteronormativity regulate subjectivity and silence queer identities. The study concludes that familial discourse constitutes a critical site where national histories are simultaneously reproduced and resisted. It recommends that future research extend discourse-oriented literary analysis to other postcolonial contexts and incorporate corpus-assisted methods to enhance analytical generalizability. These findings foreground the family as a critical discursive institution through which national history is lived, negotiated, and transmitted across generations.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; sociolinguistics; family narrative; postcolonial literature; national history

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INTRODUCTION

Building on the understanding of the family as a discursive site where private life intersects with national history, this study situates literary narrative within broader debates on memory, ideology, and power. Literature has long functioned as a crucial medium through which societies narrate, remember, and contest their histories. Beyond its aesthetic dimension, literary narrative operates as a discursive space in which collective memory, ideology, and identity are negotiated, particularly in postcolonial and post-authoritarian contexts where official historiography frequently marginalizes or silences certain experiences. In such contexts, history is not only recorded in archives or commemorated through monuments but is embedded in everyday social relations, including those within families. These intimate domains become sites where national ideologies are internalized, reproduced, and occasionally resisted through language, silence, and affective interaction.

Scholarship in cultural memory studies has consistently emphasized that national history is not articulated solely through public or institutional discourse but is deeply intertwined with private and domestic narratives. Assmann (2018) conceptualizes literature as a carrier of cultural memory, arguing that literary texts transmit historical meaning across generations by preserving moral evaluations and emotional orientations toward the past. Similarly, Erll (2020) frames literature as a “memory medium” that enables historical narratives to circulate across temporal and spatial boundaries, allowing the past to be continually reinterpreted in new contexts. From this perspective, literary narratives function as dynamic sites of memory production rather than passive reflections of historical events.

Recent interdisciplinary research further underscores the importance of examining how historical consciousness is transmitted through everyday practices rather than monumental or institutional forms alone. Hirsch’s (2012) concept of post-memory highlights how historical trauma is inherited intergenerationally through fragmented stories, silences, and affective relations within families. Jelin (2017) likewise argues that memory work often occurs in private spaces, where individuals negotiate official narratives through lived experience. These insights foreground the family as a critical micro-site of national history, particularly in societies shaped by colonialism, racial segregation, dictatorship, and authoritarian moral regulation, where historical trauma frequently enters domestic life in indirect and emotionally mediated forms.

Within postcolonial studies, literature has been widely examined as a mode of resistance to dominant historical narratives. Postcolonial texts often challenge imperial and colonial historiography by foregrounding marginalized perspectives and exposing the persistence of power relations after formal political transitions (Boehmer, 2018; Young, 2016). Such narratives emphasize that political independence or regime change does not necessarily entail discursive or material transformation. In the South African context, post-apartheid literature has been characterized by sustained engagement with unresolved issues of racial injustice, land dispossession, and economic inequality (Attridge, 2017; Nuttall, 2022). Scholars argue that many post-apartheid novels critique the limitations of reconciliation discourse by revealing how structural inequalities persist beneath narratives of national unity. Nuttall (2022) further observes that domestic and intimate spaces in South African fiction often mirror national contradictions, rendering the family a crucial site for interrogating post-apartheid ideology.

Similarly, Philippine literary scholarship addressing the Marcos dictatorship and its aftermath highlights the enduring effects of authoritarianism on everyday life. Studies emphasize how narratives of fear, exile, migration, and return reveal the moral and psychological legacies of dictatorship, particularly through silence and conformity (Hau, 2017; Tolentino, 2019). Hau

(2017) argues that authoritarian power in the Philippines extended beyond state institutions into families, schools, and religious communities, shaping subjectivity through moral discipline rather than overt coercion. Tolentino (2019) further demonstrates how cultural texts expose the contradictions of post-dictatorship democracy, where political liberalization coexists with persistent ideological control.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, comparatively little attention has been paid to how familial discourse itself functions as a sociolinguistic mechanism for reproducing national history. Much literary criticism remains thematic or symbolic, often overlooking the micro-level linguistic practices through which ideology is enacted in intimate settings. This limitation is particularly evident in comparative studies that bridge African and Southeast Asian postcolonial and post-authoritarian literatures through discourse-oriented frameworks.

The family has long been theorized as a central institution for ideological reproduction. Bourdieu (1990) conceptualizes the family as a key site of symbolic power, where social hierarchies are naturalized through everyday practices. Sociolinguistic research further demonstrates that identity is interactionally constructed through language use, including both speech and silence (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). Within familial settings, patterns of address, evaluation, inheritance discourse, and moral instruction play a central role in shaping subjectivity and social belonging (Kiesling, 2019). Silence, in particular, has been increasingly recognized as a meaningful communicative resource rather than a mere absence of discourse. Jaworski (2019) conceptualizes silence as socially and ideologically loaded, capable of signaling compliance, resistance, fear, or authority, while Gal (2018) illustrates how silence contributes to the erasure of marginalized identities. In authoritarian and conservative contexts, silence within families often mirrors broader regimes of censorship and moral surveillance (Wodak, 2021).

From a discourse-analytic perspective, these practices illustrate how ideology is reproduced through mundane interaction rather than explicit indoctrination. Fairclough (2015) argues that power is most effective when embedded in routine communicative practices that appear natural and apolitical, such as expressions of care, obligation, or moral guidance. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust framework for examining these dynamics by conceptualizing discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and sustains ideology (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2018). While CDA has traditionally focused on institutional and media discourse, recent scholarship has increasingly advocated its application to literary texts (Lazar, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2018; Toolan, 2019). Discourse-oriented literary analysis enables systematic examination of how narrative voice, lexical choice, metaphor, and silence construct ideological meaning (Munday, 2022).

Nevertheless, CDA-based literary studies have rarely foregrounded the family as a primary analytical unit. Existing research tends to privilege national or institutional discourse within narratives, overlooking how ideology operates within intimate social spaces. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how national histories are discursively constructed through familial narratives in two contemporary novels: Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) and Danton Remoto's *Riverrun*. Emerging from distinct geopolitical contexts post-apartheid South Africa and post-dictatorship Philippines both novels foreground families whose internal dynamics reflect broader structures of historical inequality. In *The Promise*, the Swart family becomes a symbolic site where unresolved racial injustice, land dispossession, and the failures of post-apartheid reconciliation are negotiated through inheritance discourse. In *Riverrun*, a Filipino family shaped by the Marcos dictatorship navigates authoritarian fear, Catholic morality, and heteronormative discipline, with silence functioning as a dominant mode of survival and regulation.

By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with sociolinguistic theories of identity, silence, and indexicality, this study moves beyond representational analysis to examine how national histories are linguistically encoded in everyday familial interaction. Its contribution lies in foregrounding the family as a central discursive site of historical reproduction, offering a comparative analysis across postcolonial and post-authoritarian contexts, and demonstrating the analytical value of discourse-oriented approaches for literary studies. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) how national histories are discursively constructed through familial narratives in *The Promise* and *Riverrun*; (2) what linguistic and sociolinguistic strategies reproduce or challenge power relations related to race, morality, and sexuality within family discourse; and (3) how these familial discourses reflect broader ideological structures in South Africa and the Philippines.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and sociolinguistics. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for examining how meaning, ideology, and power are constructed through language in literary texts, where interpretation requires close attention to context, narrative structure, and linguistic detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking generalizability, this study aims for analytical depth, offering a nuanced understanding of how familial discourse functions as a site of national historical reproduction.

CDA provides the overarching analytical framework for this study, conceptualizing discourse as a socially situated practice that both reflects and sustains power relations (Fairclough, 2015). Sociolinguistic theory complements CDA by foregrounding how identity, silence, and social meaning are interactionally produced through language use (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016; Jaworski, 2019). Together, these approaches enable a multi-layered analysis that connects micro-level linguistic features with macro-level historical contexts.

Data Sources and Corpus Selection

The primary data for this study consist of selected narrative excerpts from *The Promise* and *Riverrun*. These novels were purposively chosen due to their explicit engagement with national history through family-centered narratives. *The Promise* addresses the legacy of apartheid and post-apartheid reconciliation in South Africa, while *Riverrun* explores the enduring effects of the Marcos dictatorship on Filipino subjectivity and family life.

Textual excerpts were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

1. The presence of explicit or implicit family interaction (e.g., dialogue, narration of domestic events).
2. Relevance to themes of inheritance, authority, silence, morality, race, or sexuality.
3. Clear connection to broader sociopolitical contexts, such as apartheid, land ownership, dictatorship, or religious regulation.

This approach ensures that the data are theoretically relevant and analytically rich, aligning with qualitative research standards in discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2018).

Analytical Framework: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

The analysis follows Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model of discourse, which examines texts at three interrelated levels: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice.

At the textual level, the analysis focuses on linguistic features such as lexical choice, modality, metaphor, narrative voice, and patterns of silence. These features are examined to identify how meaning and ideology are encoded in family discourse.

At the level of discursive practice, the study examines how familial discourse is produced, circulated, and interpreted within the narrative. This includes attention to whose voices are foregrounded or marginalized, how silence functions within interaction, and how moral or authoritative positions are legitimized.

At the social practice level, textual and discursive findings are situated within the broader historical and sociopolitical contexts of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and the Marcos dictatorship and its aftermath in the Philippines. This level of analysis connects literary discourse to material histories of racial segregation, authoritarian governance, and moral regulation.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the selected excerpts were read closely to identify recurring discourse patterns related to family, authority, inheritance, silence, and identity. Second, these patterns were coded thematically, drawing on CDA and sociolinguistic concepts such as ideological reproduction, indexicality, and communicative silence (Blommaert, 2015; Jaworski, 2019).

Third, the coded data were analyzed across the three dimensions of Fairclough's model, ensuring systematic movement between textual detail and social context. Finally, findings from both novels were compared to identify structural similarities and contextual differences in how familial discourse mediates national history.

To enhance analytical rigor, interpretations were triangulated with historical and literary scholarship on South Africa and the Philippines. This triangulation strengthens the validity of the analysis by situating textual findings within established empirical and theoretical research (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, the analysis that follows moves systematically between textual features, discursive practices, and broader social contexts. This approach enables a close examination of how everyday family interactions in the two novels mediate national histories and ideological power relations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings through the combined lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and sociolinguistics. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis demonstrates that familial discourse in *The Promise* and *Riverrun* functions as a mediating structure between private life and national history. Across both novels, the family emerges not merely as a narrative setting but as a discursive institution through which historical ideologies are reproduced, naturalized, and, in limited ways, contested. By situating micro-level linguistic patterns within broader sociopolitical contexts, this section illustrates how everyday

language practices particularly inheritance discourse, silence, and moral regulation operate as mechanisms of historical continuity rather than rupture.

Familial Discourse and Racialized History in *The Promise*

Situated within the unresolved historical legacy of apartheid and post-apartheid reconciliation, *The Promise* constructs the family as a racialized site of deferred justice. The analysis reveals that the Swart family in *The Promise* operates as a discursive microcosm of South African society, where racial hierarchy is sustained through routine domestic interactions rather than explicit ideological declaration. Central to this process is the repeated postponement of Salome's promised inheritance, which functions as a discursive mechanism of deferral. From a CDA perspective, deferral constitutes a temporal strategy that symbolically acknowledges injustice while displacing responsibility and avoiding material redress (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2018).

At the textual level, this deferral is realized through modal constructions, passive voice, and vague temporal references that obscure agency and accountability. The promise is repeatedly referenced yet never prioritized, transforming racial injustice into a private matter of familial obligation rather than a structural legacy of colonial land dispossession. Such linguistic strategies align with broader post-apartheid reconciliation discourse, which emphasizes moral recognition and forgiveness while deferring substantive economic redistribution (Attridge, 2017; Nuttall, 2022).

Metaphors of invisibility and marginal presence further reinforce racialized subject positions. Salome's limited narrative voice and peripheral textual presence index colonial discourses that render Black subjectivity silent and subordinate within white domestic spaces (Boehmer, 2018). Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid, these discursive patterns demonstrate how racial hierarchy persists through everyday family language, supporting Fairclough's (2015) claim that discursive structures often outlast institutional change.

Amor's insistence on fulfilling the promise introduces a counter-discourse that challenges familial and national silence. However, this resistance remains individualized and moral rather than structural. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Amor's discourse lacks institutional uptake, illustrating Blommaert's (2015) argument that counter-hegemonic speech rarely produces transformation without structural support. The eventual fulfillment of the promise, occurring only after prolonged delay, underscores the limits of liberal moral agency within entrenched systems of racial inequality and mirrors critiques of post-apartheid justice as symbolically progressive yet materially conservative (Wodak, 2021).

Silence, Morality, and Queer Subjectivity in *Riverrun*

Emerging from the authoritarian context of the Marcos dictatorship and its aftermath, *Riverrun* foregrounds the family as a space where fear, morality, and silence regulate subjectivity. In *Riverrun*, familial discourse is shaped by authoritarian fear, Catholic morality, and economic precarity during and after the Marcos dictatorship. Unlike *The Promise*, where injustice is deferred through speech acts, *Riverrun* demonstrates how silence itself functions as a primary mode of discursive regulation. Silence emerges not as communicative absence but as a structured sociolinguistic practice that signals obedience, fear, and moral conformity (Jaworski, 2019).

Historically, this silence is situated within the culture of censorship and surveillance characteristic of authoritarian governance in the Philippines. The absence of explicit political discussion within the family reflects the internalization of state repression, illustrating how

authoritarian power operates most effectively when it becomes habitual and self-regulating (Hau, 2017; Wodak, 2021). At the discursive practice level, silence thus functions as a mechanism through which national ideology penetrates the private sphere.

Religious discourse further reinforces this regime of silence. Catholic language of sin, obedience, and sacrifice operates as a legitimating discourse that aligns moral virtue with conformity and self-denial (Fairclough, 2015). This moral framework plays a central role in regulating sexuality, particularly queer desire, which remains unspeakable within the family. Rather than explicit condemnation, queerness is discursively erased through silence, producing what Gal (2018) terms “ideological erasure,” whereby non-normative identities are rendered invisible while heteronormativity is normalized.

The protagonist’s inability to articulate queer identity illustrates how subjectivity is shaped through negation rather than affirmation. From a sociolinguistic perspective, identity is interactional achieved through language, and the absence of linguistic resources for self-expression constrains identity formation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016; Kiesling, 2019). Silence thus functions simultaneously as protection and constraint, enabling survival while foreclosing self-realization.

Migration temporarily disrupts this discursive regime by providing spaces of linguistic and identity experimentation. However, the return to the homeland reinscribes familial and national ideologies, demonstrating the resilience of discursive structures across spatial movement (Erll, 2020). This finding challenges celebratory narratives of mobility by showing that geographical displacement does not necessarily entail discursive liberation.

Familial Discourse as a Site of Ideological Reproduction

Across both novels, the family functions as a relay point through which national ideology is translated into everyday communicative practice. In *The Promise*, racial injustice is normalized through inheritance discourse and temporal deferral; in *Riverrun*, authoritarianism and heteronormativity are sustained through silence and moral instruction. Despite contextual differences, both texts demonstrate ideology is most effective when embedded in intimate, routinized interactions that appear apolitical, operating through normalization rather than overt coercion (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2018; Wodak, 2021).

These findings support Foucauldian accounts of power as productive and diffuse rather than purely repressive (Foucault, 1978). In both narratives, domination operates less through explicit coercion than through normalization through what is left unsaid, postponed, or framed as moral necessity. The family thus emerges as a critical institution where historical power relations are reproduced under the guise of care, obligation, and moral responsibility.

Comparative Implications for Postcolonial Discourse Studies

Comparatively, *The Promise* and *Riverrun* reveal structurally analogous discursive formations shaped by distinct historical conditions. While racialized inheritance discourse dominates the South African context and moral-religious silence structures the Philippine context, both function to sustain historical inequality through everyday family interaction. Silence, in particular, emerges as a shared sociolinguistic mechanism linking private life to national trauma (Jaworski, 2019; van Dijk, 2018).

These parallels underscore the value of a comparative CDA approach to literary analysis. By examining familial discourse across postcolonial contexts, this study demonstrates that

national history is not only remembered through public narratives but also reproduced through mundane communicative practices within the home. Such an approach expands the scope of CDA beyond institutional and media discourse, positioning the family as a central site of ideological reproduction and historical continuity.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *The Promise* and *Riverrun* construct national histories through familial discourse, positioning the family not merely as a narrative backdrop but as a central discursive institution where historical power relations are reproduced and, at times, contested. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis informed by sociolinguistics, the study reveals how everyday language practices within families encode enduring structures of race, land ownership, morality, and sexuality.

The study contributes to discourse-oriented literary studies by offering an interdisciplinary framework that integrates CDA, sociolinguistics, and postcolonial theory. It highlights the importance of analyzing private domains as sites of ideological reproduction and historical memory.

Future research may extend this framework to other postcolonial contexts or incorporate corpus-assisted discourse analysis to enhance analytical scope and methodological rigor. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how national histories are lived, negotiated, and contested through everyday language.

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