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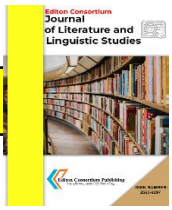

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Decolonialist Praxis: Language as a Counter Hegemonic Discourse in Petals of Blood

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Abstract

This article re-examines the novel through the lens of its poetic and aesthetic dimensions, arguing that Ngũgĩ's engagement with language and narrative form embodies his ideological commitment to cultural decolonisation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood has often been interpreted primarily as a vehicle for the author's Marxist ideology, with critics emphasising its political content over its artistic merit. By employing orature and subverting colonial literary traditions, Ngũgĩ reconfigures the novel as a medium of resistance. These strategies articulate a subaltern consciousness while also aligning with Ngũgĩ's broader ideological project of recuperating indigenous forms of expression. This synthesis of ideology and aesthetics signals a shift in Ngũgĩ's literary trajectory and underscores Petals of Blood as a pivotal work in the evolution of his aesthetic ideology. Ultimately, this article posits that the novel's integration of language and ideology renders it a masterpiece of Ngũgĩ's early career and a harbinger of his eventual embrace of writing in Gĩkũyũ.

Key words: Aesthetic(s), decolonisation, orature, language, proletarianisation, subaltern.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* in 1977 marked a pivotal moment in the history of African literature, challenging the dominance of European traditions that had long defined the novel form. Ngũgĩ reimagined the genre as a platform for articulating African realities and expressing indigenous values, fundamentally subverting its imperialist legacy. By merging aesthetic innovation with ideological commitment, Ngũgĩ created a work that is as much a profound artistic accomplishment as it is a powerful political statement. *Petals of Blood* transcends conventional literary expectations, simultaneously serving as a gripping narrative of postcolonial Kenya's socio-political struggles and a vehicle for amplifying the voices of marginalised communities. This dual function aligns seamlessly with Ngũgĩ's broader cultural project of decolonisation, encapsulated in his call for a "return to the roots" (Ngũgĩ, 1981)—a vision that seeks to reclaim Kenyan history from the perspective of the subaltern and highlights the indispensable role of indigenous cultural forms in the broader struggle for liberation.

The postcolonial crisis of the 1970s, characterised by deepening socio-economic inequalities and political betrayal, profoundly shaped Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's aesthetic ideology. In independent Kenya, the promises of liberation were swiftly undermined by the rise of a neo-colonial elite whose exploitative practices preserved the inequities of colonial rule. Under the guise of "progress" and "development," these elites entrenched systemic inequality, perpetuating the suffering of the majority while enriching a select few. Described as the first of Ngũgĩ's novels to be "fairly and squarely about independent Kenya" (Cook & Okenimkpe, 1997), *Petals of Blood* offers a vivid critique of these neo-colonial betrayals. Ngũgĩ frames his intervention in the novel as a call to "a collective battle against the forces that had hijacked Africa's development" (Uwasomba, 2006), confronting Kenya's socio-political realities in the aftermath of independence with incisive clarity.

In striving to foreground the voices of the marginalised majority—whom Ngũgĩ identifies as the true agents of change envisioned in *Petals of Blood*—the author deliberately shifts the narrative focus away from Kenya's elites to "the peasantry, the proletariat, the unemployed, the hungry, the uprooted, and the dispossessed, the subaltern" (Lazarus, 1995). Through this lens, Ngũgĩ amplifies the perspectives of those systematically silenced by the dual forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism, offering a vivid exploration of the inequalities that shaped Kenya's post-independence public sphere. The transformation of Ilmorog, from a vibrant rural village to a site of capitalist exploitation and alienation, becomes a powerful microcosm of the broader struggles faced by Kenya's working-class and agrarian communities under neo-colonial governance.

By centring the lived experiences of marginalised characters, Ngũgĩ reveals the devastating human costs of neo-colonial policies while simultaneously offering both a trenchant critique of systemic injustice and a rallying cry for collective resistance. His narrative exposes not only the socio-economic structures of exploitation but also underscores the necessity of reclaiming agency through solidarity and collective action, themes that resonate strongly within the novel's broader revolutionary vision.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's engagement with oral traditions in *Petals of Blood* underscores his unwavering commitment to cultural reclamation and the empowerment of marginalised communities. By drawing on the richness of indigenous Kenyan forms such as the Gĩkũyũ *ituĩka* festival and oral storytelling techniques, Ngũgĩ seeks to craft a narrative idiom that authentically represents the lived realities of subaltern subjects. Orature, as the art of the subaltern classes, becomes a vital tool in his literary arsenal, enabling him to give voice to the oppressed workers and peasants who are systematically excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives. This deliberate turn to orature reflects Ngũgĩ's belief in its capacity to preserve communal memory, articulate resistance, and challenge the hegemonic structures of neo-colonialism.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ's use of orature challenges the elitist literary conventions that dominate Western narratives, fostering an inclusive framework rooted in the collective experiences of Kenya's marginalised majority. The *ituĩka* festival,

for instance, symbolises the generational transfer of power and serves as a metaphor for revolutionary change reimagined within the context of Kenya's post-independence struggles. Similarly, the oral traditions of Gichandi, Litungu, and Nyatiti, while not directly employed in the novel, are evoked as symbolic tools of storytelling in the absence of formal chroniclers to document Kenya's resistance. These traditions, deeply embedded in the cultural practices of Kenya's peasantry, provide a counter-hegemonic discourse that reclaims suppressed histories and reconfigures Kenyan identity through the lens of communal struggle (Ngũgĩ, 1986).

Ngũgĩ's reliance on orature is not merely a stylistic choice but a political act of decolonisation. By turning to the oral traditions of the subaltern classes, he constructs a narrative that resists the imperial "contamination" of the novel form and reclaims it as a medium for articulating indigenous perspectives (Ngũgĩ, 1981). This approach aligns with his broader ideological project of cultural liberation, which emphasises the centrality of language and oral traditions in the fight against neo-colonial oppression. As Ogundokun (2015) notes, orature serves as a powerful means of storytelling that preserves cultural heritage while challenging dominant narrative forms imposed by colonial powers. In *Petals of Blood*, this reclamation of orature transforms the novel into a site of resistance, amplifying the voices of Kenya's oppressed workers and peasants and offering a trenchant critique of systemic injustice. Ultimately, Ngũgĩ's integration of orature into *Petals of Blood* exemplifies his commitment to creating a literature that is both culturally authentic and politically transformative. By centring the art of the subaltern classes, he not only recovers the dignity of indigenous cultural expressions but also reimagines the novel as a vehicle for collective resistance and social change.

But for Ngũgĩ, the oral traditions are far more than stylistic embellishments; they are fundamental to the novel's aesthetic and ideological project. The author draws upon oral art forms such as the Gĩkũyũ *ituĩka* festival, oral storytelling techniques, and the lexicons of indigenous Kenyan languages, which serve as vehicles to reclaim cultural agency and foreground the voices of the marginalised. By incorporating Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili terms such as *athamaki* (community elders) and *uhere* (an epidemic of measles), Ngũgĩ subverts the dominance of English, compelling it to draw upon and accommodate indigenous linguistic frameworks (Ngũgĩ, 1977). These deliberate linguistic choices undermine colonial narratives, positioning African languages as crucial tools for cultural reclamation and political liberation. As Chinua Achebe critiques in his analysis of Western literary expectations, the refusal to italicise or translate these terms disrupts the parochial demand that African writers accommodate European readers (Achebe, 1975).

Ngũgĩ's representation of subaltern groups aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity, defined as the condition of marginalised social classes excluded from dominant cultural and historical narratives (Gramsci, 1971). Through characters such as Munira, Karega, and Nyakinyua, *Petals of Blood* amplifies the voices of the peasantry and proletariat, reclaiming histories suppressed by the neo-colonial state. This reclamation of the subaltern perspective highlights the inequalities perpetuated in Kenya's post-independence public sphere and builds upon the ideological foundation for collective resistance. Ngũgĩ's commitment to centring subaltern narratives also resonates with Homi Bhabha's assertion that oppressed individuals can recover agency by appropriating dominant languages and forms of representation (Bhabha, 1994). In reconfiguring the novelistic form and the language of the coloniser, Ngũgĩ articulates a subaltern consciousness rooted in revolutionary struggle, embodying his Marxist vision of social transformation.

Authorial intrusions in *Petals of Blood* further reflect Ngũgĩ's engagement with historiographical debates about Kenyan identity and history. These interventions critique how both colonial and neo-colonial systems manipulated historical narratives. For example, the communal narrator laments, "there are many questions about our history which remain unanswered ... our present-day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we arrived here yesterday" (Ngũgĩ, 1977). Through this critique, Ngũgĩ reimagines Kenyan history as a continuum

of resistance, reframing it as a narrative centred on collective defiance against domination. Characters like Munira, in their journeys to reconnect with "usurped history" (Ngũgĩ, 1977, p. 227), embody the broader ideological project of correcting historiographical imbalances and recovering the suppressed stories of the subaltern.

Ngũgĩ's use of oral traditions, indigenous languages, and historical consciousness ensures that *Petals of Blood* functions as a counter-hegemonic narrative, engaging deeply with Kenya's past and present struggles. This integration of aesthetics and ideology underscores his assertion that the two are inseparable, each enriching the other in meaningful ways. By refusing to conform to Western literary conventions and privileging local voices, Ngũgĩ develops a liberatory aesthetic that revitalises the African novel as a tool for decolonisation and social change. As Breidlid (2002) observes, *Petals of Blood* "restores colonised and post-colonised selves and worlds while at the same time revealing their contradictions and ambivalence" (pp. 19–71).

Through its sophisticated melding of narrative, aesthetics, and political commitment, *Petals of Blood* not only critiques systems of exploitation but also reclaims cultural identity and envisions a more just and equitable future. Ngũgĩ's reclamation of the novelistic form signals a transformative moment in his literary career, affirming the power of African literature to serve as both a mode of resistance and a space for imagining liberation.

Ngũgĩ's Decolonialist Praxis: Language and the Resistance to Cultural and Political Oppression in Neo-colonial Kenya

Colonial powers deployed language as a formidable instrument of domination, systematically suppressing indigenous languages and alienating communities from their cultural heritage. This linguistic imposition entrenched colonial power dynamics, creating a hierarchical structure in which local languages—and, by extension, local knowledge systems—were rendered inferior. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o critiques this linguistic imperialism, arguing that it erases indigenous narratives, marginalises native cultures, and sustains colonial mentalities long after political independence has been nominally achieved. In post-independence Kenya, these colonial vestiges manifest in the continuation of neo-colonial policies that undermine indigenous cultural and political identities, a theme deeply woven into Ngũgĩ's oeuvre.

Central to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonialist praxis is his recognition of the profound and inextricable link between language, identity, and liberation. Language, as Ngũgĩ argues in *Decolonising the Mind*, is more than a medium of communication; it is also "a carrier of culture" that defines a people's sense of self and their relationship with the natural and social environment (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. xiv). Within this framework, language transcends its utilitarian function to become a contested site of both colonisation and resistance. The struggle over language is, therefore, an existential battle for representation and identity, which lies at the heart of Ngũgĩ's artistic and ideological project. In *Petals of Blood*, this philosophy finds powerful expression as the novel interrogates the instrumentalisation of language and cultural memory in resisting systemic oppression.

Petals of Blood offers a trenchant critique of the capitalist structures embedded in post-independence Kenya, exposing the moral decay and systemic exploitation that underpin the rise of the neo-colonial elite. These elites, typified by "robber capitalist" barons, exploit the rhetoric of progress to enact policies that exacerbate inequality and alienate communities. Through the transformation of Ilmorog—from a vibrant, self-sustaining rural village into a desolate locus of capitalist "development"—Ngũgĩ delivers a searing indictment of the socio-economic upheavals caused by neo-colonial policies. This transformation stands as a potent metaphor for Kenya's broader struggles under neo-colonial governance, highlighting the disintegration of traditional agrarian societies in the face of land alienation, economic exploitation, and the commodification of labour.

Ngũgĩ's portrayal of these processes aligns closely with his Marxist vision of revolutionary structural change, offering a vivid depiction of proletarianisation. By illustrating how farmers and herdsmen are dispossessed of their land and

coerced into urban labour markets, the novel captures the creation of a new urban working class that fuels Kenya's capitalist machinery. This critique resonates with broader postcolonial scholarship, such as Manase's (2022, p. 24) analysis of neo-colonial predation in African economies, where independence failed to alleviate systemic inequalities, leaving the rural majority vulnerable to exploitation. Similarly, Sa'idu (2021, p. 48) emphasises the ways in which the rhetoric of "development" masks extractive policies, a theme vividly realised in Ilmorog's degradation.

In *Petals of Blood*, the transformation of Ilmorog is not merely an economic shift but a cultural crisis, representing the erosion of communal traditions and indigenous governance. Ngũgĩ's narrative highlights the devastating impact of neo-colonialism on both material conditions and cultural integrity, demonstrating how language and memory become critical tools for resistance. The novel's ideological force emerges through its dual critique and reclamation: while exposing the destructive systems of neo-colonial capitalism, it also elevates the subaltern voice and reimagines the possibilities of collective struggle.

Through the plight of Ilmorog's inhabitants, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o vividly captures the process of proletarianisation, whereby rural communities are dispossessed of their land and forced into urban labour markets, forming an exploited working class. This narrative mirrors broader historical and economic trends in post-independence Kenya, where neo-colonial policies facilitated wealth accumulation for the elite at the expense of the majority. As Manase (2022) argues, this critique resonates beyond Kenya, reflecting the wider neo-colonial dynamics across Africa, where national independence often failed to translate into meaningful socio-economic justice. The novel's depiction of Ilmorog's transformation from a vibrant, self-sufficient rural village into a desolate site of capitalist "development" serves as a powerful metaphor for the socio-economic upheavals wrought by neo-colonial policies.

Ngũgĩ's critique extends to the notion of "development," which is exposed as a facade for continued exploitation. The so-called development brought by the Trans-Africa Highway in Ilmorog benefits foreign investors and local elites while exacerbating the marginalisation of the majority. Farmers are coerced into mortgaging their land to access loans, only to lose their property to banks, thereby transforming them into landless labourers. This depiction aligns with recent scholarly analyses, such as Sa'idu's (2021) observation that neo-colonial regimes exploit the rhetoric of development to justify extractive economic practices that reinforce inequality and dependency. By portraying the stark human cost of such policies, Ngũgĩ critiques the complicity of both domestic elites and global capitalist systems in perpetuating neo-colonial oppression. As Obikwelu et al. (2023) note, the legacy of colonialism continues to shape Africa's economic and political landscape, with neo-colonial practices posing significant obstacles to genuine socio-economic progress.

Language and cultural reclamation remain central to Ngũgĩ's response to neo-colonialism in *Petals of Blood*. By interweaving indigenous idioms, oral traditions, and cultural references, Ngũgĩ subverts the hegemony of the English language and reclaims narrative authority for Kenya's oppressed classes. His refusal to italicise or translate terms such as *athamaki* (community elders) and *uhere* (an epidemic of measles) (Ngũgĩ, 1977) signals a rejection of the parochial expectation that African writers should cater to Western audiences. Instead, Ngũgĩ positions African languages as critical tools for cultural and political liberation, challenging the narrative erasure imposed by colonial and neo-colonial systems. As Olaniyan (2019) observes, this deliberate act of linguistic reclamation affirms the cultural legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems and disrupts Eurocentric literary conventions. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ's approach aligns with his broader ideological project of decolonisation, as articulated in *Decolonising the Mind*, where he argues that language is both a means of communication and "a carrier of culture" (Ngũgĩ, 1986).

The transformation of Ilmorog also mirrors the cultural alienation experienced under neo-colonialism, where traditional systems of governance, symbolised by community elders and collective rituals, are supplanted by exploitative capitalist structures. However, Ngũgĩ's narrative not only critiques but also seeks to inspire. The

revolutionary potential embodied by Ilmorog's inhabitants, particularly figures such as Nyakinyua, Munira, and Karega, underscores the necessity of collective action in reclaiming agency and resisting systemic oppression. As Sa'idu (2021) highlights, collective resistance remains a vital strategy for countering entrenched inequalities perpetuated by neo-colonial systems. Ngũgĩ's portrayal of Ilmorog's inhabitants thus serves as both a critique of systemic injustice and a rallying cry for solidarity and revolutionary change.

The construction of the Trans-Africa Highway serves as a potent metaphor for capitalist exploitation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*. Initially framed as a project of modernisation, the highway instead facilitates land dispossession, alienation, and the commodification of local resources. Farmers are coerced into registering their land and using title deeds as collateral for loans, a process that ultimately results in the loss of their land to banks. This transformation illuminates Ngũgĩ's incisive critique of neo-colonial "progress," which exacerbates inequality and reduces the masses to a disenfranchised proletariat forced to seek precarious livelihoods in urban centres. The creation of a "Tourist Village," owned jointly by local politicians and foreign investors, further highlights the collusion between Kenya's neo-colonial elite and external economic powers, revealing the exploitative nature of capitalist ventures. In this scenario, the residents of Ilmorog are reduced to roles such as barmaids and prostitutes, which encapsulates the dehumanising consequences of neo-colonial capitalism.

Characters like Munira, Karega, Abdulla, and Wanja embody the human cost of systemic exploitation, with Wanja's trajectory vividly illustrating the gendered dimensions of oppression. Her transformation from an ambitious entrepreneur to a victim of systemic subjugation underscores how capitalist systems intersect with patriarchal structures to compound the marginalisation of women. Wanja's narrative serves as a poignant microcosm of the broader realities faced by women under neo-colonial capitalism, highlighting the intersecting forces of gender and class oppression. As Obikwelu et al. (2023) observe, neo-colonialism not only perpetuates economic marginalisation but also deepens societal inequalities across multiple axes of identity.

The reception of *Petals of Blood* further underscores the tension between African and Western critical frameworks, reflecting the cultural and ideological contexts that shaped the novel's interpretation. African critics widely lauded the work as a milestone in Ngũgĩ's literary career, celebrating its incisive political commentary and its engagement with pressing issues in African public culture. Chidi Amuta articulates the importance of the novel's synthesis of ideology and artistry, stating: "Against the timid imputations of bourgeois critics, the decisive ideological thrust of *Petals of Blood* does not weaken its artistic identity" (Amuta, 1989). This defence underscores the idea that Ngũgĩ's Marxist vision enriches rather than detracts from the literary quality of the novel.

In stark contrast, Western reviewers often approached the novel with scepticism, viewing Ngũgĩ's overt Marxism and political boldness with unease. Critics such as Gerald Moore expressed concern over what they described as a didactic tone, suggesting that the novel prioritised ideological commitment at the expense of narrative subtlety (Moore, 1977). These critiques reveal a Western preference for artistic ambiguity over ideological clarity, as well as discomfort with the novel's uncompromising critique of neo-colonial capitalism and global power dynamics. As Olaniyan (2019) argues, this divergence highlights the broader tendency of Eurocentric frameworks to undervalue literary works that foreground political resistance and social transformation.

The contrasting receptions of *Petals of Blood* illuminate the broader tension between African literary traditions and Western critical norms. While African critics recognised Ngũgĩ's decolonialist project as a vital intervention in the cultural politics of post-independence Africa, Western reviewers often failed to engage with the socio-political stakes of his work, focusing instead on perceived deviations from Eurocentric literary conventions.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's construction of an alternative historiography in *Petals of Blood* is intricately tied to his aim of establishing a "regenerative link" with

Kenya's marginalised masses (Ngũgĩ, 1981). His evolving artistic focus highlights the organic codes of orature and popular cultural forms as indispensable modes of representation. This approach underscores his conviction that true Kenyan national literature must draw upon the languages, cultures, and histories of Kenya's peasant masses—the majority class across the country's diverse nationalities. These principles guide *Petals of Blood*, as Ngũgĩ reimagines the novel not merely as an artistic medium but as a political and cultural battleground for reclaiming identity and resisting neo-colonial hegemony.

Summing Up: Orature, Language, and Resistance in *Petals of Blood*

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* evokes indigenous literary and cultural traditions, referencing the legends preserved by performers of Gichandi, Litungu, and Nyatiti (Ngũgĩ, 1977). These oral art forms, though not directly employed in the narrative, symbolise the absence of historians and intellectual chroniclers who might have documented Kenya's resistance struggles. By invoking the custodianship of communal memory through orature, Ngũgĩ provides an alternative historiographical framework that challenges colonial narratives and prioritises subaltern perspectives. This subtle nod to Kenya's oral traditions anticipates Ngũgĩ's later artistic trajectory, moving beyond the Gĩkũyũ mythology of his early nationalist works towards a more inclusive framework encompassing Kenya's diverse communities.

The narrative voice in *Petals of Blood*, rooted in Gĩkũyũ orature, reaches its most evocative expression through characters like Nyakinyua. Her voice, described as "taut with prideful authority and nostalgia" (Ngũgĩ, 1977), recalls the collective ethos of oral storytelling, where the relationship between speaker and audience becomes pivotal. This dynamic evokes the tradition of the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator, later explored in *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ (Devil on the Cross)*, wherein the narrator embodies communal memory and subaltern aspirations. Orature thus becomes a counter-hegemonic tool in *Petals of Blood*, reclaiming suppressed histories while disrupting the "imperial contamination" of the novel form (Ngũgĩ, 1986). As Anyidoho (2018) notes, orature holds the power to reassert indigenous systems of knowledge in the face of globalising and neo-colonial pressures, aligning with Ngũgĩ's vision of cultural and political liberation.

Ngũgĩ's refusal to italicise or translate terms like *athamaki* (community elders) and *uhere* (an epidemic of measles) (Ngũgĩ, 1977) represents a deliberate act of vernacularisation that subverts colonial language hierarchies. These linguistic choices compel English to accommodate and draw from indigenous lexicons, thereby overturning embedded power relations. This aligns with Chinua Achebe's critique of Western parochialism, which demands that African writers constantly "translate" their cultures for European audiences (Achebe, 1975). Similarly, phrases like "the *njahi rains* are still 'two moons away'" (Ngũgĩ, 1977), a transliteration of the Gĩkũyũ expression *mĩĩeri ĩĩrĩ*, retain the semantic richness of indigenous idioms while resisting assimilation into standardised English.

The transformation of Ilmorog serves as a central allegory in *Petals of Blood*. Once a vibrant, self-sufficient rural village, Ilmorog is reduced to a capitalist dystopia, reflecting the socio-economic inequalities entrenched by neo-colonial governance. Farmers are coerced into mortgaging their land under the pretext of "development," only to lose it to banks, resulting in proletarianisation. This critique resonates with Sa'idu's (2021) analysis of neo-colonial rhetoric, which often cloaks extractive economic practices in the guise of modernisation. As Obikwelu et al. (2023) argue, neo-colonialism exacerbates dependency and marginalisation, with capitalist systems privileging a minority elite while exploiting the majority. Characters like Wanja reflect this dual oppression, embodying how capitalist structures intersect with patriarchal systems to deepen societal inequalities.

While deeply embedded in Kenya's specific socio-political context, *Petals of Blood* transcends national boundaries, linking Kenya's struggles to global resistance movements. Figures like Toussaint L'Ouverture and Nat Turner situate Ilmorog's narrative within a universal framework of anti-oppression, highlighting the interconnectedness of struggles against colonialism and systemic injustice. Ngũgĩ challenges readers to

interrogate enduring systems of power and marginalisation, urging reflection on whose histories are preserved and whose are silenced.

Ultimately, *Petals of Blood* endures as a masterful work of art and ideology, balancing historical narrative, political critique, and aesthetic reclamation. It interrogates systems of exploitation, reclaims indigenous identities, and envisions a future rooted in equity and justice. Ngũgĩ's integration of historical narrative, political critique, and aesthetic reclamation transforms the novel into an enduring symbol of resistance, underscoring the transformative potential of literature in shaping social consciousness and inspiring liberation.

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