

# A Question of Dignity – A Comparative and Historical Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring*

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## ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe and Kalyan Rao, the Nigerian and the Telugu Dalit writers, authors of two groundbreaking novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Untouchable Spring*, belong to two different socio-cultural traditions and historical contexts. Both are the products and chroniclers of societies that faced oppression and exploitation as well as literary misrepresentation. The individual identity, humanity and dignity of their people was negated through stereotypical and superficial portrayals in popular imagination and dominant discourses. Both writers seek to restore the dignity and self-respect of their communities through the two novels that interrogate negative and inauthentic representations and provide challenging, alternative perspectives. They are simultaneous narratives of protest and assertion and choose similar narrative thrust points to achieve their objectives.

## KEY WORDS

Hegemony, protest, authentic, dignity, assertion

The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe and the Telugu Dalit writer Kalyan Rao belong to two divergent literary and cultural traditions.

While their novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Untouchable Spring* differ in scope, tone, trajectory, and narrative strategies, they are linked together by the writers' impassioned concern to correct the stereotypical and negative literary misrepresentation of their people and communities at large. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Untouchable Spring*, they take up a self-appointed, historically necessitated task, to challenge this superficial, inauthentic portrayal in order to restore the dignity and self-respect of their people. By positing an alternate picture and history, by writing from within, by creating strong individuals and real identifiable communities, and assigning value to their activities and traditions, both writers assert their peoples' right to define themselves. Speaking of the Igbo community of Nigeria and the Telugu Dalit communities of the malas and madigas in Andhra Pradesh, each writer appropriates crucial literary space to give voice to marginalized and misrepresented communities, and thus challenges both literary historiography and dominant literary conventions. Both writers assert the identity and worth of groups marginalized by hegemonic political and socio-economic systems like colonization and caste-based discrimination which have historically deprived them of individuality, dignity, voice and agency.

Achebe was deeply disturbed by the epiphanic realization that the western literature he had imbibed so unquestioningly because of his English education, negated the very humanity of his people by representing them in a superficial manner. As he said, “the real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in this world” (1977, 12). Presented as the Other of the post-colonial discourse, the African was, either to be dismissed, ridiculed or abhorred. Achebe sparked off a huge literary debate by challenging the canonical status of Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary for their dehumanizing portrayal of Africa and Africans in ‘Heart of Darkness’ (1902) and ‘Mr. Johnson’ (1939), called Conrad ‘a thoroughgoing racist’ and took upon himself the task of writing from within. As a teacher he was agitated by the psychological impact of years of mental and cultural colonization that had left an ingrained inferiority complex, especially in the Nigerian younger generations. He felt he owed it to his people to remind them that “their past with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them”, (1965, 45). They too had a history, culture and dignity. He challenged the positioning of Africa as antithetical to European civilization in terms of intelligence and refinement. As a writer, it was his chosen mission to “help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (Ibid, 44), to make his people regain their self-respect and dignity.

In her insightful analysis of Achebe’s literary achievement, Diana Akers Rhoads says, “...he must dispel old images in order to create a true sense of his peoples’ dignity” ((1993, 63). By focusing on the humanity and specific identity of the Igbo people in the fictional representative village of Umuofia, Achebe

seeks to counteract their literary representation as a vast, depersonalised and undifferentiated mass. He presents them as real, living human beings, rooted in their own specific socio-economic, cultural and political systems, focusing on the pre-colonial Igbo society at a moment of historical transition in end-twentieth century from being a free people to a colonized one. The British colonialist enterprise had begun in Nigeria in mid-nineteenth century and by highlighting the moment of contact and conflict between the Igbos of Umuofia and the white man, Achebe documents in human terms the historical and political process occurring in many parts of Africa and other colonized territories. By situating the Igbos in a crucial moment of confrontation and destabilization, Achebe shows them to be both heroes and victims, normal people situated in real human events.

The unique identity and dignity of the Igbos is asserted by honouring their community life, with its diverse social, religious, economic and cultural practices. The nine villages of Umuofia comprise a well-organised, self-governing and democratic community, with clearly defined parameters of achievement, governance, religious and social activities. The *ndichie* or the elders govern through collective will, the *Egwugwu* dispense justice in a transparent manner, the gods and oracles exact unquestioning obedience from all, irrespective of social standing. Rhoads asserts, “His Igbos have what constitutes dignity in modern times - democratic institutions, tolerance of other cultures, a balance of male and female principles, capacity to change for the better or to meet new circumstances, a means of redistributing wealth, a viable system of morality, support for industriousness, an effective system of justice, striking and memorable art and poetry” (Ibid, 61). Achebe shows them engaged in their various activities, whether watching a wrestling match akin to

one in which Okonkwo defeated Amalinze the Cat or following Ezinma as she leads them all a merry dance in searching for her *iyi-uwa*, or making merry on moon-lit nights as significantly, they too are afraid of the darkness, symbolically seen to be their natural habitat in colonialist writings. Elaborate rituals govern their social interactions and there is no unseemingly haste to come to the point, whether it is Unoka's creditor come to ask for his loan repayment, or the marriage negotiations of Akueke. The kola nut plays an important role in these exchanges and must be ritually broken and shared before any serious conversation takes place. The validity of these rituals and experiences is upheld by the writer to define their cultural specificity.

The biggest testimony of the Igbos' civilized and humane approach as depicted by Achebe is their attitude towards the white missionaries. Neither side can understand the rationale of the other's religion, but though amused and scornful of the white man's religion as expounded to them, they nevertheless give them a piece of land to build their church, allow clansmen to convert to Christianity and even when determined to destroy the church to avenge the 'killing' of an *Egwugwu*, tell Reverend Smith they will not harm him, "You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and spirits of his fathers," (Achebe, 1958, 134). They are ready for an uneasy co-existence, but they naively misunderstand the imperialistic agenda and clever strategies of the white man. All this Achebe conveys in an objective but ironical narrative style that clearly shows his sympathy in a conflict between two unevenly matched sides. He does not gloss over their imperfections which validates his objective stance. Though himself belonging to a second-generation converted Christian family, he was connected to the thought-processes and

memories of the older generation through the community elders who still lived in traditional village societies.

In the character of Okonkwo, Achebe has created an unforgettable individual who also embodies the values of his community, having earned his position as a respected leader by a fortuitous combination of hard work and a supportive *chi* or personal god. His persona as a proud and confident member of the community is constituted through his constant assertion of his masculinity in terms of his physical prowess, his heroism in inter-tribal wars, his control over his wives and children, the value of his opinion in community meetings and his role as an *Egwugwu* or ancestral spirit. His weaknesses like his hot temper and proneness to violence too define him to make him all too human, especially his aversion to be compared to his father Unoka, who earned no title and left him with many debts. He hides his attachment to Ikemefuna and his daughter Ezinma because showing emotions is a sign of weakness that is anathema to him. Subsequently, his marginalization within the community is truly symbolic of the changed perspectives and divisions among the people.

It is intolerable for Okonkwo to see the growing influence of the alien religion in Mbanta and Umuofia, especially after his son Nwoye too becomes a Christian. He has a horrifying vision of 'himself and his father crowding around their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god.' (1958, 108). This constitutes a betrayal unacceptable to him. Achebe demonstrates his growing frustration at his inability to motivate his clansmen to reject this 'abominable religion' and assert their warrior spirit of old, his implacable hatred of the white man's

government and the court-messengers who humiliate him and other village leaders in the District Commissioner's office. It is a moment's work for him to find release for all the frustration, anger and humiliation by killing the head messenger. His subsequent suicide hinges upon his realization that his clan has lost its fighting-spirit. A proud man like him can see no compromise with the situation as most clansmen have done. Lacking the intellectual capacity to analyze the situation, he has to concur with his friend Obierika who wisely saw how their clan fell apart due to the clever strategies employed by the white man. His impulsive action is in defence of his dignity and self-respect. Obierika also fittingly provides the epitaph on Okonkwo's death, "that man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog" (147). His clansmen cannot even bury him for he has committed a sin against the Earth goddess. Ironically, the man who represented his community becomes an outcast because of his suicide.

Through his predicament we see "the tragedy of a people who find their way of life suddenly assailed by forces they do not understand and are not equipped to deal with" (Scheub, 1993, 40). Okonkwo chooses to take his own life rather than face the punishment enforced by the DC, the representative of the British queen. He is not a perfect man but human in his failings, and Achebe provides a tragic stature to this man who was inflexible and uncompromising in his beliefs. His encapsulation in one paragraph of the District Commissioner's proposed anthropological treatise, 'Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger' is precisely an example of the reductive, generalized literary representation of the African by empire-writers that Achebe challenges in the novel. The human energy and vitality associated with Okonkwo's springy

walk and blazing eyes in the very beginning of the novel is totally depersonalized by the end.

Oral transmissions and folk narratives are an inherent feature of ancient cultures constituting both the Jungian 'collective unconscious' as well as the 'collective consciousness' formulated by the sociologist Emile Durkheim. Herbert Scheub, in his comprehensive analysis of African oral traditions, asserts, "The African oral tradition distills the essence of human experience, shaping them into memorable, readily retrievable images of broad applicability with an extraordinary potential for eliciting emotional responses" (1985, 1). Achebe too assigns great value to the rich oral culture of the Igbos, in which as he said, "The ancestors are sending us signals from the long history and experiences of bygone days, about the meaning of life, the qualities we should cultivate and the values that are important", (1977, 136). The dominant European tradition privileging the written text is subverted by incorporating oral traditions in the narrative that assert their rich cultural heritage and challenge the stereotypical popular image of the barbaric and uncivilized African. Scheub says, "The African writer and critic stand between the two great images, that which animate African oral traditions and literature and the competing myth from the West" (1985, 44) and the African writers, both products and chroniclers of their historical and cultural situation, need to assert their own cultural identity in the process of identity-construction. Like a folk story-teller, Achebe immerses the reader in a plethora of narrations, ranging from amusing personal stories to innumerable accounts of gods, goddesses, beliefs, superstitions, harvests, feasts, etc. in the lengthy first part of the novel which is episodic and loosely structured with many temporal shifts, building up the comprehensive social picture through digressions, repetitions and community

memories. The gendered wealth of stories and songs, the proverbs that pithily sum up the traditional outlook, the Igbo words that reflect the 'otherness' of the language and indigenise standard English, are Achebe's strategies to celebrate an ancient oral culture and offer an alternative set of values, traditions and practices, that was soon subsumed within the hegemonic domain of the colonizer culture. This is also poignantly depicted by the title of the D C's book that shows the movement from the insider, oral narrative to the external, written narratives favoured by European chroniclers and writers. Achebe evokes an empathetic response in the readers for the falling apart of a community and a way of life hinted at in the epigraph from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming'.

Thus, Achebe creates an unforgettable picture of a vibrant, real and dynamic Igbo community, linked to its past through living traditions and practices, uneasy in the transitional present and apprehensive about an uncertain future where the claims of kinship seem overwhelmed by materialistic and individual-centric concerns. His consciousness-raising approach is a deliberate act of celebration of the people, their community life, their festivals and rituals, their humanity and their human weaknesses. According to Gareth Griffiths, "the celebration of the past and of traditional values and practices is an attempt to recover a full human experience, and not to create a false, paradisaical perfection". (1978, 20). The novel significantly contributes to repositioning African characters in the literary arena as real, identifiable individuals.

Kalyan Rao in his novel '*Untouchable Spring*' (*Antarani Vasantam*), similarly seeks to provide a concrete identity, dignity and human value to the lives of the malas and madigas, the dominant Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh, and by extension, to all Dalit

communities in India. Published in 2000 in Telugu, and available as a translated text endorsed by the writer in 2010, the novel is celebrated as a powerful Telugu Dalit work available outside its linguistic boundaries. Through it, Kalyan Rao challenges and subverts the literary suppression and misrepresentation of the Dalit communities as well as their histories, their arts and cultural traditions by mainstream literary histories and traditions. Like Achebe he provides a concrete identity to the stereotypically misrepresented Dalit community. A mala and a converted Christian himself, a writer-activist associated with Virasam or the Revolutionary Writers Association of Andhra Pradesh that favoured a politically-engaged writing, his motivation is also to provide an authentic literary representation of these untouchable groups who have been the victims of centuries-old, religiously-sanctioned, ideologically justified caste-based oppression and discrimination by a hierarchically organized Hindu society. He too protests against the dehumanizing and stereotypical representations of these groups and writes to restore the self-respect and dignity of his people, both as individuals and as a community.

As a distinct category of literature and closely associated with the Dalit movement for social transformation initiated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar's ideology in the early decades of the century, Dalit writing is informed by the literary aesthetics of protest and rejection and is the product of the Dalit consciousness of the lived experience of deeply-entrenched discriminatory practices. Beginning as a literary recording of life-experiences of writer-activists in divergent regional literary domains, it has evolved in the last few decades to become a powerful, pan-Indian subaltern writing for demanding emancipation and equality. Sharankumar Limbale, the acclaimed Marathi Dalit writer and critic has defined Dalit writing



as ‘writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness’ (2004, 19) and identified its objective also, ‘to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus’ (ibid, 19). Though written in context of Marathi Dalit writing, Limbale’s words resonate with a pan-Indian relevance for Dalit writing which aims to raise awareness among both Dalit and non-Dalit readers, to make Dalit lives visible and to expose and condemn caste prejudices. As Nicole Thiara says, Dalit writing is “rooted in local Indian realities, subaltern vernacular traditions and histories of anti-caste resistance” (2016, 254). Dalit writers, whatever their ideological affiliations, come together to claim important literary space to express their representative experience of discrimination, oppression, exploitation as well as defiance, assertion and even aggression.

As a Dalit literary text, *‘Untouchable Spring’* challenges the strategies of erasure and containment of Dalits employed by dominant Sanskrit literary traditions, that either wrote them out of existence or, influenced by progressive social-reformist movements presented them superficially, as objects of pity or compassion, lacking voice and agency. Kalyan Rao argues for a de-hierarchization of Indian literature to accommodate Dalit writing, which creates an invaluable space for Dalit lives and by exposing their sufferings as well as celebrating their resistance through creation of strong and heroic characters, reexamines the notions of the heroic and epic.

Alok Mukherjee, in his translation of Limbale’s *‘Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations’*, analyses that the “Dalits are the upper caste Hindus’ Other” (2004, 2) who are both inside and outside the hegemonic Hindu society. Their subalternity is unlike the one produced by colonial hegemony as it is “inherited from birth

and sanctioned by sacred authority. It is eternal and unalterable” (2004, 3). This ontological fixity gives uniqueness to their situation as the Brahmanical caste-system, by attaching notions of pollution and untouchability to Dalits, has placed them irrevocably outside the ‘*savarna*’ hierarchical network. This ‘unique’, dehumanizing social arrangement is both graphically depicted and challenged by the novel, conceived as an intergenerational memory-text spanning six generations, drawing inevitable comparisons with the Black American writer Alex Haley’s *“Roots”* as an interiorised individual and community history. Kalyan Rao’s novel combines aspects of autobiography, epic, alternate historical archive and a polemical document in line with his own ideological commitment, but it is above all a novel reflecting the Dalit consciousness of being discriminated, marginalized, deprived and humiliated. Simultaneously, it also gives literary expression to the evolving Dalit consciousness of rejection, resistance, assertion and aggression.

This dynamic consciousness is documented through a graphic representation of the trials and tribulations faced by the untouchable communities spread over different locations in coastal Andhra Pradesh, in a time frame spanning a century beginning end-nineteenth century. A community tale of suffering and hardship and the struggle to attain dignity and self-respect, the novel, through Ruth’s second-hand and first-hand memories, in a complex, post-modern narrative style, builds up a vivid picture of the rural community of Yennela Dinni, organized along caste-lines with the malapalli and madigapalli outside the *ooru* or the village limits. This separation and segregation is “a cruel horizontal line across the people of the country”, (Rao,2010, 7) reflects Ruth, whose myriad memories become an important resource to historicize the sufferings and deprivations of her community

which have remained unchanged despite the country gaining Independence, changing socio-economic and political contexts, despite conversion to Christianity. The author blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction by narrativizing these lived experiences. Situated between the uneducated earlier generations and the educated, rebellious later generations, educated and a writer herself, her dual perspective allows her to realise that untouchability remains their only identity:

“But there was a uniqueness here.

That uniqueness was all the more in the lives of the malas and madigas of this country. Untouchability. That was always the same. Was there at all times. Was there in all generations. They had no life without its touching them, without its meeting them. No family” (188)

The early chapters of the novel highlight the pathetic life of the malas and madigas, working as bonded labourers in the fields and homes of the karanams and the kapus, resigned to their reviled status as untouchables and too fearful of violent reprisals to even think of defiance or protest. A simple act of raising the height of the door to their house is unthinkable because it would be seen as an act of deliberate defiance and insult by the upper castes. If it was raised, “the information would reach the *ooru* somehow. That debate would end in the sastras.” (9) Their back-breaking labour in the karanam’s fields got them just three small baskets of grain as the ‘karnam’s largesse’ but they saw their exploiters as their benefactors because centuries of humiliating and discriminatory treatment had ingrained servility and self-abasement in their psyche. The upper castes used all strategies to keep them divided and supplicant to preserve their age-old privileged position. Kalyan Rao cites many examples of the untouchable communities’ deprivation of important resources like land and water, of violent and

brutal exemplary punishments to destroy the slightest hint of challenge and defiance. These confrontations become more pronounced with the growing sense of resistance and rebellion of the educated younger generations exemplified by Reuben, Emmanuel and Jesse. Reflecting the recent personal memories and narratives of Ruth, the later part of the novel incorporates actual recent political and social events to paint a grim picture of the continued repression and discrimination, of state authorities colluding with the landed upper classes in unleashing violent repression, police brutalities, arson, and encounters to eliminate the threat posed by armed peasant rebellions. The narrative makes visible many events from an insider perspective in order to rouse the collective awareness of all through shock and horror. Though Kalyan Rao is criticized by some Dalit critics for deviating from Ambedkarite principles of seeking constitutional redressal for Dalit issues and mixing caste and class struggles in line with his radical ideology, the internal evidence of the novel provides a viable context for seeing the sympathies for communism and Naxalism, along with religious conversion, as attempts by the Dalit communities to find a new socio-cultural space to live with dignity and self-respect.

While foregrounding their sufferings and abuse, the novel also highlights the treasures of their life, the ‘untouchable springs’ like their strong individual, family and community bonds which provide great emotional and psychological support. Boodevi’s love for her nephew Yellana, her bond with her brother and sister-in-law, her love for Subhadra, Yellana’s wife and Sivaiah his son, is an excellent example of such close relationships. Many such bonds, between Yellana and Subhadra, Reuben and Ruth, Emmanuel and Mary Suvarta, Jesse and Ruby, between Martin the preacher’s wife Saramma and Sasirekha and her son Reuben, reveal a strong community spirit. Remarkably,

the women, especially mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-law share an especially empathetic and supportive bond, supporting each other as well as their men in their diverse commitments. That is really a strength of the community as depicted by the novelist and by creating these diverse characters and rooting them in their community and family lives, he gives individual identity and voice to these characters, releasing them from a generalized, stereotypical representation.

Kalyan Rao provides an epic dimension to the narrative by chronicling the growing resistance in each generation to the hegemonic socio-economic oppression and dehumanization. From rejection of the Puranic creation myth of the untouchables, to criticism of Manu, "Half man. Half animal"(15) who envisioned the caste system, to valorisation of Narigadu leading the malas and madigas to the upper mound to escape the floods, Subhadra breaking the dyke in broad daylight in defiance of discriminatory water-sharing arrangement for irrigation, Martin's successful efforts to get unclaimed village land in Valasapadu for the poor Christians, to the rejection by Ramanujam of the Harijan Seva Sangham's superficial social reformation programs like community eating and temple entry, the open-ended narrative is permeated by anger and bitterness against ceaseless exploitation and humiliating restrictions. Dalit writing by its very nature cannot be neutral and the narrative voice becomes polemical at certain places, to emphasize the injustice of the entire situation, "Just for two palmfuls of water. Just for a stomachful. What a long journey this was!" (204).

The lack of documentation and dismissal of Dalit art forms and oral traditions as being inferior to mainstream art and literature is an important issue for Dalit writers, as here too caste-considerations have played a significant

role. Kalyan Rao said in 'The Story Behind the Story' of '*Antarani Vasantam*', "...That's true. My ancestors lived really outside the village. But they were inheritors of a magnificent culture. Great artists. Litterateurs too. They did not know how to write. They'd weave songs.....Mine is that weaving heritage. That's magnificent. All that magnificence has become untouchable. Has been suppressed. Why so? This Brahmanical dominance couldn't tolerate its naturalness. In this country more than art and literature, caste has become important. Art and literature have been assessed from the perspective of caste....that's the great tragedy here.....*Antarani Vasantam* is an exploration of this." (2008, 114) He too uses oral narrative forms to create the comprehensive community saga. But this discussion in the novel coheres around the character of Yellana, a character who provides a narrative unity to diverse strands of the novel. A towering personality, Yellana combines an artistic sensibility and a rebellious spirit in himself. The writer creates in him a legendary ancestor who epitomizes the rich oral heritage, the artistic achievements, the spirit of resistance and subversion that influences and connects all succeeding generations.

Yellana is a born singer and develops into a great performer under the mentorship of the learned mala performer Naganna after he flees from Yennela Dinni, expertly and passionately performing the *Chenchulakshmi* and *Prahlad* plays as part of the vedhi natakams, the Urumula dance and the Ganga Jatra. These Dalit performative arts become important sites of resistance, especially when Naganna and Yellana invite the mala and madiga caste elders as chief guests for the performance, in respectful language reserved for the karnams and kapus when they attend these performances. This symbolic act provokes serious consequences for them, and they cancel a performance rather than agree to the



ultimatum given by Bukireddy of Dibalamitta, to 'not call out to the pedda mala and pedda madiga the way the karnams and kapus were called' ( 80). This becomes a turning point for Yellana who realizes the need for weaving new songs dealing with their realities, so that his art becomes a new expression of self-respect and heroism; the song weaves itself and becomes a heroic tale of Narigadu and Mataiah, the community heroes. He has "the great artist's responsive heart. Words were his property. Words that he knew. Words that people around him knew. Life was his experience. The reality that was born and grew up around him. He did not run along with the tune. He dragged the tune along with him." (95). Kalyan Rao condemns the rejection and dismissal of such natural, powerful art that transformed Yellana into the wandering bard-philosopher mala bairagi, whose songs reverberate in the entire region, give status to his succeeding generations and connect him with his great-grandson Jesse, who sings his songs as he performs with the Jana Natya Mandal, a street-theatre group that mobilises the peasants for armed rebellion. But given the dismissive attitude of literary and cultural historians, the omniscient narrator says bitterly, "As if justice was ever done to the lives of Yellanas! Their emotions were betrayed. The injustice done to their word and speech is not insignificant...." (97). Performers like him who carry forward the rich artistic legacies of their communities have remained undocumented. By bringing them into the narrative, the writer honours their rich cultural legacy, and insists on the innate value of the Dalit dramatic and artistic traditions, redefining the notion of art and its relevance in their lives.

Thus, both Chinua Achebe and Kalyan Rao establish important literary milestones by writing stories of empowerment and assertion, challenging the inauthentic portrayals of their people in the dominant literary discourses.

Their novels are strikingly different from each other, *Things Fall Apart* a seemingly simple and straightforward story permeated by controlled irony, while *Untouchable Spring* has a complex, polyphonic approach reverberating with a wide spectrum of tones. But both the novels can be seen to be foundational texts, filling the historical gaps and silences, rousing their communities to a sense of their own worth, and affirming their identity as real human beings deserving to be accorded full value and dignity. By subverting the canonical literary representations, they both attempt to free their communities from stereotypical and superficial misrepresentations.

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