

**The Colonial Legacy as a Juxtaposition of African Narrative and Identities: A Study of  
Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the complexities of African identities in the postcolonial context, focusing on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Grain of Wheat*. It examines the enduring impact of colonial legacies on identity formation, highlighting how colonialism disrupted traditional social structures and imposed foreign values. The research emphasises the role of literature as a powerful tool for challenging colonial narratives and reclaiming cultural heritage, advocating for the use of indigenous languages to foster cultural pride and resistance. By analysing the characters' struggles with identity, the paper illustrates the themes of hybridity and cultural negotiation, reflecting the dynamic interplay between local traditions and global influences in contemporary African societies. Moreover, the paper addresses the ongoing quest for social justice, emphasising Ngugi's critique of political corruption and economic exploitation as relevant to current struggles for equality in postcolonial nations. Through this lens, the paper underscores the transformative potential of literature to articulate resistance and envision equitable futures. In conclusion, it argues that African identities are not static but are continually shaped by historical encounters and contemporary realities. This exploration invites a deeper understanding of the richness and diversity of African identities, celebrating their resilience and complexity in a globalised world. By engaging with these themes, the paper contributes to broader discussions on decolonisation, cultural affirmation, and the role of storytelling in shaping identities in the postcolonial era.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, African Identity, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Cultural Resistance, Hybridity

## Introduction

Colonial legacy in Africa has profoundly shaped the continent's social, political, and cultural landscapes. The period of colonial rule, which, for most African countries, lasted from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, resulted in significant transformations that continued to influence contemporary African identities and narratives (Nayyar, 2024). As nations emerged from the shadows of colonialism, there was the dual challenge of reclaiming cultural heritage while navigating the complexities introduced by colonial powers. Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens through which to examine these dynamics, focusing on the lingering impacts of colonialism on identity formation, cultural representation, and narrative structures. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have contributed foundational ideas to this field, emphasising concepts like hybridity, mimicry, and the Other as essential to understanding postcolonial contexts (Chakrabarty, 2012). Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, set against Kenya's struggle for independence, is a poignant example for exploring these themes (Chakraborty, 2024). The novel intricately weaves personal and collective identities, reflecting the complexities of individuals caught between colonial oppression and the fight for self-determination. Through its characters and narrative techniques, Ngugi illustrates the multifaceted nature of identity as historical and social forces shape it.

The historical context of colonialism in Africa is a multifaceted and complex narrative spanning several centuries, characterised by exploration, exploitation, and resistance (Beinart, 2016). While external colonies were founded in Africa during antiquity by the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the period most often referred to when discussing colonialism in Africa focuses on the European conquests during the "Scramble for Africa" (1884-1914) and the subsequent decolonisation after World War II. European interactions with Africa began in the 15th century with exploratory voyages along the coastline (Benjamin, 2009). Portugal, Spain, and other European powers established coastal trading posts, initially focusing on trade but later becoming heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade (Rodrigues, 2019). The slave trade had a devastating impact on African societies, disrupting social structures, causing immense suffering, and leading to significant demographic changes (Nwagu, 2023). As Walter Rodney argues in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, this exploitation of human capital severely hindered Africa's development (Rodney, 2018).

The late 19th century witnessed the "Scramble for Africa," where European powers rapidly colonised the continent (Chamberlain, 2014). Thomas Pakenham highlights the political rivalries and the often brutal methods colonial powers employ. European powers imposed their languages, educational systems, legal frameworks, and religious beliefs, often suppressing indigenous cultural practices (Watson, 2007). Economically, Africa was integrated into the global capitalist system as a source of raw materials and a market for European goods. Colonial administrations focused on extracting resources such as rubber, diamonds, gold, and ivory, often neglecting local needs and hindering the development of diversified economies (Hillbom, 2024). Rodney (2022) notes that colonial powers prioritised the economics of colonisation, including land acquisition, forced labour, and the introduction of cash crops, which altered inter-African trading patterns and perpetuated Africa's role as a supplier of raw materials.

Despite the imposition of colonial rule, Africans actively resisted foreign domination. Resistance took various forms, from armed conflicts to peaceful protests and the formation of nationalist movements. Influential figures such as Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, and Nelson Mandela spearheaded liberation movements, advocating for independence and restoring African identity and dignity (Adebajo, 2024). The impact of World War I and World War II further fuelled nationalist sentiments, weakening colonial powers and accelerating the decolonisation process (Jost, 2015). However, the colonial boundaries often disregarded existing ethnic and cultural divisions, leading to political instability and conflicts in many post-colonial states. The period of colonial rule had a profound and lasting impact on the continent, shaping its contemporary challenges and opportunities. Understanding this historical context is crucial for analysing African narratives and identities through a postcolonial lens.

### **Overview of Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for examining the lasting impacts of colonialism on cultures, societies, and individuals, particularly in formerly colonised regions (Jack, 2015). Postcolonial theory emerged as a distinct field of study in the latter half of the 20th century, analysing the power dynamics, cultural representations, and social structures that persist even after the formal end of colonial rule (Bhabra, 2023). It is important to note that the "post-" in postcolonialism does not imply that colonialism is over but rather signifies an ongoing engagement with its legacies (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Several core concepts underpin postcolonial theory:

**Orientalism:** Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* examines how the West constructs a romanticised and often distorted image of the East ("the Orient") to justify its dominance (Ahmad, 2023). This concept highlights how knowledge is intertwined with power, shaping perceptions and reinforcing colonial hierarchies. **Hybridity:** Bhabha explores the concept of hybridity, which refers to creating new cultural forms by mixing coloniser and colonised cultures (Umar & Lawan, 2024). Hybridity challenges the notion of fixed, authentic identities, suggesting that cultural exchange can lead to innovative and transformative outcomes. **Mimicry:** Bhabha also discusses mimicry, where the colonised adopt the coloniser's culture but in a way that is never a perfect replication (Bhabha, 2021). This imperfect imitation can be a form of resistance, subverting the coloniser's authority through subtle mockery. **Subaltern:** Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises questions about the representation of marginalised groups excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives. The "subaltern" refers to those with limited or no access to cultural imperialism and challenges the idea that Western intellectuals can speak for them (Spivak, 2023). **Otherness:** Postcolonial theory examines how colonial powers create a sense of "otherness" about the colonised, portraying them as different, inferior, and needing Western intervention (Jack, 2015). This construction of the "Other" serves to legitimise colonial rule and maintain power imbalances.

By analysing Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, the paper explores ways in which the novel provides rich examples of how colonial rule disrupts traditional identities, leading to hybridity, mimicry, and a sense of displacement. By employing postcolonial theory, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the enduring legacy of colonialism in Africa and how African narratives contribute to the ongoing decolonisation and identity formation process.

### **African Narratives and Identity Formation**

African narratives, encompassing both oral traditions and written literature, play a crucial role in shaping and preserving African identities. These narratives transmit cultural values, historical knowledge, and social norms from generation to generation, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity (Keita, 2024). In the context of colonialism and its aftermath, African narratives have also become powerful tools for resisting cultural imperialism, reclaiming agency, and reimagining identities (Nayyar, 2024). Oral tradition is deeply rooted in African cultures, predating the introduction of written systems (Eldredge, 2015). For centuries, storytelling, myths, legends, proverbs, and songs have been used to educate, entertain, and preserve collective

memory (Ogbu, 2018). Griots or traditional storytellers were prominent in many African societies, acting as historians, advisors, and cultural guardians. Oral narratives encode cultural values, beliefs, customs, and social structures, ensuring their transmission across generations (Afridi et al., 2025). They serve as a "living archive," safeguarding knowledge and traditions in the absence of written records. Folktales and legends often convey moral lessons, teaching about right and wrong, courage, honesty, respect, and community responsibility (Carr & Harrison, 2015).

They guide individuals in understanding their roles and obligations within society. Storytelling sessions are often communal activities, bringing people together to share experiences, reinforce social bonds, and celebrate their shared heritage (Stevenson, 2019). Oral narratives link to ancestral origins, historical events, and cultural heroes, fostering a sense of continuity and identity across time (Ladzekpo et al., 2024). Genealogies passed down through oral tradition connect individuals to their ancestors and cultural histories. With the advent of written literature, African writers began exploring themes of identity, colonialism, and cultural change. These narratives offer a powerful means of challenging colonial representations, reclaiming African voices, and reimagining identities in the postcolonial era, deconstructing colonial narratives and reconstructing authentic representations of African identities. It explores displacement, cultural loss, hybridity, and the struggle for self-determination (Fadel, 2023). African writers draw upon their cultural heritage, traditions, and languages to assert their identity and resist cultural erasure (Woods, 2018). They celebrate African values, beliefs, and ways of life, promoting a sense of pride and belonging. African literature explores the complexities of identity in the postcolonial world, grappling with issues of modernity, globalisation, and cultural hybridity (Tahir, 2023). It imagines new possibilities for African identities rooted in tradition and open to the future. Several African authors have profoundly contributed to the discourse on identity, colonialism, and cultural resistance through literature. In novels like *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe portrays the collision between traditional Igbo society and colonial forces, highlighting the disintegration of indigenous structures and the resulting cultural dislocation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, known for advocating African languages in literature, examines similar themes in works such as *A Grain of Wheat*, exploring how colonial rule disrupted communal identity and introduced psychological fragmentation. Ama Ata Aidoo's writings delve into the intersections of gender, power, and African traditions, emphasising the

layered dimensions of cultural resistance in postcolonial contexts. Likewise, Wole Soyinka addresses the complexities of identity and cultural conflict in his plays and novels, often drawing from Yoruba mythology to illuminate the tensions between indigenous spirituality and colonial modernity. Collectively, these writers use literature to reclaim African voices, confront colonial legacies, and envision alternative futures rooted in cultural self-definition.

### **Colonial Legacy and Its Impact on African Identities in *A Grain of Wheat***

The colonial legacy in Africa has had a profound and multifaceted impact on forming and negotiating African identities. Colonialism, characterised by political, economic, and socio-cultural domination, disrupted existing social structures, imposed foreign values, and created lasting psychological effects that continue to shape African societies today (Naheed, 2025). Ngugi waThiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* illustrates the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context. Colonial powers often dismantled or co-opted existing African political and social systems, replacing them with centralised administrations that served imperial interests (Benyera, 2020). Traditional leadership structures were undermined, and new social hierarchies emerged based on race, class, and collaboration with the colonial regime (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). This disruption led to a loss of social cohesion and disorientation, as communities struggled to adapt to imposed changes. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the character of Karanja exemplifies this disruption. He collaborates with the British authorities, becoming a home guard and betraying his people for personal gain. His actions highlight the moral ambiguities and social divisions created by colonialism, where individuals were forced to choose between loyalty to their community and survival under colonial rule. Colonial powers sought to impose their cultural norms, languages, and educational systems on African communities, often marginalising or suppressing indigenous cultures and traditions (Leibowitz, 2017). This cultural imperialism led to the erosion of native languages, the devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the internalisation of a sense of inferiority among the colonised populations.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Gikonyo's transformation reflects this cultural imposition. Initially, a carpenter embracing traditional craftsmanship, he adopts Western ideals and seeks material success, symbolised by his desire to own a modern shop. This shift illustrates the allure and the alienating effects of colonial values on individual aspirations and cultural identity. Frantz Fanon explored the psychological impact of colonialism on the colonised, highlighting the internalisation of racist stereotypes and the development of a sense of alienation and inferiority

(Ifeakandu & Omonigho, 2025). Colonial education systems often reinforced these feelings, teaching African children to devalue their own cultures and histories while glorifying European achievements (Weiner, 2016). In *A Grain of Wheat*, the character of Mugo embodies the psychological complexities of colonialism. A past betrayal haunts him, and he struggles with guilt, inadequacy and a desire for redemption. His internal conflict reflects the broader psychological scars left by colonialism on individuals and communities, where acts of betrayal and collaboration were often driven by fear and a desire for survival.

Despite the oppressive nature of colonial rule, Africans actively resisted foreign domination through various means, including armed struggle, political activism, and cultural revival (Bulhan, 2015). African writers played a crucial role in this process, using literature to challenge colonial narratives, reclaim African voices, and re-imagine identities (Sofi & Khan, 2023). On another vein, still in *A Grain of Wheat*, the character of Kihika represents the spirit of resistance and the fight for liberation. He becomes a leader in the Mau Mau uprising, symbolising the collective struggle for independence and rejecting colonial oppression (Yenjela, 2020). However, his death and the subsequent disillusionment of other characters also highlight the complexities and sacrifices involved in pursuing freedom.

In the aftermath of colonialism, African societies have grappled with the challenge of forging new identities rooted in tradition and open to the future (Kalua, 2017). Postcolonial identity is often characterised by hybridity, a blending of African and Western influences, and a negotiation between local and global forces (Aanayo, 2023). In *A Grain of Wheat*, the characters navigate this hybrid space, grappling with the legacies of colonialism while seeking to build a new nation. The colonial legacy has left an indelible mark on African identities, disrupting traditional structures, imposing foreign values, and creating lasting psychological effects. However, African narratives, such as *A Grain of Wheat*, offer a powerful means of resisting colonial representations, reclaiming agency, and reimagining identities in the postcolonial era.

### **Juxtaposition of Traditional and Colonial Influences in A Grain of Wheat**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* masterfully portrays the complex interplay between traditional African culture and the pervasive influence of colonialism in Kenya. The novel's characters, settings, and narrative structure contribute to a nuanced exploration of this juxtaposition, revealing the tensions, contradictions, and hybrid identities that emerge from this historical encounter (Tahir, 2023). One of the central themes in *A Grain of Wheat* is the clash

between traditional Gikuyu values and the Western ideals imposed by colonial rule (Baytar & Avcu, 2023). Traditional values emphasised community, land, and ancestral connections, while colonialism promoted individualism, material wealth and westernised worldview (Igboin, 2011). Gikonyo's initial commitment to the Mau Mau movement and his subsequent embrace of capitalist values after his release from detention exemplify this conflict. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's desire to own a modern shop and accumulate wealth reflects the allure of Western materialism, which clashes with the communal values of traditional Gikuyu society (Borse, 2019). His decision to become a home guard and collaborate with the British demonstrates the seductive power of colonial authority and the betrayal of traditional loyalties (Karanja, 2015). His pursuit of personal gain and his adoption of Western customs highlight the corrupting influence of colonialism on individual morality and social cohesion. The presence of Christianity, represented by the "House of God," introduces another layer of cultural conflict. The novel explores the tension between traditional Gikuyu beliefs and the imposed Christian faith, highlighting how colonialism sought to replace indigenous spiritual practices with Western religious norms (Iskarna, 2018).

The characters in *A Grain of Wheat* often embody hybrid identities, torn between their African heritage and the influence of colonial culture. They grapple with cultural ambivalence, struggling to reconcile their traditional values with the realities of a changing world. Mugo's character embodies the psychological complexities of colonialism (Hogan, 2025). He is revered as a hero for his supposed role in betraying Kihika, but he is haunted by guilt and a sense of inadequacy. His internal conflict reflects the broader psychological scars left by colonialism, where individuals are forced to navigate conflicting loyalties and moral dilemmas. Bhabha argues that such ambivalence is a hallmark of the colonial experience, where the colonised subject is caught between mimicry and resistance (Jefferess, 2008). Thabai, the fictional village where most of the main characters reside, represents a traditional Gikuyu community grappling with the impact of colonialism. As the colonial capital, Nairobi symbolises colonial power and the imposition of Western culture. However, it is also a site of resistance, where early nationalist movements emerged to challenge colonial rule.

The detention camp represents the brutal reality of colonial oppression and the suppression of African resistance (Buntman, 2021). It is a space where traditional values are eroded, and individuals are subjected to physical and psychological trauma. Ngugi wa Thiong'o

interweaves past and present events to highlight the enduring impact of colonialism on the characters' lives. This narrative technique underscores the idea that the past is always present, influencing the choices and actions of individuals in the postcolonial world. Ngugi wa Thiong'o contributes to a broader understanding of the enduring legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for cultural and political liberation.

### **The Role of Literature in Shaping Postcolonial Identities**

Literature plays a vital role in shaping postcolonial identities by providing a platform to challenge colonial narratives, reclaim cultural heritage, and explore the complexities of self-definition in the aftermath of colonial rule. The works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o serve as a powerful example of how literature can contribute to the construction and negotiation of postcolonial identities. One of the primary functions of postcolonial literature is to challenge the dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Colonial narratives often misrepresented or silenced the voices of colonised peoples, perpetuating stereotypes and justifying colonial rule. Postcolonial writers counter these narratives by reclaiming their histories, cultures, and perspectives. Ngugi challenges the official colonial version of Kenyan history by giving voice to the experiences of ordinary Kenyans who participated in the Mau Mau uprising. He portrays the complexities of the struggle for independence, highlighting the sacrifices, betrayals, and moral ambiguities that shaped the lives of individuals caught in the crossfire of colonial conflict (Ogude, 2016). By centring the narrative on the perspectives of the colonised, Ngugi subverts the colonial gaze and reclaims Kenyan history from a Kenyan perspective.

Postcolonial literature explores colonialism's psychological, social, and cultural impacts on individual and collective identities. It examines how colonial rule disrupts traditional social structures, imposes foreign values, and creates a sense of alienation and displacement. Gikonyo's transformation from a carpenter embracing traditional craftsmanship to a businessman pursuing material success reflects colonial values' allure and the alienating effects (Amel & Nesrine, 2023). Mugo's internal conflict and his struggle with guilt and betrayal embody the psychological complexities of colonialism, where individuals are forced to make difficult choices in the face of oppression (Muhammed & Adegoke, 2024). According to Balogun and Woldegiorgis (2025), Ngūgī wa Thiong'o "redefined the purpose of African literature, insisting that it must speak to its people in their languages, reflect their histories, and resist the epistemic

violence of colonial modernity". Postcolonial literature often celebrates cultural hybridity, blending indigenous cultures with elements of the coloniser's culture. Hybridity challenges the notion of fixed, authentic identities and suggests that cultural exchange can lead to new and innovative forms of self-expression (Baiget al., 2024). In *A Grain of Wheat*, the characters navigate a hybrid cultural landscape, drawing upon Gikuyu traditions and Western influences to forge their identities (Baytar & Avcu, 2023). The novel's use of both Gikuyu and English reflects the linguistic hybridity of the colonial and postcolonial experience. The characters' struggles to reconcile their traditional values with the realities of a changing world highlight the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context. By giving voice to the experiences of the colonised, literature can challenge the legitimacy of colonial rule and inspire movements for social and political change. Ngugi empowers readers to challenge injustice and fight for a more equitable society.

### **Contemporary Relevance of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Work**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a seminal figure in postcolonial literature, continues to shape contemporary discourse on language, identity, colonialism, and cultural resistance. His work remains critically relevant in postcolonial contexts and beyond, especially as global societies grapple with cultural erasure, hybridity, and inequality. A staunch advocate for linguistic decolonisation, Ngugi's influential essay *Decolonising the Mind* argues for prioritising indigenous African languages in literature to reclaim cultural identity and resist colonial rule's epistemic violence (Rani, 2022). His decision to abandon writing in English in favour of Gikuyu is emblematic of his broader commitment to cultural authenticity and intellectual sovereignty. This stance has galvanised a movement among African writers and intellectuals to engage more deeply with their linguistic heritage and challenge the dominance of global languages such as English and French (Kahiraba & Keita, 2024).

However, Ngugi's own life presents a compelling case study in the contradictions and complexities of the postcolonial subject. While he critiques the West as a source of Africa's cultural and political fragmentation, he has spent much of his adult life teaching at prominent Western universities in the United States. This diasporic existence invites reflection on the paradoxes inherent in postcolonial identity, where intellectual and political resistance to Western imperialism often unfolds within Western institutions. Rather than undermining his credibility, this tension might be read as a lived example of *hybridity*—a central concept in postcolonial

theory that captures the in-between space occupied by formerly colonised subjects who must constantly negotiate between tradition and modernity, indigeneity and globalisation (Nuri, 2024).

Similarly, Ngugi's publicly stated wish to be cremated upon death—a practice generally foreign to Gikuyu burial traditions, which emphasise a sacred connection between the body and the ancestral earth—raises important questions about cultural fidelity. Some may interpret this decision as a rupture or even a betrayal of indigenous cosmologies. However, it could also be viewed through cultural hybridity: an act synthesising modernist, secular values with personal agency, reflecting the broader existential choices faced by postcolonial individuals navigating a globalised world. Complicating Ngugi's legacy further is the long-standing allegation of plot similarities between *A Grain of Wheat* and Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. Critics have noted parallels in narrative structure and character arcs, raising questions about originality and intertextual borrowing. While some see this as a potential unacknowledged appropriation, others argue that Ngugi's novel subverts and recontextualises the Eurocentric tropes of Conrad's work to serve a distinctly African political and cultural agenda. In this light, intertextuality becomes a strategic tool of postcolonial writing, repurposing canonical texts not to replicate, but to rewrite and resist imperial ideologies.

Despite these complexities, Ngugi's literary and theoretical interventions remain deeply resonant. His works critique political corruption and the betrayal of nationalist ideals by post-independence African elites, themes that remain pressing in contemporary African politics. By addressing issues such as land dispossession, economic injustice, and social fragmentation, Ngugi connects local postcolonial struggles with global movements for equity and justice. He warns against cultural homogenisation and the encroachment of neoliberal consumerism, urging a reclamation of local traditions and communal values (Chakraborty, 2024). Ngugi wa Thiong'o's life and work illustrate postcolonial identity's fraught but fertile terrain. His literary voice continues to inspire resistance, provoke debate, and call attention to the enduring legacies of empire. The contradictions in his personal choices do not diminish his impact; instead, they reflect the complexity of navigating the postcolonial condition, where allegiance to tradition, commitment to justice, and participation in global modernity must coexist in dynamic, and often uneasy, tension.

## Conclusion

Exploring African identities in the postcolonial context reveals a complex tapestry woven from historical legacies, cultural resilience, and ongoing struggles for self-definition. This research has examined the intricate interplay between colonial influences and traditional values, particularly through the lens of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*. The findings underscore several key themes that shape contemporary understandings of African identities. The colonial experience has profoundly affected African identities, disrupting traditional social structures and imposing foreign values. This disruption created psychological and cultural challenges that individuals and communities continue to navigate. Ngugi's characters grapple with these legacies, illustrating the lasting impact of colonialism on their sense of self and belonging. Through storytelling, African writers articulate their experiences, address social injustices, and foster a sense of agency and empowerment. The intersection of local and global narratives reveals how African identities are often hybrid, shaped by historical encounters and contemporary global influences. Ngugi's characters embody this hybridity, reflecting the complexities of negotiating traditional values with modern realities.

This dynamic is essential for understanding the fluidity of identity in postcolonial contexts. Ngugi's commitment to social justice highlights the ongoing struggles for equality and human rights in postcolonial societies. Literature becomes a platform for voicing resistance and envisioning a more equitable future. The journey of African identities in the postcolonial era is marked by resilience, transformation, and an enduring quest for authenticity. As societies grapple with the remnants of colonialism, the reclamation of cultural heritage and the affirmation of indigenous identities become paramount. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work exemplifies the power of literature to illuminate these struggles and forge connections between the past and present. As we reflect on these themes, we are reminded of the transformative potential of literature to inspire change, foster understanding, and celebrate the richness of African identities.

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