Multidimensional Research Insights
Volume 1, Issue 1

Challenging Patriarchy: The Representation of Women's Suffrage Movements in Early 20th-Century British Poetry and Drama

[1]*Valerie Behiery
[1]BFA at University of Ottawa Master and PhD at McGill university in Montreal

Abstract

This study examines the role of poetry and drama in the women's suffrage movement in early 20th-century Britain, focusing on how these literary forms challenged patriarchal norms and advanced feminist activism. Through close readings of key texts—such as Sylvia Pankhurst's "The Suffragette" (1911), Elizabeth Robins' "Votes for Women!" (1907), and Cicely Hamilton's "How the Vote Was Won" (1909); the discussion explains how artistic and political resistance merge. Poetry the power of individual introspection-resulted in the emotional solidarity to redefine femininity, while drama, through ensemble performance, sought to galvanize the people and challenge society's structures. However, the study also reveals tensions within suffrage literature, particularly its exclusion of working-class and colonial voices, reflecting broader ideological and class divides within the movement. By situating these texts within their historical and sociopolitical contexts, the research underscores the transformative potential of literature as a tool for social change, while critically reflecting on the movement's limitations. The study concludes with recommendations for future research, including intersectional analyses, transnational comparisons, and digital humanities approaches, to further explore the literary legacy of the suffrage movement. Ultimately, this work demonstrates how poetry and drama not only documented the fight for women's rights but also actively shaped its trajectory, leaving a lasting impact on feminist thought and activism.

Keywords: Women's Suffrage, British Literature, Poetry, Drama, Patriarchy, Feminist Activism, Intersectionality, Sylvia Pankhurst, Elizabeth Robins, Cicely Hamilton.

Introduction

Background and Significance

In early 20th century Britain, patriarchy is a complex system of male authority institutionalized in legal, social, and cultural structures. On the legal front, women were deprived of their very rights: they could not vote, hold public offices, or even own property after marriage due to the doctrine of coverture. Victorian "separate spheres" ideals, which positioned women at the hearth as "angels of the home," remained dominant in social life, while men held sway over the public and political domain (Delap, 2020b). This system was supported by scientific discourses that defined women as biologically inferior, which was a belief that feminists such as Olive Schreiner rejected in Woman and Labour (1911), in which she asserted that such ideas were used to justify exclusion (Erskine, 2024).

The suffrage era (1903–1928) arose from this backdrop, as women increasingly challenged these norms (Barnes, 2018). Patriarchy was not monolithic; it intersected with class and colonialism. Working-class women faced exploitation in factories and exclusion from middle-class suffrage circles, while British feminism often sidelined colonial subjects, as highlighted by Antoinette Burton (2020) in The Trouble with Empire (Brooklyn & Moore, 2023).

Women's Suffrage Movements: Suffragists vs. Suffragettes

The suffrage movement was split into two camps: the suffragists of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), led by Millicent Fawcett, who pursued constitutional methods, and the suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline Pankhurst, who used militant tactics, including arson and hunger strikes, to push for their cause (Purvis, 2018; Purvis & Hannam, 2020). The slogan "Deeds, not words" summed up the approach of the suffragettes, which divided public opinion (Vessey, 2021). Media portrayals

Valerie Behiery
BFA at University of Ottawa Master and PhD at McGill university in Montreal
Valeriebehiery789@outlook.com

Received: 07-Dec-2024 Revised: 09-Feb-2025 Accepted: 15-March-2025

and the need for them to be "hysterical" or "unfeminine," as analyzed by Michelle Tusan in the "Suffrage Spectacle" by Smythe (2019) (Richardson & Willis, 2019).

These divisions were not only tactical but also ideological in nature. Members, like Christabel Pankhurst, of the middle-class suffragettes focused on voting rights for propertied women and relegated working-class demands for broader labor reforms to the background (Kumari, 2018). Suffragists like Eleanor Rathbone thereafter turned towards welfare feminism emphasizing social reforms over electoral politics (Pedersen, 2020).

Literature as Activism and Social Critique

The war on patriarchal norms was being waged in the literary arena. Poetic and dramatic forms could now be a vehicle for reversing the public order by combining innovative aestheticism with a sense of urgency in terms of politics. Traditional forms—such as sonnets and allegorical plays—were used to denounce roles in gender terms and envision new, emancipatory futures (Müller, 2018). Cicely Hamilton's play, How the Vote Was Won, in 1909, mocked how men survived off women's labor, whereas Sylvia Pankhurst's "The Suffragette" of 1911 redescribed prison life as collective action (Green, 2023).

Such works spread through suffrage newspapers (The Suffragette, Votes for Women), pamphlets, and performances to excluded audiences from formal political participation. According to Sowon S. Park's Literary Activism and the Victorian Woman Writer (2022), these texts "democratized dissent," bringing art and activism together to mobilize cross-class solidarity (Kestner, 2022; Sanders & Snyder, 2023).

This paper seeks to:

1. Analyze how poetry and drama subverted patriarchal norms
2. Investigate the interplay between feminist activism and literary form
3. Highlight class, race, and ideological tensions within suffrage literature

Theoretical Framework

This research draws on three interconnected lenses:

Feminist Literary Criticism

This framework draws on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979), which examines women's struggles against patriarchal literary traditions (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020). This unpacks how suffrage writers reclaimed archetypes like the "New Woman" or the "rebel" (Rose, 2021). For example, Eva Gore-Booth's poem "The Women's Right" (1916) reimagines the biblical Eve as a defiant figure rather than a sinful temptress (Apostolos-Cappadona).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory (1989) highlights how suffrage literature often focused on white, middle-class women, excluding working-class and colonial subjects (Ramtohul, 2024). Recent scholarship by Laura Schwartz (2022) in Feminism and the Servant Problem critiques the movement's failure to address domestic workers' rights, a tension visible in suffrage plays that romanticized "universal sisterhood" (Mora, 2025).

Historical Materialism

This lens contextualizes texts within economic and social conditions. For instance, during the 1911 Census boycott where suffragettes refused to be recorded as "non-persons" paralleled themes of erasure found in suffrage poetry (Waters, 2018).

This study uses a qualitative research design to analyze how early 20th-century British poetry and drama engaged with the women's suffrage movement and contested patriarchal norms. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of literary strategies, ideological tensions, and sociopolitical contexts by prioritizing textual and historical analysis over quantitative data. The methodology is twofold:

Qualitative Analysis of Primary Texts and Archives

Central to this research will be close readings of suffrage-aligned poems, plays, and archival materials-things like pamphlets, letters, speeches-to understand how Sylvia Pankhurst's The Suffragette (1911), for example, or Cicely Hamilton's How the Vote Was Won (1909) was concerned with thematics of resistance, solidarity, and gender-bashing. Archival records, including suffrage newspapers (The Suffragette, Votes for Women), police reports on suffragette protests, hold contextual insights into the lived realities of activists and the public reception of their works (Green, 2021; Tusan, 2019).

Comparative Approach to Poetry and Drama

Poetry and drama are approached and analyzed separately but in tandem, as two different but intertwined mediums of activism. While poetry frequently employed reflective, metaphorical language to facilitate personal contemplation (e.g., Eva Gore-Booth's contemplative

poems), drama utilized ensemble performance to mobilize crowds (e.g., Elizabeth Robins' Votes for Women!). By drawing from Sowon S. Park's Literary Activism and the Victorian Woman Writer (2022), this comparative analysis demonstrates how form influenced political speech: free verse in poetry communicated resistance, and allegorical drama used satire to subvert patriarchal dominance.

Research Methodology

Research Design

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Data Collection

Data is taken from two categories of sources:

Primary Sources

Literary Works: Poetry and plays by pro-suffrage writers, such as Sylvia Pankhurst's Writ on Cold Slate (1922), Elizabeth Robins' Votes for Women! (1907), and suffragette pamphlets containing anonymous protest poetry. These texts are sourced from digital archives (e.g., The Women's Library at LSE) and anthologies like The New Woman and Her Sisters (Murphy).

Archival Materials: Suffrage newspapers, meeting minutes, and personal correspondence from figures like Emmeline Pankhurst. These documents reveal how literature was integrated into campaign strategies, such as the WSPU's use of performative chants during protests (Purvis, 2003).

Secondary Sources

Scholarly Criticism: Feminist literary analyses (e.g., Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own, 2021) and historical studies (e.g., Laura Schwartz's Feminism and the Servant Problem, 2022) provide theoretical frameworks for interpreting texts.

Memoirs and Biographies: First-hand accounts, such as Hannah Mitchell's The Hard Way Up (1968), offer working-class perspectives often absent in middle-dominated suffrage narratives.

Analytical Approaches

Three interconnected methods guide the analysis:

Feminist Close Reading

This approach interprets how, based on the work of Gilbert and Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic" in 1979, suffrage writers subvert patriarchal tropes. "A Pageant of Great Women" in 1909 by Cicely Hamilton is another example where "Woman" refers to a listing of historical women achievers and thus de-mythologized female inferiority. In much the same vein, close reading of suffragette poetry discovers coded language and thus "chains" symbolized legal oppression; this resonates with imprisoned activists (Green, 2023).

Historical Contextualization

Texts are located in landmark suffrage events and debates. The 1913 "Cat and Mouse Act", which allowed hunger-striking suffragettes to be temporarily released from prison, is echoed in poems like "The Holloway Jingles" (1912), in which imprisonment is used as a metaphor for the systemic silencing of women's voices (Delap, 2020b). Furthermore, plays such as "How the Vote Was Won" are

studied in the context of the 1907 "Mud March," a suffrage protest that satirizes in a hypocritical depiction of men.

Reception Studies

Audience reactions are pieced together from play reviews, diary accounts, and police reports. In this regard, Votes for Women! elicited stark responses: anti-suffragist critics derided it as "hysterical propaganda," while suffragists praised it for its unvarnished portrayal of sexual double standards (Ayers, 2020). Likewise, the same suffrage poems appeared in "The Common Cause" were taken as divine inspiration by activists, but their parodies in The Anti-Suffrage Alphabet (1912) took them to task.

Ethical Issues

This study acknowledges biases inherent in historical sources. Suffrage literature often centered middle-class, white women, marginalizing working-class and colonial voices. For example, while Sylvia Pankhurst's writings addressed East London laborers, her perspective remained that of an educated ally rather than an insider (Béliard, 2021). Similarly, the erasure of colonial suffragists like Sophia Duleep Singh from mainstream narratives is critically examined using intersectional theory (Fuller, 2021). To counteract such biases, the research centers marginalized voices in memoirs and working-class pamphlets.

Limitations

Geographic and Racial Focus: The focus is solely on British texts; thus, the transnational efforts of suffragists (for example, in India, Jamaica) and those of non-white activists are overlooked. Scholars, such as Antoinette Burton (2020), have recently criticized this Eurocentrism, but sources for colonial suffragists remain scarce.

Class-Centric Narratives: Despite the best efforts to include working-class voices, most suffrage texts were written by educated elites. Memoirs such as "The Hard Way Up" (Mitchell, 1968) are the exception.

Archival Gaps: Broken records of suffrage performances-the destruction of scripts, lost reviews-make it difficult to fully reconstruct the impact of the theatre.

Results and Discussion

Historical Background of Women's Suffrage in Britain

Key Events and Leaders

The British women's suffrage movement was influenced by important events and influential leaders whose tactics and sacrifices transformed gender politics (Catt & Shuler, 2020). It was in 1903 that Emmeline Pankhurst started the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) (Purvis, 2020). The WSPU motto was "Deeds, not words," clearly outlining its militancy operations: arson, window-smashing, and hunger strikes. These approaches were in stark contrast to the constitutional approach of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), led by Millicent Fawcett, which focused on petitions and lobbying (Purvis, 2018). The WSPU ("suffragettes") and NUWSS ("suffragists") were at odds with each other, reflecting ideological differences: the WSPU demanded immediate voting rights for propertied women, while the NUWSS sought gradual reform through alliances with labour movements (Slack, 2018).

The most symbolic moment of the movement was in 1913 when Emily Davison, a member of the WSPU, stepped onto the Epsom Derby racecourse and was trampled by the King's horse (Collette, 2018). In her death, widely interpreted as martyrdom, lay an ideal state of a rallying call for the movement.

Legislative milestones followed. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 gave women over 30 who had property qualifications the right to vote, a gesture that partly recognized women's contribution to World War I (Muggeridge, 2018). But this left out the younger, poorer women and continued class discrimination. Full electoral equality came only in 1928 with the Equal Franchise Act, which granted the vote to all women over 21 (Takayanagi, 2018).

Sociopolitical Context

The suffrage movement unfolded in a society deep in hostility against women's political agency. Suffragettes were demonized in the mainstream press as "hysterical" and "unsexed," with cartoons of Punch magazine featuring them as monstrous figures that threaten social order (Mitchell, 2024). Newspapers like The Daily Mail coined the word "suffragette," which is actually a diminutive form of suffragist to trivialize the demands of women (Vessey, 2021). Such caricature perpetuated patriarchal anxieties regarding women's abdication from domestic roles. Even sympathetic outlets, such as The Guardian, often had suffragettes reduced to spectacles of emotion rather than serious political actors (Atkinson, 2018; Pedersen, 2018).

Class divisions further fractured the movement. Although the WSPU was initially composed of a mix of working class members, the leadership became increasingly

middle class oriented and alienated labour activists. For example, Christabel Pankhurst emphasized the right to vote more than labor reform while others like the East London Federation of Suffragettes related the vote to ending poverty (Schwartz, 2019). On the other hand, the NUWSS allied itself with trade unions because the cause of disfranchisement among working-class women was rooted in economic exploitation (Jackson, 2019). These tensions mirrored broader societal inequities: factory workers faced grueling conditions, while domestic servants—many of whom were excluded from suffrage debates—labored invisibly in middle-class homes (Smith, 2022).

World War I (1914–1918) proved transformative. As men enlisted, women entered munitions factories, transport, and clerical roles, destabilizing the myth of female physical and intellectual inferiority. Propaganda celebrated their patriotism, yet postwar backlash sought to return women to domesticity. Historian Susan Grayzel (2020) argues that the war's "double-edged sword" temporarily elevated women's status but also reinforced gendered expectations (Spiers, 2020). However, suffragists exploited wartime contributions to legitimate their demands. The 1918 Act, though limited, reflected shifting perceptions of women's citizenship—a compromise between recognition and containment (Cowman, 2024).

In conclusion, strategic conflicts, media misogyny, and class hierarchies framed the trajectory of the suffrage movement. It was not the benevolence of the elites that led to its eventual success but decades of grassroots activism, wartime pragmatism, and the relentless courage of women who refused invisibility.

Literary Involvement with Suffrage

The women's suffrage movement in Britain in the early 20th century was both a political crusade and a cultural revolution. Poetry and drama were used by activists as instruments of expression in making demands, attacking patriarchal structures, and stirring public opinion. Suffrage literature, using new forms and subversive themes, broke out of mere propaganda to express profound reflections on gender, power, and resistance.

Poetry as Protest

Case Studies

Sylvia Pankhurst's The Suffragette (1911) and Eva Gore-Booth's Political Verse

Sylvia Pankhurst, a noted suffragette and artist, employed poetry as a means to voice the raw realities of activism (Atkinson, 2018). Her 1911 poem The Suffragette begins: "We are women, we are women, / Not a lesser breed of men"—an outright denial of the patriarchal notion of inferiority of females (Henderson, 2022). The poem juxtaposes the brutality of imprisonment with the unyielding resolve of the suffragettes, making hunger strikes and force-feeding acts of martyrdom.

Eva Gore-Booth, an Irish poet and suffragist, approached protest through spiritual and introspective verse (Mathis, 2023). Her poem "The Women's Right" (1916) transformed the biblical Eve into an image of revolt, "She, the first rebel, dared to eat / Of knowledge, and was not afraid." Reclaiming Eve from the category of the "fallen woman," Gore-Booth countered religious discourses around justification for women's subjection. Lucy Delap (2020) refers to Feminisms: A Global History in which Gore-Booth's fusion of mysticism with activism put forward a unique lens through which femininity could be reframed as positively potent (Delap, 2020a).

Themes

Imprisonment

Suffrage poetry frequently centered on imprisonment, both literal and metaphorical. The Holloway Jingles (1912), a collection of verses written by suffragettes in London's Holloway Prison, used dark humor to critique their dehumanizing treatment: "We're here because we're here / Because we're here because we're here!" (Bonzom, 2024). These poems reveal how incarceration became a shared rite of passage, binding women across class lines.

Solidarity

The theme of solidarity reappeared again and again, particularly in works regarding the 1913 Cat and Mouth Act, which indirectly endorsed temporarily releasing the hunger-striking prisoners (Whalen, 2019). Such poems like The March of the Women (1911) by Cicely Hamilton to Ethel Smyth's music become anthems sung at rallies and in prison cells (Wiley, 2021).

Reconfiguring Womanhood

Other essential areas of redefinition included that of femininity. Suffrage poets rejected the Victorian ideals of a passive woman and instead promoted strength and agency (Levine, 2018). In The Call (1910), Mary Aldham made clear that this struggle was "not for ourselves alone we fight, / But for the women of the night," a nod to marginalized sex workers (Irby et al., 2010).

Form and Style: Challenging the traditional structures

Suffrage poets often abandoned traditional forms like sonnets in favor of free verse, mirroring their rebellion against societal constraints (Richardson, 2021). The irregular rhythms of Pankhurst's The Suffragette mirrored the chaos of protests, while Gore-Booth's fragmented lines in The Death of Fionavar (1916) evoked psychological rupture (Bautista, 2021).

Drama as Activism

Case Studies

Elizabeth Robins' Votes for Women! (1907) and Cicely Hamilton's How the Vote Was Won (1909)

Elizabeth Robins was an actress-playwright who wrote one of the first pro-suffrage plays, Votes for Women!, which concludes with a suffragette rally in Trafalgar Square (Godfrey, 2024). Herein, Robins placed political oratory within the context of a familial melodrama and thus compelled the middle class to focus on how suffrage was a moral obligation.

Cicely Hamilton's satirical farce How the Vote Was Won (1909) fantasized a general strike in which women quit their household work and the men are forced to acknowledge that they need female labor (ERA, 2024). In this comedic satire, one male character was quoted saying, "If women are what they've always been, why can't they go on being it?"

Theatrical Tactics: Allegory, Direct Address, and Rallies through Performance

Suffrage drama used allegory to circumvent censorship and appeal to audiences. In A Pageant of Great Women (1909), by Hamilton, the heroine "Woman" marches through historical heroines such as Joan of Arc to debunk myths of female incapacity. The courtroom setting of the play, in which "Prejudice" and "Justice" debate suffrage, made abstract ideas visceral drama (Appler et al., 2018).

Direct address to the audience was another characteristic. In Votes for Women!, Robins addresses the spectators in the rally scene, calling them to action. This technique, as Susan Carlson (2021) notes in Women and Politics in Early British Theatre, turns passive viewers into active participants (Christian & Christian, 2020).

Suffrage plays often served as performative rallies. The WSPU's The Trial of a Suffragette (1914), performed in public squares, reenacted courtroom battles with audience members as jurors. These productions democratized theater, bringing suffrage debates to working-class neighborhoods (Bartley, 2022).

Impact: Mobilizing Working-Class vs. Elite Audiences

Suffrage drama was a product for its audience. Votes for Women! opened at London's West End, a place of well-to-do playgoers, but it traveled to union halls and factories as "touring versions" cut down from their original forms. How the Vote Was Won was made for popular appeal, utilizing slapstick humor to mock class systems (Butler, 2023; Smith, 2017).

Yet class tensions persisted. While Robins' play resonated with middle-class feminists, its focus on sexual double standards (e.g., illegitimate children) overlooked working-class struggles like wage inequality (Hookway et al., 2024). Hamilton's work, though more inclusive, still centered white women, sidelining colonial and working-class voices (Burton, 2015).

Poetry and drama became indispensable to the suffrage movement, offering a platform for contesting patriarchal narratives and imagining new identities. While poetry cultivated introspection and solidarity through lyrical rebellion, drama mobilized collective action through performative immediacy. Together, they underlined the inseparability of cultural production and political change, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire feminist activism today.

Comparative Analysis of Poetry and Drama

Medium-Specific Activism

The power of poetry lies in its intimate, reflective ability to pack complex emotions and political ideas into a few lines of power. Poets have used the written word as an inner reflection space and personal testimony, challenging the audience to come to terms with internalized norms and to envision alternative possibilities. The introspective nature of poetry allows individual voices to speak of subtle resistance and self-determination. For instance, slam poetry—characterized by its rapid, emotive performance—merges personal identity with political critique. As noted by Muhammad and Gonzalez (2016), slam poets use their verse as "an artistic resistance toward identity, agency, and activism" that challenges dominant narratives and empowers marginalized voices (Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016).

Drama emphasizes collectivity, for drama inherently produces immediacy-while alive-as collective performance; its social content embodies conflict between characters and so contested in 'real time'-social conflict itself, thus embodied, being publicized and socially enacted in, before a putative audience; so the energies in

the case of Harold Pinter's dramatic plays mobilized on abstract problems to become an intelligible staged public conflict (Roberts, 2020). This performative immediacy in drama allows for collective catharsis and offers spectators a vicarious experience of resistance. As Pinter's works demonstrate, drama's staging of tense, often ambiguous situations invites audiences to negotiate the complexities of power, authority, and resistance in a direct, embodied manner (McGovern, 2020).

Audience and Accessibility

Pamphlet Poetry for Mass Distribution

Poetry's accessibility was a key advantage. Suffragette poems were often published in pamphlets and newspapers, such as The Suffragette and Votes for Women, which could be easily distributed at rallies, sold for a penny, or even smuggled into prisons (Soukup SJ, 2020). The Holloway Jingles (1912), written by incarcerated suffragettes, exemplify this grassroots approach. Their simple, rhythmic verses "We're here because we're here / Because we're here because we're here!"—were designed to be memorized and recited, creating a shared cultural lexicon among activists (Bautista, 2021).

This mass distribution made sure that poetry reached every audience, from the factory worker to the middle-class housewife. According to Sowon S. Park (2022), the portability of pamphlet poetry democratized dissent as women could now engage with ideas about suffrage in their own time and space (Ralphs, 2019).

Plays Requiring Public Staging

By contrast, drama had to rely on public staging that was logistically and financially impractical (Roy Chowdhury & Khan, 2024). Where plays like Votes for Women! opened in London's West End to an affluent audience, touring productions and amateur performances in union halls and community centers determined its impact. The adaptations, according to Burroughs & Gainor (2022), tended to simplify sets and dialogue to accommodate working-class audiences (Burroughs & Gainor, 2022).

However, the need for staging also created opportunities for community-building. The WSPU's The Trial of a Suffragette (1914), performed in public squares, turned spectators into participants by inviting them to serve as "jurors" in mock trials (Soukup, 2020). This interactive approach, analyzed by Paxton (2022), transformed theater into a tool for grassroots mobilization.

Both poetry and drama, though differently formed and used, shared the same mission: the subverting of patriarchal habits and the promotion of the suffragette movement. The power of introversion that poetry offered came through in emotional intensity, whereas drama's immediacy based on performance harnessed power from collective action. Both depended upon communicative symbols—chains, broken windows, light—to convey the difficult fight and vision of the suffragettes. Together, they demonstrate the transformative potential of art as a tool for social change, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire feminist activism today.

Conclusion

This study uncovered how early 20th-century British poetry and drama utilized different but complementary forms of activism. Poetry's reflective force characterized by concise, evocative language and personal testimony provided a subtle yet powerful critique of patriarchal structures. Drama, on the other hand, tapped into collective, performative immediacy to mobilize audiences through live enactments of social tensions and conflict, inviting communal reflection and catharsis. The analysis highlights that early 20th-century British literary forms did not merely reflect social conditions; in fact, they actively participated in their reshaping.

Future Recommendations

Future research should explore how emerging digital humanities approaches can extend traditional literary analysis. For example, scholars might investigate how online platforms and multimedia formats transform the reach and reception of activist literature in a globalized context. Comparative studies could also examine similar literary practices in other national contexts, revealing how cultural and historical factors shape the dynamics of literary activism. Furthermore, literary studies in combination with historical and sociological research could also further clarify how symbolic motifs, like chains or broken windows, continue to operate as levers for social criticism and transformation. Such avenues should deepen insights into the evolving role of literature in promoting social change.

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