

Art as Resistance and Identity Formation in Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*

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Abstract

Anuradha Roy's The Earthspinner (2021) presents art not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a powerful means of expressing identity, memory, belonging, and conflict. Focusing on Elango, a potter whose life and creative vision are shaped by caste, religious divisions, love, social exclusion, and artistic aspiration, the novel explores the uncertain position of the artist within a society governed by family hierarchies and strict cultural boundaries. Elango's commitment to clay becomes a mode of self-definition through which he resists the limitations imposed upon him by caste and social convention. At the same time, the novel's second narrative element, represented by Sara, demonstrates how art and memory contribute to the rebuilding of identity across geographical and temporal boundaries. Her engagement with pottery reconnects her with her past and with Elango.

This article examines how artistic creation functions as resistance and as a process of identity formation in The Earthspinner, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a process of becoming, Charles Taylor's theory of recognition, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices. The study argues that Roy presents art as a dialogic space in which characters negotiate their relationships with society, history, place, and the other. Elango's clay work becomes a language through which he asserts dignity and individuality, while Sara's relationship with pottery allows her to recover a divided connection with her past. The ruin of Elango's clay horse suggests an assault upon identity, memory, creativity, and the possibility of coexistence. The paper concludes that the Protagonist reconceptualises art as both a resistant practice and an identity-making process, demonstrating that creative expression can challenge social exclusion while enabling individuals to imagine and retrieve the self.

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Introduction

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* brings together art, love, memory, caste, religion, displacement, grief, and the desire for human connection. The novel follows Elango, a potter whose life is inseparable from his artistic practice, and Sara, whose memories of India and her relationship with Elango take on new significance as she later engages with pottery. Elango's large terracotta horse becomes the narrative's most important artistic object. Its creation represents imagination and self-assertion, while its devastation becomes a manifestation of intolerance.

Elango's identity is inseparable from the earth with which he works. His relationship with clay connects to the potters' pond and his ancestors' inherited craft. When he anticipates that "his pond and its surrounding soil would be gone and with it his clay" (Roy 36), the loss of clay signifies more than the disappearance of a raw material. It threatens his artistic vocation, cultural inheritance, livelihood and sense of self. His identity is materially rooted in the earth.

The novel, however, does not present identity as something completely determined by inheritance. Elango transforms the inherited occupation of pottery into an individual artistic vocation. The distinction between being a potter and becoming an artist is therefore essential to the novel's treatment of identity. Through artistic creation, Elango develops an identity that cannot be totally restricted by caste, occupation, or social expectation.

The clay horse becomes the most important symbol of this transformation. Emerging from Elango's imagination and materializing through his artistic labour, the horse is connected to his love for Zohra. It becomes "a deeply private thing, inextricable in his mind from Zohra" (Roy 113). The artwork consequently embodies his personal emotion as well as his desire for a form of belonging that crosses religious boundaries.

Sara's experience extends the relationship between art and identity. Her engagement with pottery allows her to reconnect with memories of India, her father, and Elango. The pottery studio becomes a space of memory and connection. Her experience demonstrates that art can rebuild identity even when individuals have experienced physical displacement and temporal separation. The act of shaping clay therefore, becomes both a physical and psychological process.

This article examines how art functions as resistance and identity formation in *The Earthspinner*. It employs Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, Hall's theory of identity as becoming, Taylor's concept of recognition, and Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices. Through these theoretical perspectives, the paper argues that artistic practice allows Roy's characters to negotiate identities that are neither completely predetermined nor entirely self-created. Art becomes a space in which tradition and individuality, memory and present experience, and cultural difference

and human connection can meet.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on *The Earthspinner* has explored the novel's engagement with artistic creation, environmental transformation, religious intolerance, and resistance. Cristina Nicolae's discussion of the artist in Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* provides a foundation for understanding the position of the artist and the significance of creative practice in the novel. Other studies have examined the relationship between clay, environmental transformation, religious conflict, and artistic resistance.

The present study extends these concerns by focusing specifically on the relationship between art, resistance, and identity formation. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity is particularly useful because Elango's clay horse becomes a space where apparently separate cultural identities encounter one another. The combination of Hindu imagery, Urdu calligraphy, love across religious boundaries, and artistic collaboration challenges the assumption that cultural identities exist as pure and separate categories.

Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a process of becoming provides another important theoretical framework. Hall rejects the idea that identity is fixed or complete. In *The Earthspinner*, Elango is socially identified through inherited caste and occupational structures, yet his artistic practice enables him to construct another version of himself. His movement from potter to artist demonstrates how identity can be continuously produced through experience, memory, representation, and creative action.

Charles Taylor's theory of recognition further illuminates Elango's struggle. Identity develops through interaction with others, and misrecognition can damage an individual's understanding of self. Elango's difficulty lies partly in society's failure to recognise his artistic identity. His artistic practice therefore becomes a demand for recognition. The damage to the horse represents the rejection of that acknowledgment.

Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices also provide a productive framework. Elango is positioned within marginalised structures, but Roy does not reduce him to a victim. Instead, he is presented as an individual possessing imagination, artistic ambition, love, memory, and emotional complexity. Art enables him to become an artistic subject rather than remaining simply a social category.

The existing scholarship therefore establishes the importance of art, environment, conflict, and resistance in the novel. This paper brings these perspectives together through the central concept of identity formation. It argues that the artistic act itself becomes a process through which the characters confront imposed identities and create alternative forms of selfhood.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*. Close reading is used to examine significant passages, characters,

artistic objects, symbols, and narrative situations related to art and identity. The study pays particular attention to Elango's relationship with clay; the creation and destruction of the clay horse; Sara's engagement with pottery; the interaction between Hindu and Muslim artistic traditions; and the relationship between artistic practice and memory.

The study applies four theoretical perspectives. It uses Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity to examine the meeting of different cultural and religious identities. Stuart Hall's theory of identity is to understand identity as a continuous and unfinished process. Charles Taylor's concept of recognition is employed to analyse the importance of social recognition in the formation of identity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices are used to examine how artistic expression enables socially marginalised individuals to articulate forms of selfhood beyond imposed categories.

The analysis also considers the symbolic significance of clay, the potter's wheel, the clay horse, the pottery studio, and artistic damage. These elements are interpreted not simply as narrative details but as representations of the relationship between creativity, memory, resistance, and identity.

Art as a Medium of Identity Formation

In *The Earthspinner*, artistic practice is inseparable from personal identity formation. Elango's relationship with clay is not merely professional; clay represents his origin, livelihood, imagination, and cultural inheritance. His artistic identity grows from an inherited tradition but is not limited by it.

The distinction between hereditary occupation and individual artistic vocation matters. Elango was born into a pottery tradition, yet he transforms this tradition through imagination. His identity, therefore, exists between what society assigns to him and what he chooses to become. His creative practice allows him to redefine the meaning of pottery. When Elango anticipates that "his pond and its surrounding soil would be gone and with it his clay" (Roy 36).

The clay horse becomes the clearest expression of this transformation. He does not simply produce an object for commercial purposes. The horse originates from his imagination and becomes connected with his emotional relationship with Zohra. Artistic creation, therefore, extends his inner world. This process can be understood through Stuart Hall's concept of identity as becoming. Identity is not presented as an ended product but as something continually shaped through experience and representation. Elango inherits the identity of a potter, but through artistic imagination, he constructs the identity of an artist. His creative practice becomes a form of self-fashioning.

Clay itself becomes an appropriate representation for this process. It can be shaped and reshaped. In the same way, identity can be transformed through experience and creative agency. The potter works upon the material and gives it a new form. Elango similarly works upon an inherited identity and transforms it.

Art as Resistance to Caste and Social Boundaries

Art in *The Earthspinner* becomes a resource through which Elango resists identities imposed by caste and social convention. His hereditary occupation could function as a restrictive social category, but his creative practice allows him to claim individuality within that structure. Elango does not resist by rejecting his heritage entirely. Instead, he transforms it. Pottery becomes an artistic vocation rather than merely an inherited occupation. His resistance is therefore expressed through creation: he creates something new from the tradition that he has inherited.

This transformation matters because the novel does not suggest that resistance requires abandoning cultural inheritance. Elango's resistance emerges from within the tradition itself. He retains his connection to clay while giving it an individual meaning. The clay horse becomes the clearest expression of this resistance. This creation challenges the boundaries placed upon Elango's imagination and relationships. Through the horse, he produces an object that expresses his love, artistic vision, and desire for a form of belonging beyond restrictive social confines.

Art therefore becomes socially consequential even when it begins as a personal act. Elango creates the horse to express his emotional world, but the social reaction turns the artwork into a contested object. His personal identity becomes publicly visible and therefore vulnerable to social judgment. The novel shows that artistic identity becomes vulnerable once art enters society. An artwork can be interpreted, celebrated, rejected, or destroyed. However, the creative act retains meaning because it gives material form to an identity that social structures attempt to constrain.

The Clay Horse: Art, Love, and Cultural Hybridity

The clay horse is the central artistic symbol in the novel. Personal emotion, artistic imagination, cultural inheritance, and resistance come together in an object. Elango's understanding of the horse is made explicit when he regards it as "a deeply private thing, inextricable in his mind from Zohra" (Roy 113). The phrase establishes the horse as an extension of his emotional and artistic identity. The horse becomes a symbol of Elango and Zohra's relationship. Their relationship crosses religious boundaries imposed by the surrounding community. Through the artwork, Elango imagines a form of human connection that rigid social identities attempt to prevent.

The horse is more than a representation of love. It becomes a site of cultural encounter. Usman's contribution as a blind calligrapher intensifies this symbolism. His Urdu calligraphy on Elango's Hindu temple horse brings two artistic traditions into contact. Elango works with clay, while Usman works with language and calligraphy. Their collaboration produces a cross-cultural artistic form. The horse becomes at once traditional and individual, Hindu in imagery and connected to Muslim artistic expression, inherited and transformed.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides an effective theoretical framework for understanding this situation. Cultural identity is not necessarily pure or fixed; it can emerge through negotiation and interaction. The clay horse occupies such an in-

between space. It embodies the possibility that cultural differences can coexist without requiring one identity to erase another. The opposition directed towards the horse, therefore, represents a rejection of the hybrid cultural space it embodies. The destruction of the artwork becomes an attempt to restore fixed cultural boundaries. The artistic object is socially significant precisely because it demonstrates that those boundaries are not necessarily absolute.

Art and the Negotiation of Religious Identity

Religious identity is another important element of artistic resistance in *The Earthspinner*. The relationship between Elango and Zohra challenges the assumption that religious identity should limit human relationships. The clay horse becomes a material representation of this challenge. It brings together personal love and cultural difference. The artwork becomes a space where identities society seeks to separate can coexist. Usman's Urdu calligraphy further develops this theme. Reactions to the writing reveal a contrast between appreciation of artistic language and suspicion of cultural difference. The phrase "The language of poets!" (Roy 149) powerfully expresses the artistic value of Urdu. In the context of the horse, calligraphy becomes a medium of communication rather than separation.

The horse, therefore, represents the possibility of cultural interaction. Clay and calligraphy occupy the same artistic surface. The artwork itself does not recognise rigid religious separation; instead, it embodies cultural interaction. This conflict between artistic hybridity and social rigidity is central to Roy's representation of resistance. The artwork becomes significant because it demonstrates that belonging can be imagined across boundaries. Through the horse, Roy explores how artistic creation can challenge exclusionary definitions of cultural identity.

Sara's Pottery: Art, Memory, and Reconstruction of Identity

Sara's narrative introduces another dimension of the relationship between art and identity. While Elango uses art primarily to create and assert identity, Sara experiences art as a way to recover identity through memory. Her relationship with pottery reconnects her with her father, Elango, India, and her earlier experiences. The pottery studio becomes a space in which different temporal and geographical dimensions of her identity can coexist. She describes the studio as a "safe haven" (Roy 15), signifying that it functions as more than a workplace. It provides a space where memory and identity can be experienced without constant external explanation.

The physical act of working with clay becomes an act of remembering. When Sara reflects, "The wheel turns, I place a ball of clay on it, I cover the clay with both my hands" (Roy 14), the wheel's movement connects her present experience with her past. The first-person description is especially significant because it makes memory physical and immediate. Sara's pottery practice, therefore, functions as an instrument of memory. It does not simply create an object; it reactivates relationships and experiences separated by time. Her identity cannot be reduced to her present physical location. It is shaped by India, childhood memories, her

relationship with Elango, her father's intellectual world, and her present life in England. Pottery provides a medium through which these different aspects can coexist.

Bhabha's concept of the third space is relevant here because Sara occupies an in-between cultural position. She does not have to abandon her past to inhabit her present. Artistic practice allows her to negotiate between different cultural and geographical identities.

The Potter's Wheel as a Metaphor for Identity Formation

The potter's wheel is one of the novel's most significant images of identity formation. The wheel's movement and the clay's transformation parallel the self's continuous development. Sara's recollection provides direct textual evidence for this relationship: "The wheel turns, I place a ball of clay on it, I cover the clay with both my hands" (Roy 14). The turning wheel suggests movement, while the shaping hands suggest agency. Together, they provide a material image for the interaction between continuity and transformation.

Clay is neither completely determined by its original form nor entirely independent of the potter. Its transformation results from an interaction between material, human creativity, pressure, movement, and technique. Similarly, identity develops through an interaction between individual agency and social forces. Elango's identity follows this pattern. He inherits the pottery tradition, but he reshapes it through artistic imagination. His identity, therefore, exists between inherited and chosen forms.

Sara's experience also reflects this process. Her engagement with pottery allows her to reshape her relationship with memory. The past is not simply recovered exactly as it was; it is reinterpreted through present experience. The title, *The Earthspinner*, itself reinforces this metaphor. The "spinner" evokes the potter's wheel and the clay's continuous transformation. Identity, like clay, remains unfinished and capable of change. The metaphor challenges the idea that identity is a fixed product. Instead, it presents identity as a creative process. Individuals continuously negotiate their relationship with family, society, culture, memory, and place.

Recognition, Misrecognition, and the Artist's Identity

Charles Taylor's theory of recognition helps to explain Elango's struggle for social and artistic identity. Identity develops through communication with others, and recognition contributes to an individual's understanding of self. Conversely, misrecognition can deny or distort recognition of identity. Elango's difficulty partly stems from society's failure to recognise his artistic identity. Society tends to understand him through inherited categories such as caste and occupation. Elango, however, understands himself through creativity and imagination.

His artistic practice therefore becomes a demand for recognition. By creating the clay horse, he makes visible an identity that exceeds the category assigned to him. The horse, described as "a deeply private thing, inextricable in his mind from Zohra" (Roy 113), makes his emotional and artistic self materially visible. The

destruction of the horse represents the refusal of that recognition. Those who reject or destroy the artwork do not simply reject an object; they reject the identity and relationships it expresses.

Yet the novel does not allow this rejection to become complete deletion. Elango's artistic identity survives through memory and narrative. The artwork may disappear physically, but its meaning remains. This suggests that recognition need not come only from the immediate social environment. Literature itself can provide recognition by preserving the artist's experience and making it visible to readers.

Art, Marginality and the Recovery of Voice

Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices provide another important framework for understanding Elango. Roy does not present him merely as a victim of caste or social prohibition. He is presented as an individual with artistic ambition, love, imagination, memory and emotional complexity. This distinction is significant. A marginalised person can be reduced to the social structure that marginalises them. Roy resists such reduction by presenting Elango as a creative subject.

Art becomes the medium through which this subjectivity becomes visible. His pottery communicates what inherited social categories cannot express. The horse is particularly important because it transforms his private imagination into a visible artistic form. Sara undergoes a related process. She cannot be reduced to the category of migrant or displaced person. Her identity emerges through the interaction of memory, place, family, art and experience. Her recollection that "The wheel turns, I place a ball of clay on it, I cover the clay with both my hands" (Roy 14) demonstrates how artistic practice gives physical form to memory.

The novel therefore presents identity as relational. Individuals are shaped by social structures, but they can also reinterpret those structures through creativity. Art becomes a means of recovering voice because it enables marginalised individuals to represent themselves through forms that are not completely controlled by dominant social categories.

The Destruction of the Clay Horse: Erasure and Resistance

The destruction of the clay horse is one of the novel's most powerful moments in its treatment of art and resistance. The horse contains multiple meanings. It is an artistic creation, an expression of Elango's imagination, a representation of his relationship with Zohra and a symbol of cultural coexistence. Its destruction therefore produces multiple forms of loss. It is not simply the destruction of an artwork but a symbolic attack on memory, love, artistic identity and cultural hybridity.

The violence directed at the horse can be read as an attempt to suppress the alternative identity the artwork represents. The horse demonstrates that religious and cultural boundaries can be crossed. Its destruction attempts to deny that possibility. However, the destruction does not erase it completely. The horse survives through memory. Sara remembers Elango and his art. The story preserves the horse's history. Literature itself becomes an archive of what intolerance attempts to

suppress.

Resistance, therefore, does not necessarily require immediate victory. Sometimes resistance consists in preserving an alternative meaning after an attempt has been made to eliminate it. The horse becomes such a surviving meaning. The contrast between creation and destruction is particularly important. Elango creates, while the forces opposing the horse destroy. Creation provides a space in which difference can exist; destruction seeks to eliminate that difference. The novel consequently presents creativity as an ethical form of resistance. Elango's resistance is not primarily expressed through argument. It exists in the persistence of his creative vision.

Art, Memory, and the Persistence of Identity

The relationship between art and memory extends beyond individual characters. The novel itself becomes a form of artistic preservation. Elango's physical artwork may be destroyed, but the narrative preserves its significance. A parallel emerges between Elango shaping clay and Roy shaping narrative. Both transform material into meaning. Elango transforms earth into artistic form, while Roy transforms experience into literary form. Through this process, individual memory becomes cultural memory. Elango, who is marginalised within his social environment, becomes visible to readers. The artwork that disappears within the narrative survives through literature.

The preservation of memory is therefore itself a form of resistance. Social structures may attempt to erase alternative identities, but memory can preserve them. Art provides a material or narrative form through which memory continues. Sara's relationship with pottery demonstrates this process at a personal level. Her artistic practice reconnects her with people and places from her past. Elango's artistic legacy survives through memory, and the novel itself preserves his story. Art, therefore, resists erasure by giving form to experiences that might otherwise disappear. Creativity becomes an act of remembrance.

Discussion

The Earthspinner presents identity as an unfinished and relational process. The novel does not treat identity as a fixed essence individuals possess. Instead, identity is continuously shaped through caste, religion, family, memory, place, artistic practice, and social interaction. Elango represents identity construction through creativity. He inherits the social identity of a potter but transforms that inheritance into an artistic vocation. His clay work allows him to imagine himself beyond the categories imposed upon him. Sara represents another form of identity formation. Her artistic practice enables her to recover and reinterpret memories that have been separated by geographical and temporal distance.

Bhabha's theory of hybridity helps explain the novel's cultural dimension. The clay horse and Elango and Usman's collaboration show how art can create spaces where different cultural traditions meet. The horse becomes a hybrid object that challenges rigid cultural separation. Hall's theory of identity as becoming explains

why Elango's identity cannot be treated as complete or predetermined. His identity develops through movement between inheritance and individual creativity. The clay metaphor reinforces this understanding. Taylor's concept of recognition highlights identity's social dimension. Elango requires recognition as an artist, but society continues to perceive him through inherited categories. The destruction of the horse becomes a refusal to recognise the identity he has created.

Spivak's perspective further demonstrates the importance of representing marginalised individuals as subjects rather than merely as victims. Elango's artistic ambition gives him creative interiority. His identity is more complex than the social structures that attempt to define him. The destruction of the horse brings these theoretical dimensions together. The artwork represents personal identity, cultural hybridity, love, memory, and resistance. Its destruction is therefore an attempt to suppress alternative forms of identity. Nevertheless, the novel suggests that identity cannot be completely erased. The horse survives through memory, and Elango survives through narrative.

The novel consequently presents two major functions of art. For Elango, art creates the self. For Sara, art is a means of recovering the self. Both processes involve resistance. Elango resists caste, occupational, and religious restrictions, while Sara resists the fragmentation produced by time, displacement, and geographical distance. The clay metaphor captures the unfinished nature of this process. Clay can be shaped and reshaped, just as identity can be continuously reconstructed. The potter's wheel becomes a metaphor for movement, transformation, and becoming. Art, therefore, becomes both a language of resistance and a grammar of identity. It enables individuals to challenge externally imposed categories while creating spaces in which alternative forms of belonging become possible.

Conclusion

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* provides a significant exploration of the relationship between artistic creation, resistance, and identity formation. Through Elango and Sara, the novel demonstrates that art is not simply an aesthetic activity but a means through which individuals negotiate their relationship with society, memory, culture, and themselves. Elango's pottery transforms an inherited occupation into an individual artistic vocation. His relationship with clay is grounded in the material and cultural world of the potter's pond, while the line "his pond and its surrounding soil would be gone and with it his clay" (Roy 36) reveals how environmental and social change can threaten an inherited artistic identity. The horse's intimate relationship with Zohra is established through the description of it as "a deeply private thing, inextricable in his mind from Zohra" (Roy 113). The quotation shows that the artwork carries personal and relational meaning beyond its physical form. Usman's Urdu calligraphy and the response, "The language of poets!" (Roy 149), intensify its significance by highlighting the possibility of artistic communication across cultural boundaries.

Sara's relationship with pottery demonstrates another dimension of artistic identity. Her engagement with clay reconnects her with memories of India, her father, and Elango. (Roy 14), presenting art as a physical process through which memory is recovered and reinterpreted. Her description of the studio as a "safe heaven" (Roy 15) further establishes pottery as a space of belonging. Bhabha's concept of hybridity reveals how the clay horse becomes a space of cultural encounter. Hall's theory of identity as becoming demonstrates that Elango's identity is continuously constructed rather than fixed. Taylor's theory of recognition explains his struggle to have his artistic identity acknowledged. Spivak's perspective highlights the importance of presenting marginalised individuals as creative subjects rather than reducing them to victims.

The destruction of the clay horse represents the most powerful attempt to suppress the alternative identity represented by the artwork. Yet destruction does not result in complete erasure. The horse survives through memory, and Elango's artistic vision survives through Roy's narrative. The novel, therefore, presents resistance as something that can exist in the decision to create, remember, imagine, and preserve. Elango resists by creating. Sara resists fragmentation by remembering and reconnecting. Roy preserves the artistic and emotional history through narration.

The metaphor of clay ultimately provides the central insight of the novel. Like clay on the potter's wheel, identity remains capable of transformation. It carries inherited history but can be reshaped through imagination and creative agency. *The Earthspinner*, therefore, presents art as both a language of resistance and a process of identity formation. To create is to assert presence, to shape clay is to shape memory, and to preserve an artwork through narrative is to resist deletion. Although the clay horse may be physically destroyed, the imagination that created it continues through memory, literature, and cultural remembrance.

Scope for Further Research

Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* offers several possibilities for further research. Future studies may examine the relationship between artistic creation and environmental transformation, particularly the significance of the disappearance of the potters' pond and the changing relationship between communities and natural resources. Another possible area of study is the relationship between gender and artistic identity. Further research could examine how female and male experiences of creativity, memory, social expectation, and belonging differ within the novel. The novel can also be studied comparatively with other contemporary Indian novels that explore caste, religious conflict, migration, artistic identity, and cultural hybridity. Such comparative research could reveal how contemporary Indian literature represents artistic resistance as a response to social fragmentation.

Further research may also explore the relationship between materiality and memory. Clay, pottery, the potter's wheel, and the destroyed horse can be examined through material-culture studies to understand how physical objects preserve

cultural and personal memory. An interdisciplinary study combining literary studies, cultural studies, visual arts, environmental humanities, and memory studies could further illuminate the novel's treatment of identity and artistic resistance. Finally, the relationship between literature and artistic preservation deserves further investigation. Roy's novel demonstrates how literature can preserve an artwork that is destroyed within the fictional world. This relationship between artistic destruction and literary remembrance provides an important avenue for understanding literature as an archive of marginalized identities and suppressed creative expression.

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