

The Socio-Historical Panorama of The Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam in Tran Thuy Mai's Novel *the Princess of Dong Xuan*

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary Vietnamese literature, the reconstruction of the social panorama of a historical period is not merely an attempt to reproduce past events but also a way of engaging in dialogue with the present, raising questions of identity, memory, and responsibility. The *Princess of Dong Xuan* by Tran Thuy Mai is a representative effort in this regard. Against the backdrop of the tumultuous transformations of the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the novel recreates a historical landscape marked by bloodshed, internal strife, and tragedy. Through the fate of Princess Dong Xuan and the intertwining of both historical and fictional characters, the narrative portrays not only the decline of a dynasty but also the mournful consciousness of an entire nation. The novel reconstructs a vivid historical tableau of the Nguyen court in the late nineteenth century, set against the weakening of Dai Nam in the vortex of war and diplomacy, from the French invasion in 1858 to the unequal treaties of Harmand (1883) and Patenôtre (1884). At the same time, it depicts the internal division of the court between the factions of resistance and compromise, along with the destitution and disorder among the people, thereby exposing the disintegration of imperial authority.

KEYWORDS: Tran Thuy Mai, The Princess of Dong Xuan, Nguyen Dynasty, historical novel, contemporary Vietnamese literature, cultural memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Vietnamese literary studies, the historical novel has consistently been one of the most debated creative domains and has attracted significant critical attention. Since the *Renovation* reforms of 1986, along with the loosening of state control and the emergence of new approaches to history, many writers have turned to the past as a means of engaging in dialogue with the present. From the serial historical novels of the early twentieth century to modern works, the genre has retained a particular appeal, as it allows readers to revisit the past while simultaneously reflecting on the present and envisioning the future. In the contemporary context, as the demand to reexamine history in order to decode national identity grows ever more pressing, the historical novel has proven its crucial role in connecting collective memory with individual consciousness. Scholars such as Tran Dinh Su, Phong Le, and Nguyen Dang Diep have emphasized that rewriting history in literature is not only a matter of reconstructing events but also of interpreting, reflecting, and shaping collective memory.

Tran Thuy Mai, a prominent female writer in contemporary Vietnamese literature, has left her distinctive mark on the genre of the historical novel by choosing characters rarely mentioned in official histories, thereby exploring aspects of the past that are at once familiar and novel. Her novel *The Princess of Dong Xuan* stands out as a remarkable case, for it delves into the final phase of the Nguyễn Dynasty—a period fraught with upheavals and national tragedies. Drawing on the tragic fate of a royal princess, the author opens up a panoramic view of the Nguyen court in the late nineteenth century, a time marked by war, turmoil, and the fractures within feudal society.

What makes *The Princess of Dong Xuan* distinctive lies not only in the reconstruction of a historical figure seldom mentioned in chronicles, but also in the author's use of an individual fate to mirror the destiny of the nation. Through the princess's experiences of loss and suffering, readers perceive the comprehensive crisis of the Nguyen Dynasty—spanning the military, political, diplomatic, and social spheres. The novel is not a mere replication of historical records; rather, it is a fusion of artistic imagination and historical fact, aiming to recreate the spirit of the age while raising questions of humanistic and reflective significance.

Studying *The Princess of Dong Xuan* from the perspective of the “socio-historical panorama of the Nguyen Dynasty” carries significant implications on multiple levels. First, it affirms the role of the historical novel in reviving past events while simultaneously filling in the gaps left by official historiography. Second, it highlights the close relationship between literature and history, in which literature not only inherits but also reinterprets and creatively reconstructs the past. Third, through the form of the

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novel, the work raises questions that remain relevant today: the lessons drawn from the Nguyen Dynasty's failure, the responsibility of national leaders at decisive historical moments, and the role of the people in safeguarding the nation.

For these reasons, examining the socio-historical panorama of the Nguyen Dynasty in *The Princess of Dong Xuan* not only sheds light on the artistic value of the novel but also enables readers to gain a deeper understanding of the transformations in national history. This provides a foundation for analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the work in relation to literature and history, as well as between memory and the present. Tran Thuy Mai has contributed to broadening the scope of the historical novel-from reflecting war, diplomacy, and internal strife to portraying the community's tragic memories. This makes the work an important reference for the study of the interrelationship between literature and history, while also demonstrating the power of literature in preserving and reconstructing collective memory.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To carry out this study, we employed a variety of research methods, with primary emphasis on two approaches: the interdisciplinary method and the typological method. The interdisciplinary method was applied to clarify how Tran Thuy Mai incorporated elements of historiography, literature, cultural studies, and psychology into her work. This approach helps to affirm the close connection between cultural experience and the author's creative capacity, thereby contributing to an understanding of the cultural-historical contexts that influenced the writer and her texts. The typological method was adopted to analyze the symbolic elements, imagery, and distinctive artistic structures of the novel, in order to elucidate how the author conveys her historical sensibility. In doing so, the study explores the relationship between form and content, thus clarifying the artistic strategies through which historical consciousness is represented in the novel.

3. CONTENT

3.1. The Nguyen Dynasty in Decline and the Vortex of War and Diplomacy

One of the central themes of *The Princess of Dong Xuan* is the reconstruction of the historical context of the Nguyen Dynasty under Emperor Tu Duc. In 1847, Tu Duc ascended the throne at a time when the country was beset with difficulties. This was a period of comprehensive crisis: natural disasters, crop failures, famine, and successive peasant uprisings. Meanwhile, the court lacked an effective reform strategy. Its conservative and insular policies caused Dai Nam to fall rapidly behind in the face of the expansion of colonialism. The threat of French invasion became increasingly evident. Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century, the relationship between Vietnam and France was one of equality between two independent sovereign states, in the latter half it turned into a hostile relationship between a colonizing power and the colonized. During the first decade of Tu Duc's reign, relations between Vietnam and France were particularly strained, revolving mainly around the issue of the prohibition of Catholicism-an excuse exploited by France to launch its invasion of Vietnam.

The French invasion of 1858 is portrayed in the novel as an irreversible turning point. Driven by the desire to expand its colonies and control vital trade routes in Asia, on September 1, 1858, the French-Spanish allied forces fired upon the Son Tra Peninsula in Da Nang, inaugurating France's armed intervention in Vietnam. An expeditionary fleet was formed, consisting of the Franco-Spanish alliance with 14 warships and 2,350 soldiers, together with modern vessels such as the *Némésis*, which served as the command ship, equipped with 50 powerful cannons capable of immense destructive force. Exploiting the issue of Catholic persecution as a pretext, the French launched their assault on Da Nang and subsequently advanced into Gia Dinh, forcing the imperial court to confront highly disadvantageous conditions.

The novel repeatedly evokes vivid images of war: "...two or three blood-soaked heads had been impaled on sharp stakes and lifted high above the crowd" [4, p.183]. Blood, fire, corpses, the sound of cannon blasts, cries, and wailing mingled with smoke and the stench of blood-soaked earth. Fear, suffering, despair, and hatred permeated the "blood-stained trampled grasslands" [4, p.183] - details that not only underscore the horror of war but also reveal the helplessness of the imperial army before the technological superiority of the enemy. War not only claimed lives but also inflicted lasting physical and psychological wounds upon survivors. The resistance plunged the country into turmoil, with the Nguyen court facing enormous difficulties and deep internal divisions. This created a volatile space in which characters were forced to confront harsh choices and irreconcilable conflicts.

The fierce resistance of the Vietnamese people meant that, after many months of occupying Da Nang, the French were unable to advance further. In 1859, the French decided to redirect their campaign toward Cochinchina. In February 1861, they captured the Ky Hoa garrison, and by April they had taken My Tho. Meanwhile, in June 1861, Admiral Charner sent a proposal to the Hue court, declaring that France was willing to negotiate peace if the following conditions were met: freedom of religion for Vietnamese Catholics; cession of the provinces of Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong to France; permission for Westerners to travel and trade freely throughout Vietnamese territory; and the establishment of Western consulates in Vietnam. Among these demands, Emperor Tu Duc accepted only the first-granting freedom of religion to Catholics. Consequently, the French attempt at peace negotiations failed.

In *The Princess of Dong Xuan*, Tran Thuy Mai employs the historical backdrop of the Nguyen Dynasty under Emperor Tu Duc to pose critical questions regarding the court's foreign policy in the face of French colonial aggression. Should the dynasty

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have pursued conciliation in order to preserve its strength, or committed itself fully to armed resistance despite the foreknowledge of likely defeat? Did the strategy of seeking aid from the Qing troops truly offer advantages, or did it merely invite greater calamities? After the French envoy Rheinart arrived in Hue, proposing that Vietnam accept protectorate status and cede Hanoi, the court, under mounting pressure, opted to seek support from the Qing and relied on the Black Flag Army. Taking advantage of this situation, the Qing court dispatched troops to occupy the provinces of Bac Ninh and Son Tay. The military confrontation between France and China subsequently escalated, culminating in the death of Colonel Henri Rivière at the hands of the Black Flag Army at Cau Giay.

Clearly, the spread of Qing bandits into Vietnam contributed to a state of persistent instability, creating favorable conditions for the French to expand their invasion across the country. At the same time, this situation, coupled with internal uprisings, forced the court to concentrate its main forces on suppressing domestic rebellions and safeguarding the throne rather than on resisting foreign aggression and devising strategies for national defense. Moreover, it compelled the court to seek military assistance from the Qing, which - as history shows - brought about grave consequences. As Nguyen Van Tuong remarked to General Hoang Ta Viem: "The second matter is even more worrisome: at present, in order to fight the French, we must rely on the Black Flags. But the Black Flags only claim the prestige of being remnants of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; in truth, they are but a band of brigands. Worse still, the Black Flags are Chinese. Suppose we allied with them and defeated the French - then the stronger we became, the deeper we would allow China to penetrate into our very core. His Majesty's concern lies precisely there!" [4, p.62].

Through this reliance, the Hue court revealed to the Qing both the weakness of its army and its impotence in dealing with the national crisis. This likely emboldened the Qing to intervene more assertively in the affairs of Bac Ky. These details underscore Dai Nam's double tragedy: facing the French invaders while simultaneously being subjected to Qing manipulation. The inevitable consequence was the signing of successive unequal treaties. The Harmand Treaty (August 25, 1883) and the Patenôtre Treaty (June 6, 1884) are invoked in the novel as tragic milestones, formally placing Vietnam under French protectorate rule. Within this atmosphere, readers perceive not only the collapse of territorial sovereignty but also the erosion of national confidence and spirit. Tran Thuy Mai transforms these historical events into profoundly tragic narrative episodes, rendering the past no longer a dry record of facts but a vivid, haunting memory.

The resistance against the French under Emperor Tu Duc was extremely arduous and protracted. Although there were moments when Vietnamese forces achieved victories, disparities in weaponry, military capability, and internal divisions ultimately prevented them from repelling the French. On July 19, 1883, Emperor Tu Duc passed away, plunging the court into further turmoil. Exploiting this situation, the French decided to strike directly at Hue and quickly captured the imperial capital. On August 22, 1883, Emperor Hiep Hoa surrendered. Just days later, on August 25, 1883, the Harmand Treaty was signed with 27 clauses, fully recognizing Vietnam as a French colony. On June 6, 1884, the Patenôtre Treaty, regarded as the "completion" of the Harmand Treaty, entirely abolished the Nguyen Dynasty's existence as an independent monarchy. With this, the French colonial conquest of Vietnam, lasting nearly three decades, was effectively completed.

To speak of the brutality of war is not merely to refer to material destruction but, more profoundly, to the devastation of the spirit—a trauma borne not only by individuals but by the entire community. The suffering of the nation became the collective wound of its people. This event was not only a turning point in national history but also a force that profoundly shaped the lives and destinies of the characters, particularly Princess Dong Xuan. Her life, and that of those around her, was completely overturned by war. They faced danger, loss, and separation. The resistance accelerated the decline of the feudal regime while also bringing about a deep transformation in human values and ways of life.

The *Dai Nam thuc luc*, compiled by the Nguyen Dynasty's National History Institute in the form of annals, records events concisely but pays little attention to those related to the anti-French resistance in Cochinchina during Tu Duc's reign. French-language sources, apart from works by a few historians, mostly consist of notes, reports, and letters from missionaries and Frenchmen who had taken part in the conquest of Cochinchina. As a result, the picture of the resistance in Cochinchina under Emperor Tu Duc has not been fully reconstructed as it actually unfolded. By placing her characters within the "house of history," Tran Thuy Mai reimagines and reshapes its outlines, offering readers a more comprehensive vision of the anti-French war-marked by errors, losses, and immense sacrifices.

Through Tran Thuy Mai's *The Princess of Dong Xuan*, the historical panorama of the Nguyen Dynasty emerges in a state of decline, caught in the tragic vortex of war and diplomacy. Under Emperor Tu Duc, the dynasty sank into a comprehensive crisis: natural disasters, famine, and peasant uprisings, compounded by the conservatism of its governance, which caused the nation to fall rapidly behind. When the French launched their invasion in 1858, the court proved powerless militarily and indecisive in diplomacy. Half-hearted compromises, internal divisions, and the resort to Qing intervention only further exposed its weakness, plunging the country into a condition of "facing enemies on both fronts": simultaneously under attack by the French and exploited by China.

Through Tran Thuy Mai's pen, the past is no longer a set of rigid historical records but is transformed into emotionally charged narrative sequences that compel readers to reflect on the responsibility of a dynasty toward the fate of the nation. The signing of the Harmand Treaty (1883) and the Patenôtre Treaty (1884)—marking the demise of an independent monarchy—did not merely close a fiery chapter of history but also reminded posterity of the cost of conservatism, the absence of reform, and internal

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division. In this sense, *The Princess of Dong Xuan* not only reconstructs the Nguyen Dynasty's spiral of decline but also raises reflective questions: What must a nation do to avoid repeating the tragedies of history? From the sorrows of the nineteenth century, the novel conveys timeless lessons about the power of national unity, the necessity of reform, and the importance of strategic vision at critical junctures.

3.2. Internal Conflicts and the Disintegration of Power

Alongside foreign invasion, *The Princess of Dong Xuan* also focuses on portraying the internal fragmentation within the Nguyen court. The conflict between the pro-war and pro-peace factions is vividly depicted through a series of tense dialogues. High-ranking officials such as Nguyen Tri Phuong and Hoang Ta Viem are portrayed as resolute in their resistance against the invaders, yet they are hindered by the hesitation, and at times the conciliatory stance, of other members of the court. These disagreements prevented the dynasty from formulating a unified and timely strategy.

The novel also recreates scenes of popular discontent in response to oppressive taxation, recurring natural disasters, and social injustices. Images of peasants fleeing in panic, abandoning their homes and fields, evoke a society on the verge of collapse. Meanwhile, peasant uprisings, border bandits, and marauding forces from the North compelled the court to disperse its military strength even further. Passages describing the scene in which "the scholars of Bac Ha, upon hearing that the court had signed the peace treaty, simultaneously cast down their swords and wept with their faces in their hands" testify to the shattering of faith. Both the people and the intellectual elite lost their spiritual anchor, and history itself became a collective wound.

Throughout Emperor Tu Duc's thirty-six-year reign, Vietnam was engulfed in profound upheavals. Widespread famine and crop failures triggered a series of peasant uprisings, with more than forty rebellions occurring in Bac Ky (the North) alone. Notable among these were the revolt of the emperor's own brother, Hồng Bảo; large-scale movements such as that of Le Duy Phung; the "Locust Army" in My Luong; and the violent Chay Voi uprising right in the imperial capital. At the same time, the nation faced a dual threat: the incursions of Chinese bandit groups plundering across the borders and the looming danger of French colonization. Alongside the French invasion were ceaseless uprisings by the people across the country, evolving from resistance against the French to resistance "against both the dynasty and the French." This dynamic facilitated the rapid collaboration between Vietnamese bandits and their counterparts from Qing China.

The upheavals in China also played a role, as waves of outlaws-sometimes starving peasants, at other times remnants of anti-dynastic forces, particularly those fleeing the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion-crossed into Vietnam. Thus, they became a shared scourge for both nations. In *A Brief History of Vietnam* (Chapter VIII), Tran Trong Kim notes that from the year Tan Hoi (1851), the fourth year of Tu Duc's reign, the number of "bandits" steadily multiplied: the Tam Duong bandits, the "Locust Army" (led by Cao Ba Quat and Le Duy Cu), the Phụng rebels, the Khach bandits and the Van Than uprisings, among others.

Under the Nguyen, in addition to domestic uprisings, bands of marauders from China frequently crossed into Vietnamese borderlands, looting and wreaking havoc. In the official histories of both the Nguyen and Qing dynasties, they are referred to as *thổ phi* (bandits) or *cổ phi* (pirates). Set against the backdrop of French invasion from the latter half of the nineteenth century, this influx of Chinese bandits further destabilized the nation, pushing it deeper into disorder and decline. Suppressing these marauders drained the court of troops and generals alike. On the eve of France's second military campaign in Bac Ky, the situation across the northern and central regions-from highland forests to lowland plains and coastal areas-was one of unrelenting unrest. The bandits from Qing China joined forces with Vietnamese rebels, leaving the court paralyzed and powerless to quell domestic chaos. Moreover, the Hue court was forced into the untenable position of having to fight the French while simultaneously combating Qing marauders to retain control of the northern frontier provinces-all while continuing to face uprisings erupting across the country.

From the 1860s onward, especially after 1867, alongside pre-existing bandit groups, the Vietnamese borderlands witnessed the arrival of remnants from the Taiping Rebellion as well as insurgents from other local uprisings suppressed by the Qing court. These groups regrouped into armed forces that rose up in various places. Furthermore, the redeployment of imperial troops from the capital to localities created significant political disruption in those regions, largely because the newly appointed officials lacked experience with the borderlands. The Nguyen court was thus compelled to disperse many of its capable generals-such as Nguyen Đàng Giai, Le Tuan and Nguyen Tri Phuong - to the North in order to handle unrest, thereby substantially weakening the core military forces needed to resist the French in the South.

In *The Princess of Dong Xuan*, the struggle between factions within the court-those advocating resistance and those favoring conciliation with France-is examined in detail, partially illuminating the intense conflicts that shaped the destinies of many characters, including Princess Dong Xuan herself. The resistance highlighted profound social contradictions, such as the divisions between opposing factions in the court, between officials and the people, and between the Vietnamese and the French. These tensions generated dramatic, compelling situations within the novel. Tran Thuy Mai portrays these conflicts vividly through the characters and events of *The Princess of Dong Xuan*, giving the narrative both historical depth and literary vitality.

First, attention must be given to the conflicts within the court itself, particularly between the pro-war and pro-peace factions, as well as between high-ranking and lower-ranking officials. The tension between the pro-war and pro-peace groups was the most

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severe, dividing the court into two opposing camps. The pro-war faction supported resistance against the French, while the pro-peace faction sought conciliation in order to preserve the dynasty's interests. Senior officials often held conservative views, fearing the loss of power and thus resisting change. In contrast, many lower-ranking officials displayed patriotic spirit and a willingness to fight alongside the people.

Second, there was the conflict between officials and the populace. Many officials prioritized personal interests, exploiting and oppressing the people, which fueled widespread resentment in society. Ordinary people endured poverty, heavy taxation, and oppression while also facing the dangers of war-conditions that deepened their hostility toward the government. Some officials, initially conservative and opposed to resistance, shifted their stance after witnessing the horrors of war, eventually joining the struggle. This transformation in perspective not only enhanced the realism of the novel's characters but also reflected a broader process of ideological change within Vietnamese society during this turbulent period.

Third, the conflict between the Vietnamese and the French is also central. From the standpoint of colonizer and colonized, the French enforced a brutal regime that inflicted great suffering on the Vietnamese people, thereby deepening the antagonism between the two nations. A number of Vietnamese, out of self-interest or helplessness, collaborated with the French, further exacerbating internal divisions. The novel's characters are frequently confronted with difficult choices-between competing interests, between personal emotions and national responsibility. These conflicts generate dramatic, intense situations, offering a truthful reflection of the complexities of history. They also reveal that the resistance against the French was not merely a military struggle but also an internal contest marked by sharp divisions, which makes the narrative more compelling and dramatic.

Through this exploration of social contradictions surrounding the anti-French resistance, *The Princess of Dong Xuan* provides readers with a panoramic view of Vietnamese society in the late nineteenth century, while also addressing issues of enduring relevance that remain significant to this day.

The discord among differing viewpoints further plunged the populace into misery. In *Volume II*, one passage describes: "The next day, yet another shocking piece of news spread: the two sons of Prince Tuy Ly, Mien Trinh - Hong Sam and Hong Tu - had both been executed! The son of Prince Tung Thien, Hong Phi, was imprisoned and died the following day in his cell, the reason unknown. Three royal lives were extinguished before the very eyes of the capital's people, leaving them utterly terrified. Mien Trinh was stripped of his princely title and forced to witness the execution of his sons before being exiled to Quang Ngai. Throughout the capital, people hurried along in fear, speaking cautiously, daring not to act carelessly in the slightest" [4, p.233].

When the officials signed the Treaty of Quy Mui, accepting French protectorate status, the Hue court - under pressure from the French Resident-General - dispatched Nguyen Trong Hop as imperial envoy to the North with the order: "immediately cease hostilities and await the ratification of the Quy Mui Treaty" [4, p.252]. The news that the French had attacked the capital and that the treaty had been signed reverberated through the Northern literati: "At that time, although Hanoi was occupied by the French, the fortresses of Bac Ninh and Son Tay were still resisting. Along the front lines, generals and soldiers cast down their swords and wept with their faces in their hands" [4, p.248].

War does not determine who is right or wrong; it only decides who survives. War is not a debate in search of truth; rather, it is violence and force that ultimately dictate the outcome. The novel presents harrowing and tragic images in succession, serving as a stark reminder of the value of peace. At dawn, the scene revealed was one of horror stretching from the imperial citadel's flag tower to the city gates: headless, dismembered, and disemboweled corpses strewn across the ground, congealed black blood, and swarms of buzzing flies: "The acrid stench of burnt flesh permeated everywhere" [4, p.260]; "Crows and kites circled above, occasionally swooping down, forcing the French soldiers to fire warning shots to drive them away" [4, p.20].

In Tran Thuy Mai's *The Princess of Dong Xuan*, the theme of loss is depicted as a central motif, reflecting not only the violent upheavals of history but also the depth of individual tragedy. The wars of invasion waged by the French colonizers inflicted devastating consequences, claiming the lives of countless innocent civilians as well as loyal soldiers. Beyond the loss of human life, the characters in the novel are also confronted with broken relationships and profound spiritual suffering. Yet, running through these tragedies, the narrative simultaneously affirms the resilient and indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people-a quality that enables them to rise above grief in order to endure and continue the struggle.

The distinctive feature of Tran Thuy Mai's narrative art lies in her ability to construct an interstitial space where history and individual life intersect. Whereas many historical writers tend to lapse into rigid event-based narration, in Tran Thuy Mai's work, history becomes a backdrop against which human destinies-specific, vivid, and haunting tragedies-are illuminated. The helplessness of loyal generals or the despair of common people are not mere ancillary details but manifestations of the heavy weight of history pressing upon individual fates. This very interconnection imbues the novel with profound humanistic value: it explains the downfall of the Nguyen Dynasty not only from political and military perspectives but also by uncovering internal causes-factional division, lack of consensus in governance, and, most crucially, the severing of ties between the court and the people. Such a perspective demonstrates that Tran Thuy Mai is not merely a storyteller but also a literary thinker, one who employs her pen to engage in dialogue with history and to pose enduring questions about responsibility and the survival of a dynasty.

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4. CONCLUSION

By reconstructing the Nguyen Dynasty of the late nineteenth century within the panorama of war and internal strife, Tran Thuy Mai has transformed *The Princess of Dong Xuan* into a moving discourse of memory. The novel not only depicts the defeat of a dynasty under the pressure of foreign aggression but also exposes its internal causes: the disintegration of power, indecision in policy, and alienation from the people. More importantly, the work affirms the role of literature in preserving historical memory, enabling contemporary generations to approach the past as both a human experience and a political lesson.

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