

Research article

Resisting Hegemony: Cultural Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Jamaica in Kei Miller's Augustown

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a sustained qualitative reading of Kei Miller's Augustown to interrogate how post-colonial power structures persist in contemporary Jamaica from the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Through thematic and textual analysis, the study maps the novel's depiction of three intertwined sites of domination including cultural heritage, language, and gender reflecting how Eurocentric education, Standard-English prestige, and patriarchal institutions naturalize colonial common sense in everyday life. Findings reveal that hegemony in Augustown is reproduced not through overt coercion but through the symbolic power of institutions that police hair, accent, and domestic roles. By foregrounding language and narrative as dual battlegrounds of oppression and resistance, the thesis contributes to Caribbean literary criticism, post-colonial studies, and feminist theory. It argues that preserving cultural heritage in neo-colonial contexts requires both the recovery of marginalized traditions and the active contestation of current hegemonies, offering a model for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote linguistic plurality, gender equity, and communal agency in the Global South.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Global south, Hegemony, Kei miller, Literary criticism

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INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is a broad critical framework developed in the mid-twentieth century to examine the political, cultural, and social legacies of colonial rule. Central to this framework is the analysis of how imperial powers reshaped subjectivities and institutions through the imposition of foreign norms, values, and governance structures (Loomba, 2015). Colonial authorities sought not only territorial control but also the reformation of colonized identities through cultural erasure, the suppression of indigenous languages, and the elevation of Eurocentric epistemologies as universal truths (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* revealed that knowledge production itself functioned as a key technology of domination, systematically positioning colonized populations as inferior. These strategies legitimized imperial hierarchies whose remnants continue to influence global relations and local social formations. Recent scholarship highlights the persistence of these structures; for instance, Ahmed et al. (2020) demonstrate how settler-colonial discourse "legitimizes dispossession" by normalizing unequal power relations in contemporary texts and political rhetoric.

Within this context, hybridity—the blending of indigenous and colonial cultures—has been celebrated

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as a space of tension and creativity (Bhabha, 1994). However, hybridity is ambivalent, as it can simultaneously signal resilient rearticulation and mask ongoing asymmetries. Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" remains pertinent, highlighting the capacity of hegemonic discourse to absorb or silence resistant voices (p. 284). Similarly, Mbembe (2001) cautions that colonial logics persist in postcolonial societies, infiltrating language, education, and governance. Scholars across contexts have examined the intersections of trauma, memory, and aesthetics with power: Anwar et al. (2018) trace the afterlives of abuse in social systems; Shen et al. (2021) examine how cultural aesthetics influence linguistic expression; and Riaz et al. (2022) interrogate desire and power within aesthetic experience. Collectively, these studies underscore that hegemony operates not only through material coercion but also via affect, memory, and expressive forms.

Jamaican history illustrates the complex legacies of colonialism on political economy and cultural life, as well as ongoing postcolonial struggles. Colonized by Spain in 1494 and seized by Britain in 1655, Jamaica became central to the transatlantic slave system; enslaved Africans built a plantation economy that enriched Europe while dehumanizing Black labor (Loomba, 2015). British rule imposed economic subjugation alongside cultural dominance, erasing Taíno heritage, stigmatizing African traditions, and institutionalizing English, Christianity, and British civility as normative (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Independence in 1962 did not dissolve these hierarchies. Neo-colonial dependencies, unequal land ownership, and Westminster-style governance reproduced metropolitan models (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Young, 2001). Gendered power remains entangled with these histories; Wynter (2003) argues that colonialism codified racialized and patriarchal structures that continue to circumscribe Caribbean women's agency (p. 36).

Cultural heritage—comprising memory, values, language, and ritual—becomes a contested field in postcolonial societies. Preservation is often mediated by hegemonic institutions that privilege elite narratives and sanitized traditions (Martínez, 2017; Rosilawati et al., 2019). Heritage can either reinscribe colonial hierarchies or facilitate counter-hegemonic recovery (O'Connor, 2014). In Jamaica, the coexistence of Patois and Standard English reflects a hierarchical linguistic relationship that naturalizes inequality (McDonald, 2000). Patriarchal norms similarly valorize masculine experiences while marginalizing women's stories (Brown, 2012). Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* dramatizes this double bind, as Clare must navigate male-dominated institutions through Standard English, yet her most potent acts of resistance emerge in Jamaican Patois.

Kei Miller's *Augustown* offers a literary site for analyzing these intersections of power and heritage. The novel foregrounds oral storytelling as a counter-archive, preserving narratives that colonial curricula sought to erase. It exposes linguistic hegemony as characters oscillate between Patois and Standard English, reflecting class and racial stratification. Patriarchal authority is represented through figures such as the headmaster and the police, whose regulation of women's and children's bodies demonstrates the reproduction of gendered domination through institutional practices. By triangulating oral narrative, linguistic hierarchy, and patriarchy, *Augustown* dramatizes the persistence of hegemonic structures and the potential for resistance through vernacular memory, women's agency, and community solidarity.

The relevance of Miller's work extends beyond Jamaica. Contemporary Pakistani society faces parallel struggles with linguistic hierarchies, gendered exclusions, and postcolonial legacies. English remains a gatekeeping language in education, employment, and social mobility, often marginalizing indigenous languages and dialects such as Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto (Rahman, 2002). Similarly, patriarchal norms restrict women's agency, especially in educational and institutional contexts (Saeed, 2016). By examining the intersection of oral culture, language, and gendered experience, *Augustown* provides a comparative lens to understand how cultural memory and vernacular expression can resist structural inequalities, offering insights relevant to Pakistani society.

This study frames its analysis using Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, which conceptualizes dominance as securing consent through cultural leadership rather than coercion. Hegemony is reinforced through civil-society institutions—schools, churches, media—while the state's coercive power remains in reserve (Gramsci, 1971). Cultural critics have expanded this framework: Williams (1977) illustrates hegemony's presence in everyday life; Hall (1997) examines its manifestation in media representations

of race and class; Althusser (1971) conceptualizes institutions as “ideological state apparatuses” that reproduce labor power; Laclau and Mouffe (2001) view politics as a struggle over meaning within discourse; and Cox (1996) emphasizes the alignment of global institutions, liberal ideas, and material power in sustaining world orders. Feminist and postcolonial theorists, including Spivak (1988) and Collins (2000), reveal how race, gender, and class operate as intersecting matrices of domination. Across these perspectives, hegemony is contingent and requires continuous cultural reinforcement, leaving openings for counter-hegemonic practices. *Augustown* exemplifies these spaces, demonstrating the persistence of hegemonic power and the potential for resistance.

Aligned with this framework, the present research argues that hegemonic power in contemporary Jamaica functions through linguistic standardization, institutional discipline, and gendered exclusions, while the same domains also facilitate forms of resistance. The novel's use of Patois, valorization of oral history, and focus on female experience collectively challenge dominant “common sense,” validate marginalized heritage, and open pathways for cultural reclamation—insights that are also applicable to contemporary postcolonial societies such as Pakistan.

Research Objective

- To analyze how *Augustown* represents hegemonic control over cultural heritage through (a) oral narratives, (b) linguistic hierarchies, and (c) patriarchal norms in contemporary Jamaican society.

Research Question

- How do hegemonic structures in *Augustown* influence the preservation of cultural heritage, language practices and gender norms in contemporary Jamaican society?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Caribbean literature consistently underscores a dual dynamic: colonial power persists through the authority of written archives, prestige English, and patriarchal institutions, while the same cultural materials—storytelling, vernacular speech, and gendered voices—are mobilized as instruments of resistance. This tension between hegemony and counter-hegemony shapes the analytical framework of this study, which examines how Kei Miller's *Augustown* negotiates oral memory, linguistic dominance, and gender regulation.

Early interventions in this discourse, such as Louise Bennett's mid-twentieth-century dialect poetry, exemplify the reclamation of Creole and oral heritage. However, critics note that such interventions were ambivalent: while valorizing local speech, they also stabilized a nationalist “common sense” that preserved existing class and gender hierarchies (Branca, 2010). Subsequent writers, including Michelle Cliff, deliberately disrupted these hierarchies through formal and linguistic experimentation. Ilmonen (2015) demonstrates that nonlinear chronology, code-switching, and Afro-Caribbean myth in *Abeng, No Telephone to Heaven, and Free Enterprise* expose both the prestige economy of Standard English and the patriarchal surveillance of mixed-race female bodies. Together, these studies illuminate the triad—oral memory, linguistic dominance, and gender regulation—that frames the present research, while also illustrating how literary form can destabilize entrenched hierarchies.

Recent scholarship has extended this analysis beyond Jamaica, highlighting how linguistic hybridity and formal experimentation operate as strategies of counter-hegemony in the broader Caribbean diaspora. Igoudjil (2012) interprets Elizabeth Nunez's *Even in Paradise* as a counter-myth in which nonlinear plotting, Creole-English blends, and female narrators disrupt male-centric historiography embedded in colonial “common sense.” Similarly, Khalifa (2018) shows that Marlene Nourbese Philip's hybrid verse employs fractured grammar and mythic layering to contest the racialized authority of English while constructing a resilient diasporic identity. These studies suggest that hybridity is a sustained locus of cultural power where narrative form enacts political dissent, confirming the critical relevance of examining Miller's linguistic and narrative strategies within *Augustown*.

The institutional circulation of Caribbean literature further complicates these dynamics. Burnett (2014) observes that metropolitan literary juries often favor realist, English-only novels, whereas locally adjudicated prizes elevate Creole-rich, formally experimental texts. This prize economy demonstrates that hegemony operates not only through classrooms, churches, and media but also via global markets of cultural capital, which can either reproduce or subvert linguistic hierarchies.

Parallel studies of creative activism highlight vernacular practice as a mechanism of collective resistance. For instance, Khalil's (2017) ethnography of Karachi's Lyari Underground rap collective illustrates that code-mixed Balochi-Urdu-English lyrics memorialize local trauma and mobilize youth, functioning as an alternative archive akin to Ma Taffy's oral storytelling in *Augustown*. Similarly, Danticat's (1998) *The Farming of Bones* transforms testimonial fragments and corporeal memory into acts of communal resistance. Igoudjil (2012) conceptualizes Nunez's nonlinear narrative as a "third space" fostering solidarities across race and gender. These studies underscore the ways hybrid narrative, vernacular voice, and female authority transition from textual technique to social practice, transforming private trauma into public protest.

Taken together, the literature reveals that oral narrative, linguistic prestige, and patriarchal structures operate as intertwined mechanisms of colonial afterlife across the Caribbean. Authors respond by hybridizing voice, form, and institutional engagement to create counter-hegemonic spaces. Miller's *Augustown* builds upon this critical field, showing how Ma Taffy's folktales, embedded Patois, and the community's collective action both expose and resist contemporary Jamaican hegemonic structures. By positioning Miller within this discourse, the present study contributes to ongoing debates about the intersections of language, heritage and gender in postcolonial literary practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine Kei Miller's *Augustown* (2016) through a hegemonic lens. Qualitative analysis allows for close reading of the novel's language, structure, and themes to reveal how it reflects and contests enduring colonial power relations (Loomba, 2015; Bhabha, 1994). The study focuses on three domains: (1) preservation of Jamaican culture against linguistic and institutional dominance, (2) forms of resistance expressed through vernacular language, oral storytelling, and community action, and (3) gender dynamics within these hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interactions (Branca, 2006; Ilmonen, 2017; Igoudjil, 2017). Guided by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Ma Taffy's oral histories are analyzed as informal archives challenging state-sanctioned narratives.

Thematic and textual analysis will be applied to identify recurring motifs, narrative strategies, and linguistic patterns. Methodological rigor is ensured through:

- **Triangulation**, by cross-referencing textual evidence with scholarly literature on Caribbean culture, postcolonial identity, and hegemony (Ashcroft et al., 2000; Spivak, 1988).
- **Reflexivity**, by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive lens and potential biases in reading the text.
- **Transparency**, through systematic coding of themes and clear documentation of analytic decisions.

This approach provides a robust and contextually grounded analysis of how *Augustown* exposes, negotiates, and resists hegemonic structures in contemporary Jamaican society.

Cultural Hegemony and the Preservation of Heritage

Kei Miller's *Augustown* presents a compelling examination of cultural hegemony in post-colonial Jamaica, illustrating the persistent struggle between dominant power structures and marginalized communities seeking to preserve their cultural heritage. The novel dramatizes how colonial legacies still shape norms and institutions, reinforcing Eurocentric values while suppressing indigenous traditions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the classroom scene where Mr. Saint-Josephs explodes at a six-year-old

Rastafarian: 'Dreadlocks... Like some dirty little African from the bush, and sitting right there in front of me, so brazen with his hairstyle. No, no, no! I will not tolerate it'" (Miller, 2016). His contemptuous language equating natural Black hair with dirt and disorder shows how hegemony works through cultural means rather than direct coercion as Gramsci theorizes. The coercion soon arrives, however, when the teacher took the pair of rusty scissors and barbered the boy.. the clump of dreadlocks was suddenly in his hands like a slither of snakes" (Miller, 2016). By policing hair, the school literalizes what Gramsci calls the embedding of ruling-class ideology in everyday institutions, making Eurocentric grooming standards appear natural and inevitable.

Language itself becomes a battleground of symbolic power: the teacher justifies the assault by insisting that if children "look and dress like any madman or madwoman... what else to expect?" (Miller) , pathologizing African-derived aesthetics while positioning whiteness as tidy, rational, and civil. Yet Miller also foregrounds resistance. After news of the cutting spreads, a procession of bobo shanti Rastafari and townspeople "file in behind... another 'trodding' towards some place they have been trying to reach for over a hundred and fifty years" (Miller) , reclaiming streets and history with drums, banners, and Ethiopian colors. Drawing on Gramsci's cultural hegemony, Bourdieu's symbolic power, and Hall's cultural identity, *Augustown* critiques the suppression of local heritage while celebrating oral storytelling, patois and spirituality as counter-hegemonic forces that keep ancestral memory and the dream of flight alive.

Education and religion emerge in *Augustown* as the twin engines of cultural hegemony. In the classroom, colonial discipline polices Black bodies as much as it imparts arithmetic: Mr Saint-Josephs sputters that the Rastafari child's "Dreadlocks... Like some dirty little African from the bush, and sitting right there in front of me, so brazen with his hairstyle. No, no, no! I will not tolerate it". The school grounds themselves do the quieter work of naturalizing this contempt, for "Behind the chain-link fence is not a prison, exactly, but a pleasingly close relation". It insult and architecture turn Ng g wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial schooling into lived fact, forcing children to internalize Eurocentric respectability while estranging them from Rastafari heritage.

Christianity extends the same hegemony into the spiritual realm. Ma Taffy insists that "Every lickle yute from *Augustown* ought to know the story of the flying preacherman", yet colonial authorities once silenced that story by locking Alexander Bedward in an asylum, branding his liberation theology madness. When news of Kaia's sheared locks reaches the bobo shanti compound, an elder sums up the long history of repression: "Is like Babylon want to keep we down". Their ensuing march through *Augustown* flags aflutter in Ethiopian colors shows how oral memory and grassroots spirituality persist as counter-hegemonic forces, challenging both the school's scissors and the church's cross.

By reviving the saga of Alexander Bedward, *Augustown* shows how cultural resistance is first imagined, then pathologized, and finally pushed to the margins. From the pulpit Bedward promises that "A low-born blackman is going to rise up over Babylon" , so his expected ascent becomes a metaphor for collective liberation. Yet the colonial state moves swiftly to discredit and contain him: "On the day that Bedward was supposed to fly, the police came and arrested him. He was locked up in the madhouse, Bellevue Hospital, and he remained there for the balance of his life". Fanon calls this tactic psychic domination, and Hall notes how delegitimation works through narrative control; Miller dramatizes both by turning Bedward's flight into an "official" story of madness, while oral memory tells a very different tale.

That counter-narrative lives in *Augustown's* storytellers. Ma Taffy, keeper of the valley's unofficial archive, reminds Kaia that "Every lickle yute from *Augustown* ought to know the story of the flying preacherman". Her insistence transforms folklore into a living resource, preserving what institutions try to erase and exemplifying Hall's idea of cultural resistance through retelling.

Oral tradition functions in *Augustown* as a people's archive that counter-balances written histories shaped by colonial gatekeepers. The narrator notes that in early-twentieth-century *Augustown* "there was always ... this divide between the stories that were written and the stories that were spoken stories that smelt of snow and far-away places, and stories that had the smell of their own breath". By

voicing Bedward's suppressed history on her veranda, she turns oral storytelling into an act of cultural reclamation, preserving a version of the past that official records either mock or erase.

Language itself becomes a second front in the struggle against hegemony. When an uptown journalist arrives at Union Camp in flawless Standard English, congregants immediately sense foreign authority: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" In contrast, Ma Taffy counsels a young gunman in unvarnished patois. "Lickle bwoy, you too young. ... What you fighting is Babylon system, all them things ... that cause we not to rise" reclaiming linguistic space for the community's own idiom. Her speech, steeped in rhythm and proverb, refuses the "snow-scented" prestige of Standard English and affirms Jamaican Patois as a vehicle of resistance and identity.

Fanon argues that colonial power turns language itself into "a tool of psychological and cultural domination," and Bourdieu shows how mastery of an imperial tongue becomes convertible "linguistic capital." *Augustown* dramatizes both claims: when an uptown reporter visits the Revivalist church, congregants instantly decode his authority by the way he speaks "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?". Standard English, inherited from empire, signals access to newspapers, jobs, and respectability, while Jamaican Patois is coded as rustic or unruly. Yet Miller centres voices that refuse this hierarchy. Gina explains to her privileged boyfriend, "Yes, but that's only cause I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you..." , exposing the social performance that converts accent into advantage. By making these patois utterances the moral and emotional core of the novel, Miller upends the economy of linguistic capital: the speech that empire tried to demote becomes the carrier of memory, critique, and communal power, validating Jamaican language as a living instrument of resistance.

Spiritual practice is *Augustown's* third front of resistance, standing beside oral tale-telling and patois. Ma Taffy recalls Union Camp "a church for poor people, but they build the chapel bigger than hospital... so you can imagine that Babylon was afraid of this church" showing how Revivalism unsettles colonial authority simply by giving the valley's "poor people" a monumental sacred space. That fear resurfaces a century later when news of Kaia's shorn locks sends the bobo shanti into the streets: their silent procession soon becomes "another 'trodding' towards some place they have been trying to reach for over a hundred and fifty years". The march fuses Rastafarian ritual, Ethiopian colours, and collective memory into a living counter-liturgy that answers British hymns with drumming feet.

Rastafari voices frame the conflict in overtly political terms—"Is like Babylon want to keep we down" naming Jamaica's post-colonial state for what it still is: an arm of empire. Yet the same tradition keeps hope aloft. The narrator reminds us that when dreadlocked singers chant "*I'll fly away to Zion*," "these songs hold within them the memory of Bedward" , weaving Revivalist prophecy into reggae's promise of flight. By inscribing such faith practices at the heart of the novel, Miller validates African-derived spirituality as cultural sovereignty in action: it preserves history, galvanizes protest, and lifts a community beyond the reach of Babylon's chains.

Linguistic Hegemony and Resistance

Miller stages language as a clear line between "Babylon" and resistance. When an uptown reporter slips into the Revivalist service, the congregants spot him instantly: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" His polished Standard English, like his three-piece suit, marks him as a watcher from the centres of power—exactly the "linguistic capital" Bourdieu says converts accent into privilege.

Against that prestige, Gina explains the daily code-switch she performs: "Yes, but that's only cause I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown*, then I would sound different. And you would look on me different." Her insight lays bare Brathwaite's "linguistic imperialism": mastery of English unlocks mobility, while Patois cues condescension.

By giving narrative space to voices in patois, *Augustown* overturns the island's linguistic pecking order. An uptown journalist is unmasked the instant he opens his mouth: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" Gina then explains the code-switch she performs to appease that same world: "I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown*, then I would sound different. And you would look on me different." Yet Ma Taffy insists on the power of spoken stories that "had the smell of their own breath"

By anchoring its emotional core in patois utterances—and letting Standard English ring mainly from the mouths of teachers, reporters, and uptown elites—*Augustown* turns language itself into a battlefield where Jamaican speech survives as an audible act of decolonisation. An uptown journalist is unmasked the instant he opens his mouth: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" . Gina exposes the social cost of that hierarchy when she admits, "I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown*, then I would sound different. And you would look on me different." . Ma Taffy, however, insists that the stories "had the smell of their own breath" a sensory reminder that lived history is carried in the cadences colonial schooling tried to scrub out.

Fanon notes that colonial regimes weaponise language as a tool of psychological domination; in Jamaica that weapon was Standard English, enforced in courts and classrooms to brand Afro-Caribbean speech as crude or subversive. Miller's novel resists that legacy by privileging voices that speak in patois, demonstrating that the very idiom once demeaned as "broken" English is, in fact, the vessel of collective memory and cultural authority. Even under Babylon's gaze, the community's own stories keep being told proof that linguistic sovereignty endures where people refuse to surrender the sound of their breath.

In *Augustown*, linguistic hierarchy is audible everywhere: polished Standard English rings from the spaces of power, newspapers, classrooms, police stations while patois carries the valley's memory and pain. When an uptown journalist slips into a Revivalist service, the congregants know he is Babylon the instant he speaks: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" That same authority shapes private life, too; Gina explains how she must "change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown*, then I would sound different. And you would look on me different."

. Her boyfriend's uneasy reply—"I'm sorry that I speak good English. Would that help?" exposes fluency as a form of social capital rather than mere grammar. Against that prestige, Ma Taffy's veranda tales assert another authority; her stories, she says, "had the smell of their own breath" , reminding listeners that lived history is kept alive in the cadences colonial schooling tried to stamp out. By centering these patois voices, Miller turns language itself into a battlefield where Jamaican speech survives as an audible form of decolonisation—proof that, even under Babylon's gaze, the community's own stories will keep being told. Despite this, *Augustown* also demonstrates how language functions as a means of resistance. Ma Taffy's storytelling, told entirely in Patois, is an act of cultural defiance, preserving historical narratives that are often excluded from official histories. Oral storytelling in Caribbean societies has long served as a form of counter-hegemonic knowledge production, offering alternative perspectives that challenge colonial narratives. Stuart Hall's discussion of cultural identity as a "positioning" rather than a fixed essence is relevant here, as *Augustown* illustrates how linguistic practices shape identity formation and resistance (Hall 1997).

Augustown dramatizes Fanon's insight that colonial language politics breed self-doubt and alienation. In public arenas school, church, the street Standard English signals authority, so anyone who slips into patois risks instant dismissal as "less than." When an uptown reporter opens his mouth in the Revivalist chapel, congregants tag him at once: "Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?" The assumption that eloquent English belongs to outsiders shows how deeply the community has internalised the colonial yardstick. Gina, meanwhile, describes the psychic labor of passing for respectable: "I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people like you... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown*, then I would sound different. And you would look on me

different.”

Gina’s deft code-switching may secure her a seat at uptown tables, but it also confirms in her own words that the moment she sounds “different... you would look on me different”, her natural voice will always be weighed against Babylon’s standard and found lacking. Yet *Augustown* refuses to leave patois on the back foot. The narrator recalls an older *Augustown* where “there was...this divide between the stories that were written and the stories that were spoken stories that smelt of snow and far-away places, and stories that had the smell of their own breath”. A sensory reminder that nation language carries the warmth of living bodies, whereas English arrives air-freighted from elsewhere. The novel insists that patois is more than a badge of marginality; it is the tongue of communal memory and imaginative sovereignty, forged Brathwaite reminds us out of centuries of resistance. Thus even as characters negotiate between authenticity and acceptance, the narrative itself declares that, under Babylon’s gaze, the valley’s “breath-smelling” stories will go on being told in the language that first gave them life.

The novel’s struggle over linguistic identity reverberates far beyond the mouths of a few protagonists, mapping Jamaica’s post-colonial angst onto the everyday talk of an entire community. For Ma Taffy, patois is both compass and archive; she remembers a childhood when “there was ... this divide between the stories that were written ... and stories that had the smell of their own breath” and refuses to surrender that breath, warning Soft-Paw that the real enemy is “Babylon system”. To her, the vernacular is a bridge back to freedom morning and a shield against erasure. Younger Augustownians, groomed in classrooms where English remains the yard-stick of success, inhabit a more fragile borderland. Gina confides that she secures uptown respect only because “I know how to change the way I talk when I talking to uptown people... If you did hear me speaking to somebody in *Augustown* ... you would look on me different”, laying bare the psychic tax of self-translation. Institutional power does not hide its preferences: a visiting reporter’s polished vowels instantly betray him—“Who other than uptown people used language such as he was using?” while the same schoolmaster who shears Kaia’s dreadlocks enforces English as the badge of intelligence and respectability. By letting these collisions play out in unfiltered patois, Miller obliges readers to confront their own expectations of “proper” prose and, as Brathwaite urges, to recognise nation language as a feat of cultural survival rather than a flaw. The result is a novel that weaponises cadence itself: every time a character speaks in the valley’s salt-sweet idiom, the coloniser’s dictionary is turned inside-out and the “stories that had the smell of their own breath” keep the beat of history alive.

The novel ultimately suggests that linguistic resistance is not just about speaking a language but about redefining what is considered legitimate knowledge. In a world where Standard English is associated with intellectual authority, the act of privileging Patois in storytelling, music, and daily communication is an assertion of cultural autonomy. Ma Taffy’s voice, carrying the weight of history and resistance, embodies this reclamation, proving that language is not just a tool of oppression but also a site of empowerment.

Gender Norms and Patriarchal Control

Kei Miller’s *Augustown* interrogates the entrenchment of gender norms within post-colonial Jamaican society, exposing how patriarchal structures continue to shape social expectations, limit opportunities, and reinforce systems of control. The novel highlights the ways in which colonialism not only imposed racial and linguistic hierarchies but also embedded rigid gender roles that persist long after political independence. Through characters such as Ma Taffy and Gina, *Augustown* explores the tension between traditional gender expectations and female agency, illustrating how patriarchal control operates both overtly and insidiously. Women in the novel navigate a landscape where their voices are marginalized, their autonomy is questioned, and their resistance is often met with hostility. However, the novel also presents gender defiance as a counter-hegemonic force, offering alternative models of strength, wisdom, and survival that challenge dominant power structures.

Patriarchal ideologies in post-colonial Jamaica are deeply rooted in historical processes that privileged European, male-centered values while subjugating women to roles of domesticity and dependence. Sylvia Wynter’s critique of colonial gender constructs asserts that imperialism did not merely impose political

and economic subjugation but also dictated rigid gender norms designed to sustain European dominance (Wynter 1995). The colonial legacy of defining masculinity in terms of authority, discipline, and control while relegating femininity to passivity and service is reflected in the social structures of *Augustown*, where male figures often occupy positions of power while women's roles remain constrained. The pervasive influence of these colonial gender norms manifests in institutions such as marriage, education, and religion, each reinforcing the notion that women must conform to specific expectations or face social exclusion.

Gina's very presence in *Augustown* challenges the patriarchal script that equates womanhood with dutiful wifehood and quiet dependence. From the moment Ma Taffy realises the "child with brains" has "upped and got pregnant" and thus becomes "the greatest disappointment" Gina is marked by gossiping neighbours who hiss, "See it there! ... The higher monkey climb the more him batty expose" Boys on the fence leer, but she learns "how to lift her head up and how to meet the gaze of these boys with a look that says simply, Yes. I have learnt my lessons" . Maternal love fortifies her defiance: cupping Kaia's chin, she reminds him, "You is a lion... We stronger than all the bullshit that happen around us"

When she senses the school's violence against her son, she strides "through the streets that are named as if marking a calendar August Road, July Street, June Boulevard—towards the school" , ready to confront Babylon on his behalf. Even in private moments of despair she steels herself: "My name is Gina ... I am the bright gyal from the ghetto who going to rise out of this shit hole"

. By refusing marriage as her only sanctuary, shouldering domestic work to keep Kaia fed, and staring down every sneer, Gina converts the stigma of single motherhood into proof of autonomy, carving space for a woman's life that patriarchy never planned. Gina's experience mirrors the real-world struggles of Caribbean women who resist gendered economic and social constraints. In post-colonial societies, where economic instability often forces women into positions of dependency, autonomy becomes a radical act. This is evident in Gina's refusal to allow patriarchal institutions to dictate her worth. Her resilience can be understood through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an inherent identity but a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations (Butler 1990). By rejecting prescribed roles, Gina subverts the colonial legacy of patriarchal control, demonstrating that womanhood need not be defined by submission or sacrifice.

The novel further critiques the intersection of gender and class, illustrating how economic limitations reinforce patriarchal dominance. Women in *Augustown*, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face compounded forms of oppression, as their financial instability limits their ability to challenge the systems that marginalize them. The limited economic opportunities available to women in the novel highlight how patriarchal structures are sustained not only through ideological means but also through material conditions. This aligns with Sylvia Wynter's argument that colonial systems of power continue to shape contemporary social realities, ensuring that marginalized groups remain economically and socially disadvantaged (Wynter, 1995). The portrayal of gendered poverty in *Augustown* exposes the inescapable reality for many women who, despite their intelligence and resilience, remain restricted by a system that was never designed for their success.

Ma Taffy wields a quietly subversive power that stems from memory rather than title: the novel pictures her as the valley's living archive, "one of the stories that had the smell of their own breath" rather than the "stories that smelt of snow and far-away places" that colonial schooling prizes.

In that moment her veranda becomes a classroom beyond Babylon's reach: by retelling Bedward's banned saga in unapologetic patois, Ma Taffy restores a lineage of Black resistance that written records tried to erase. Her storytelling thus embodies an alternative form of female authority rooted in oral tradition, sustained by communal memory, and defiantly at odds with the patriarchal, Eurocentric narratives that have long silenced women's voices in post-colonial Jamaica. The erasure of women's voices in history is not unique to *Augustown*; rather, it reflects a broader pattern within post-colonial literature that seeks to recover lost narratives. The novel's emphasis on Ma Taffy's role as a knowledge-keeper challenges the

tendency to frame women's experiences as secondary to those of men. Her recollection of *Augustown's* past, particularly the story of Alexander Bedward, serves as both a critique of historical erasure and an affirmation of the importance of women's contributions to resistance movements. Bedward, a real-life historical figure whose story is woven into the novel, was a preacher and leader of a religious movement that threatened colonial authority. While his story is often told through the lens of male leadership, Ma Taffy's narration reminds the reader that women were central to these movements, not merely as followers but as active participants in shaping collective resistance.

Religious structures in the novel further exemplify how patriarchal control is sustained through ideological means. Christianity, introduced to the Caribbean through European colonization, has historically reinforced gender hierarchies that position men as leaders and women as subordinates. The depiction of religious authority in *Augustown* reflects this legacy, as church leaders exercise control over the community while reinforcing moral expectations that disproportionately burden women. Women in the novel are expected to adhere to strict codes of conduct, while men are afforded greater leniency in their actions. These double standard echoes Fanon's critique of colonial morality, which imposed rigid behavioral expectations on the colonized while excusing the excesses of the colonizers (Fanon, 1963). The church's role in upholding gender norms in *Augustown* reveals how patriarchal power is naturalized through religious doctrine, making it appear as an unquestionable truth rather than a socially constructed system of control.

Miller also explores the ways in which gender norms are policed within everyday social interactions. Women in *Augustown* are frequently scrutinized, their worth often measured by their ability to conform to traditional expectations. The gossip and judgment directed at female characters serve as mechanisms of social control, reinforcing the idea that deviation from prescribed gender roles carries consequences. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, which explains how societal norms are maintained not only through formal institutions but also through everyday social interactions that reinforce power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1991). The constant surveillance of women's behavior in *Augustown* ensures that even those who resist patriarchal expectations are acutely aware of the limitations imposed upon them.

Despite the overwhelming presence of patriarchal control, *Augustown* ultimately offers a vision of resistance and transformation. The novel does not present its female characters as passive victims but as individuals who actively negotiate their positions within an oppressive system. Gina's defiance, Ma Taffy's storytelling, and even the subtle acts of everyday resilience displayed by women in the novel all contribute to a broader narrative of resistance. This reflects the reality of gender struggles in post-colonial societies, where women continually find ways to challenge and redefine their roles despite structural limitations.

The novel's treatment of gender also suggests that resistance is not always dramatic or overt; sometimes, it is found in the quiet refusal to be erased. Ma Taffy's ability to hold onto history, Gina's insistence on raising her son on her own terms, and the collective endurance of women in *Augustown* all serve as forms of defiance against patriarchal control. This aligns with Hall's argument that cultural identity is not static but shaped through ongoing acts of resistance and self-definition (Hall, 1997). By presenting women's experiences as central to the narrative, *Augustown* disrupts the traditional gender hierarchy of historical storytelling, ensuring that the voices of its female characters are heard and valued.

Miller's novel, while deeply rooted in the specific socio-historical context of Jamaica, speaks to broader issues of gender and power in post-colonial societies. It highlights the ways in which patriarchal structures, inherited from colonial rule, continue to dictate the boundaries of female autonomy. Yet, it also demonstrates that resistance is possible, that alternative narratives can be forged, and that women's voices, no matter how often silenced, will continue to shape history.

The investigation designated Kei Miller's *Augustown* as its primary corpus and subjected the novel to detailed close reading. Contextual and critical insight was drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship on

Caribbean literature, cultural hegemony, and practices of literary resistance. Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony and Frantz Fanon's reflections on language and cultural autonomy served as the principal analytic frames, augmented by feminist postcolonial criticism and recent research on vernacular assertion within postcolonial linguistic economies. Together, these sources provided a comprehensive theoretical field within which the novel's complex negotiations with power relations were examined.

While there is considerable scholarly work on Caribbean literature and its engagement with colonial histories and cultural identities, limited research focuses on the nuanced ways that *Augustown* specifically critiques hegemonic structures through language, storytelling, and gendered resistance. Most studies on the novel have examined its historical and cultural significance broadly but have not fully explored the intersection of language and storytelling as tools for cultural preservation and anti-hegemonic resistance. Similarly, existing literature does not sufficiently analyze the role of female characters, particularly Ma Taffy, in subverting patriarchal norms and advocating for education as a form of empowerment within the context of hegemonic power dynamics.

Furthermore, while Gramsci's concept of hegemony is often applied in studies of political and cultural dominance, there is a lack of focused application of this framework to analyze the intersection of linguistic resistance and gender dynamics in Caribbean literature. By addressing these gaps, this study seeks to contribute new insights to the fields of Caribbean literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and feminist theory, offering a deeper understanding of how *Augustown* serves as a narrative of resistance and cultural reclamation in a postcolonial Jamaican context.

CONCLUSION

Kei Miller crafts *Augustown* through a hybrid narrative mode that weaves magical-realist touches, oral-history techniques, and rhythmic, almost poetic prose. His depictions of the valley and its residents balance beauty with hardship, allowing the text to register both the community's wounds and its endurance. Figures such as the unshakeable Ma Taffy and the outspoken Gina personify *Augustown's* refusal to be defined only by suffering, illustrating a collective spirit that persists in the face of continual challenge.

Augustown looks closely at what a community carries forward from its past. While the novel never hides the wounds left by slavery, poverty, and state violence, it just as firmly highlights the strength and optimism that help its people endure. By layering oral history, folklore, and social critique, Miller invites readers to think about how history, identity, and the will to resist come together. This research uses a post-colonial lens to examine the power structures that shape life in *Augustown* and, by extension, modern Jamaica. It asks how the characters deploy culture, language, and gender roles as tools of resistance to protect and reinvent their identity despite lingering colonial pressures.

Competing Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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