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## Begum Rokeya to Arundhati Roy: An Intangible Dream of Woman Emancipation

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### Abstract

Both Begum Rokeya's earlier and Arundhati Roy's more recent voices have advocated for women's freedom in essentially the same ways. Although critics have examined how they raise their voices against women's exploitation, the current situation of women's suffering when comparing Rokeya and Arundhati's dreams is not shown. In order to demonstrate a gap in their research, the study compared the conditions of women in Rokeya's literature with the state of current society by discussing Arundhati's works. This essay is written using Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as primary sources. My attempt in this paper is to demonstrate how Begum Rokeya's vision of women's independence is still a dream by referring to relevant scholarly articles and interpreting the works of Arundhati Roy.

Keywords: Begum Rokeya, Arundhati Roy, Women Emancipation, Patriarchy, Gender Bias

### 1. Introduction

Woman emancipation is the dream of the earliest feminist writer Begum Rokeya and contemporary feminist writer Arundhati Roy. Begum Rokeya has devoted her entire life to enlightening the then-patriarchal society so that it can permit its women to be independent. Arundhati Roy, however, is still fighting for the same cause today since the struggle is far from over. Begum Rokeya was the torchbearer of the movements for women's equal rights and women's

education that began in the late 19th century but her dreams still remain unfulfilled. Her main goals are to uphold women's rights and include women in the educational community. It can be argued that education for every woman is nearly assured more than a century later. People no longer argue against women's education because it is very common in today's culture. However, education alone does not guarantee freedom. As a result, Arundhati showed up in the scene. Freedom is therefore Arundhati's top priority.

The study's tone has been profoundly shaped by Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in order to make it more authentic and relevant. *Sultana's Dream*, a utopian fiction published in 1905, deals with women's rights and education. The book responds to the patriarchal society of the time. Rokeya has often produced works of a similar nature with the hope that society may one day be free of violence against women. For instance, Mahmud (2016) rightly points out that Rokeya in *Padmarag* just widens Sultana's Dream's canvas. She describes a community that was formed and is run by women, where women of many nationalities and religions who have suffered from patriarchal oppression in the past can make positive changes in their lives via active participation in society. Besides, Arundhati Roy is responding to the almost same patriarchal attitude once more after a century. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a book that takes place in a patriarchal society. Its key topics include breaking the law, illicit relationships, the shifting social order, the mistreatment of women, etc. In accordance with the unwritten societal standards, this tale demonstrates how men and women are treated in different ways. Women who rebel against men and society are treated as the 'other' and will suffer the consequences. Ghosh (1999) has argued that the purpose of *The God of Small Things* is to write about an unfair, male-dominated society that horribly mistreats women and members of low castes. It is true that we frequently read literary works by many authors that discuss the lives of women under the patriarchal regime. But this paper will argue through some contemporary works of Arundhati Roy that Rokeya's vision of women's emancipation is intangible. The writing of this paper is done using the close reading technique, a method introduced in the 1940s. Close reading is a method that concentrates on the meaning found within the text itself. The text itself becomes evidence for a certain reading during close reading. I have briefly summarised the literary work using this method, quoted some important parts, introduced the quotes, and then explained them.

Women's emancipation-related topics have been studied by numerous researchers, who have produced a variety of findings. Particularly, a great deal of study has been done on Arundhati Roy and Begum Rokeya. It has been stated by Hariharasudan and Gnanamony (2017) that through her female characters from three different eras, Arundhati Roy depicts the plight of women in *The God of Small Things*. The diverse feelings of identity among the many generations of women are likewise infused with antagonism and division in the story. The conflict between the older and younger generations is also produced. Politics and family traditions both play a big part in how women are treated unfairly. Social restrictions have become so strong that they justify the mistreatment of women. This is due to the largely patriarchal social systems found in the majority of cultures. Despite Arundhati's self-described feminist stance, her novel undermines this idea.

Elahi (2017) said that the unwavering language of protest used by Begum Rokeya against the mistreatment of women by patriarchal society shook the very foundation of it and sparked a growing call for reform. Her voice of opposition persisted despite intense public scrutiny and debate, frequently creating a difficult situation for ongoing efforts for women. Instead, she made headway with a fresh outlook and arrived at the vantage point of feminist radicalism. Her feminist theory of social enlightenment and voice for the liberation of women have endured and will endure indefinitely.

Although the above studies have dealt with the works of Begum Rokeya and Arundhati Roy, the issues of women's emancipation in current society by referring to their works in a paper remain less addressed and the discussion of them as a whole demands much attention and investigation. This paper, thus, attempts to mitigate the gap by contributing to the existing literature and showing the current conditions of women's world.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 Workplace Discrimination

*Sultana's Dream*, a feminist utopian short story, provides a glimpse into an alternate reality where women hold power and men are confined to the seclusion of their homes. While the story imagines a world of gender reversal, it also subtly addresses real-world issues, including workplace discrimination. This part of this paper delves into the depiction of workplace discrimination in

*Sultana's Dream* and explores its relevance in contemporary society by referring to the works of Arundhati Roy.

In *Sultana's Dream*, the author presents Ladyland, a utopian society where women occupy positions of authority and men live a sheltered life. While the portrayal of gender roles is reversed in this fictional world, the story uses this reversal to highlight issues faced by women in the patriarchal society of the author's time. By illustrating the stark differences between Ladyland and reality, Rokeya emphasizes the injustices women endured at the hands of workplace discrimination during that era. In Ladyland, women are at the helm of the workforce, occupying key positions in various fields. From scientists and engineers to political leaders and educators, women are actively engaged in professional pursuits. However, even in this seemingly egalitarian society, signs of workplace discrimination emerge.

In Ladyland, women have the freedom to work and pursue their passions, but they are often confined to gendered roles. The story highlights how women excel in nurturing fields like medicine and education, while men are perceived to be less suited for such professions. This stereotype perpetuates the idea that certain jobs are inherently more suitable for one gender over another, limiting individual choice and career opportunities. While Ladyland empowers women, it also deliberately excludes men from participating in the workforce. This exclusion mirrors the reality of many women who, in Rokeya's time and even beyond, found themselves barred from various professions dominated by men. The lack of male representation in Ladyland draws attention to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in the real world. The story subtly portrays how the society of Ladyland views men with condescension and even ridicule. The men are seen as incompetent and incapable of handling the demands of the workforce, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that have long plagued women in patriarchal societies. In real-world workplaces, women have faced similar prejudices, battling stereotypes and proving their worth in male-dominated industries. As Sultana says, "we have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana" (Rokeya, 2005, p. 5).

*Sultana's Dream* may be set in a fictional world, but it remains relevant in the context of contemporary society, where workplace discrimination continues to persist in various forms. In many parts of the world, women still earn less than their male counterparts for performing the

same jobs. The wage gap persists, illustrating how women's work is often undervalued compared to men's, reminiscent of the economic disparities portrayed in *Ladyland*. Despite significant progress, women continue to be underrepresented in top leadership positions across industries and governments. The story's portrayal of men's exclusion from the workforce mirrors the glass ceiling that women face when attempting to ascend to powerful positions. Just as *Ladyland* assigned gendered roles to its inhabitants, modern society continues to perpetuate stereotypes about certain professions being more suitable for one gender. Women still find themselves struggling to break into male-dominated fields and face resistance in doing so. *Sultana's Dream* may have been written more than a century ago, but its exploration of workplace discrimination holds a mirror to the persistent gender disparities that prevail in contemporary society. Through its utopian vision, the story underscores the importance of challenging traditional gender norms and promoting equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender. By recognizing and addressing workplace discrimination, we take a step closer to building a truly inclusive world where everyone can realize their full potential, irrespective of their gender.

*The God of Small Things* is a powerful and evocative novel that delves into the lives of the twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, and their tumultuous experiences growing up in post-colonial India. Beyond its central themes of love, family, and societal norms, the novel also sheds light on the pervasive issue of workplace discrimination. This work explores how Roy's masterpiece vividly portrays the various forms of workplace discrimination faced by the characters and reflects the harsh realities of India's social and economic landscape during that era. Set in the southern state of Kerala during the 1960s, *The God of Small Things* reflects a society deeply entrenched in rigid social hierarchies and class distinctions. Against this backdrop, characters in the novel find themselves subject to discrimination not only based on their caste and social status but also within the confines of their workplaces.

In comparison to *Sultana's Dream*, *The God of Small Things* is a much more recent book and depicts workplace prejudice much more harshly and clearly. In *The God of Small Things*, both men and women experience workplace discrimination. In the novel, characters belonging to the lower castes, such as Velutha, face severe discrimination in the workplace. Velutha, a talented carpenter, works in the pickle factory owned by the twins' family. Despite his expertise and commitment to his craft, he is relegated to a position of subservience due to his lower social status,

a portrayal that mirrors the historical caste-based discrimination prevalent in many parts of India. The novel also exposes the exploitation of labor in the pickle factory, where workers are subject to long hours, low wages, and inhumane working conditions. This form of workplace discrimination highlights the vulnerability of workers, especially those with limited access to resources and opportunities for economic advancement. Gender roles in *The God of Small Things* are heavily delineated, and women face discrimination in the workforce as well as in their daily lives. Ammu, the twins' mother, experiences the harsh reality of being a divorced woman trying to find work to support her family. Her options are limited, and she is paid poorly for her work, a reflection of the gender-based wage disparity and limited opportunities for women during that time.

The novel depicts how workplace discrimination strips individuals of their dignity and self-worth. Velutha's wrongful arrest and brutal treatment at the hands of the police demonstrate the dehumanizing consequences of discrimination, robbing individuals of their basic rights and humanity. Although *The God of Small Things* is set in the past, its themes of workplace discrimination continue to resonate in contemporary society, both in India and across the globe. Despite legal progress, caste-based discrimination persists in many parts of India. Marginalized communities still face unequal opportunities in education and employment, and their social status often hinders their access to better job prospects.

In modern economies, labor exploitation remains a pressing concern, particularly in industries with minimal regulation and oversight. Workers in informal sectors and low-wage jobs frequently endure poor working conditions, long hours, and inadequate compensation. Gender-based workplace discrimination continues to be a significant issue worldwide. Women still encounter wage gaps, lack of representation in leadership positions, and discrimination based on stereotypes and biases. *The God of Small Things* offers a poignant and unflinching portrayal of workplace discrimination, intertwining the personal struggles of its characters with broader societal issues. Arundhati Roy's novel serves as a reminder that discrimination, in its various forms, can pervade workplaces and deeply impact individuals' lives. By acknowledging the systemic barriers and challenging the status quo, we move closer to creating workplaces that are fair, inclusive, and conducive to the growth and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their caste,

gender, or social background. As readers, we must confront these themes and work collectively towards building a more equitable and just world for everyone.

## 2.2 Gender Inequality

Rokeya (2005) asserts in *Sultana's Dream* that man is the lord and master in India and they keep all of their rights and advantages and keep the women confined to the zenana. The situation is still the same after a century. In our society, men are treated as masters. For instance, in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy accurately captures the actual situation of a patriarchal society. Sheba (2021) says since men are in charge and make decisions regarding the life of the women in the Ayemenam family, they do not have a lot of independence. As a result of Pappachi's attitude that a man should have authority over a woman, their relationship is one that is male-dominated. Marriage represents to him the male's dominance over the female. Consequently, he views his wife as a slave.

Gender inequality has been a topic that Rokeya has addressed, and it is one of the main themes in *Sultana's Dream*, a book that was published in the early 20th century. In the literature, this subject is still quite relevant. Throughout the story, Rokeya portrays gender assumptions and gender stereotypes. In *Sultana's Dream*, Sister Sara said (Rokeya, 2005, p. 7) that 'our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one.' Women are the representatives of the victims of patriarchal tyranny that was prevalent in Rokeya's own society and still exists in modern society.

*The God of Small Things*, a novel that is relatively new, includes gender assumption as one of its prominent issues. In order to show how gender assumption negatively affected the woman of India, we can quote a quote from the novel *The God of Small Things* "Ammu completed her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and move to Ayemenem. Papacy insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was very little a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for Marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the

housework” (Roy, 1997, p. 39). The patriarchal force holds that since women are solely responsible for taking care of the household, they do not need to pursue higher education. In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Ammu, a victim of misery and gender discrimination, describes the suffering that women in India at this period experienced. “Estha’s full name was Esthappen Yako. Rahel’s was Rahel. For the Time Being they had no surname because Ammu was considering reverting to her maiden name, though she said that choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice.” (Roy, 1997, p. 37). Ammu refers to Estha as Esthappen Yako and Rahel as just Rahel. Rahel's mother, Ammu, decided against giving her a last name because adding the name of her husband or father would not alter the circumstances or elevate her to the same status as the man. This indicates that women have no control over what will be in their best interests. To show gender inequality in the novel, Mardiyani and Tawami (2022) have said that Papachi is more concerned about Chacko, Ammu's brother. As a man with the benefit of receiving a greater education than Ammu, Chacko was treated differently by Papachi than Ammu. “Chacko had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and was permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was.” (Roy, 1997: 38). That statement claims that Chacko attended Oxford University and that everyone is proud of him, including Papachi. The fact that their parents did not treat them equally and as a result, there is gender imbalance, is a key distinction between Chacko and Ammu. This evidence all speaks to Ammu's subordination and gender discrimination. Ammu not only had to battle for all she desired in life, but she also had to do so while carrying the burden of gender inequality and discrimination against women. Both in her relationship and at home, she campaigned against inequity.

### 2.3 Violence against Women

Begum Rokeya, a prominent Bengali feminist writer of the early 20th century, fearlessly confronted the theme of violence against women in her writings. Through her stories, essays, and novels, Rokeya shed light on the various forms of violence inflicted upon women, exposing the oppressive systems that perpetuated their subjugation. Her works aimed to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and advocate for women's rights. She highlighted the physical abuse endured by women at the hands of their husbands or family members. In her writings, she depicted instances of domestic violence, beatings, and even honor killings. By portraying these acts of



brutality, Rokeya aimed to bring attention to the stark reality faced by many women and the urgent need for change.

Rokeya delved into the emotional and psychological violence that women faced within patriarchal societies. She explored the impact of restrictive gender roles, oppressive traditions, and societal expectations on women's mental well-being. Through her stories, she showcased the damaging effects of emotional abuse, such as gaslighting, humiliation, and constant belittlement. She unveiled the systemic violence and discrimination experienced by women in society. She depicted the ways in which women were marginalized, silenced, and denied access to education, employment, and decision-making processes. Rokeya's writings exposed the limitations imposed on women's agency, autonomy, and freedom, shedding light on the power structures that perpetuated their oppression.

Rokeya's writings were not limited to depicting the violence against women; they also emphasized women's resistance and empowerment. She encouraged women to challenge societal norms, fight for their rights, and seek education as a means to emancipation. Rokeya's narratives often portrayed strong female characters who defied societal expectations and confronted the violence perpetrated against them. As Sister Sara says, "as a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?"(Rokeya, 2005, p. 5). Through her writings, Begum Rokeya sought to create awareness about the pervasive violence against women and inspire social change. She advocated for women's rights, education, and equal opportunities, aiming to dismantle the systems that perpetuated their oppression. Her works continue to be relevant today, providing a powerful critique of gender-based violence and inspiring generations to work toward a more just and equitable society. Since Rokeya's dreams have not been fully realized, her writings are still important today. In a sense, she has created a platform for activists like Arundhati Roy to speak out against injustice.

In *The God of Small Things*, the theme of violence against women is a prominent and disturbing element. Roy portrays the multifaceted forms of violence inflicted upon women, exploring the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that perpetuate their subjugation. The novel unflinchingly reveals the devastating consequences of gender-based violence on women's lives and highlights the urgent need for societal change.

Roy depicts instances of domestic violence within the novel, particularly through the character of Ammu. She endures physical and emotional abuse from her husband, Baba, which serves as a chilling portrayal of the power dynamics within their relationship. This violence not only affects Ammu but also leaves a lasting impact on her children, further underscoring the cycle of harm perpetuated by domestic violence. The novel explores the violence of societal judgment and discrimination faced by women who dare to challenge societal norms. Characters like Ammu and Velutha face the wrath of a conservative society that seeks to punish those who transgress established gender roles. This societal violence manifests in ostracization, verbal abuse, and the denial of basic rights and opportunities.

Roy also tackles the theme of sexual violence and objectification of women in the novel. The character of Sophie Mol experiences sexual harassment from an older male family friend, highlighting the vulnerability of women to such predatory behavior. Roy exposes the pervasive culture of objectification, demonstrating how it dehumanizes women and perpetuates violence against them. Roy delves into the internalized violence that women can inflict upon themselves and each other due to the constraints of patriarchy. Characters like Baby Kochamma embody the internalized misogyny resulting from societal conditioning, perpetuating harmful beliefs and actions against women. This exploration of internalized violence highlights the complex ways in which patriarchy can infiltrate and harm women's lives. Through her depiction of violence against women in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy exposes the insidious nature of gender-based violence. She challenges the reader to confront the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that enable and normalize such violence. By highlighting the multifaceted dimensions of violence, Roy urges society to address these issues, break the cycle of oppression, and create a safer and more equitable world for women. The restlessness of our culture is thus demonstrated by her storytelling and character portrayals.

#### 2.4 Male Dominance

*Sultana's Dream*, a thought-provoking novella, provides a captivating critique of patriarchal norms and gender roles. This groundbreaking work challenges traditional gender dynamics and presents an alternative world where women hold power and agency. Through the lens of *Sultana's Dream*, we explore the theme of patriarchy and its consequences, offering a vision

of a more egalitarian society. In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya exposes the oppressive power dynamics of patriarchy. The story is set in Ladyland, a matriarchal utopia, where men are confined to the "zenana," a secluded space, and women lead society. Rokeya describes that incident in a conversation between Sultana and Sister Sara, "Where are the men? I asked her. In their proper places, where they ought to be" (Rokeya, 2005, p. 4). In another place, Sister Sara says, "We shut our men indoors" (Rokeya, 2005, p. 5). By inverting gender roles, she emphasizes the absurdity of patriarchy and its restrictions on women's freedom and potential. She challenges the idea that men are naturally superior and women inherently submissive, urging readers to question and dismantle these entrenched beliefs.

Rokeya's narrative challenges traditional gender stereotypes prevalent in society. In Ladyland, women are portrayed as intelligent, assertive, and capable of making decisions. They occupy positions of power and actively contribute to the progress of their society. Rokeya emphasizes the importance of education and intellectual pursuits for women, subverting the notion that their sole purpose is domesticity. Through her portrayal of Ladyland, she advocates for the recognition and empowerment of women beyond their conventional roles. In addition, *Sultana's Dream* serves as a critique of male dominance and its consequences. She highlights the destructive aspects of patriarchy, such as wars and conflicts perpetuated by men. In contrast, Ladyland thrives in peace and harmony, emphasizing the potential for a more compassionate and inclusive society when women take the lead. She encourages readers to question the hierarchical power structures enforced by patriarchy and envision a world where equality and cooperation prevail.

Through *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya presents a vision for gender equality and social change. She challenges readers to imagine a world where women's voices are heard, their contributions acknowledged, and their rights respected. By creating Ladyland, a society free from patriarchal constraints, Hossain inspires readers to strive for a more just and equitable reality. Moreover, *Sultana's Dream* stands as a powerful feminist work that critiques patriarchal norms and envisions a society where women are liberated from the shackles of gender-based oppression. Begum Rokeya's novella challenges traditional power dynamics, breaks gender stereotypes, and highlights the destructive consequences of male dominance. By providing a glimpse of Ladyland, she invites readers to reflect on the possibilities of a world where equality, empathy, and inclusivity reign.

*Sultana's Dream* remains a timeless piece of feminist literature, igniting conversations and inspiring us to dismantle patriarchal structures in pursuit of a more equitable future.

In our modern society, oppressive power dynamics, gender stereotypes, male domination, and gender inequity all actively exist. Rokeya's literary fight could not completely end malpractices. We frequently hear the echo of suffering. In reality, if all of the platforms speak out against patriarchal conventions, women's freedom may finally be fully achieved. Therefore, Arundhati Roy has begun her campaign to transform this staid, unchanging, and repressive society by making use of nearly all important platforms to ensure that women's views are heard.

*The God of Small Things*, a poignant novel, delves into the theme of patriarchy, exposing the pervasive influence it holds over individuals and society. Set against the backdrop of post-colonial India, the novel portrays the complexities and consequences of patriarchy, unraveling the lives of its characters and the oppressive systems that confine them. Through vivid storytelling and sharp social commentary, Roy shines a spotlight on the destructive power dynamics perpetuated by patriarchy and offers glimpses of resistance and resilience. Roy skillfully portrays the rigid gender roles enforced by patriarchy, which restrict the lives and aspirations of its characters. The novel presents a stark contrast between the expectations placed on men and women, showcasing how the patriarchal system limits both genders. Men are burdened with societal pressures of masculinity, while women face the weight of traditional roles as submissive wives and dutiful daughters. Roy's narrative exposes the suffocating nature of these roles and calls attention to the stifled potential and unfulfilled desires they engender. *The God of Small Things* depicts the darker side of patriarchy, shedding light on the violence and control that often accompany it. The male characters in the novel, influenced by patriarchal norms, exercise their authority through physical and emotional abuse. Roy underscores the devastating impact of this violence on women, highlighting the cycles of trauma and subjugation they endure. By exploring the consequences of patriarchy, Roy invites readers to confront the systemic injustices that perpetuate such abuse.

Amidst the suffocating grasp of patriarchy, Roy weaves threads of resistance and subversion. The novel's female characters, such as Ammu and Baby Kochamma, challenge societal expectations and strive for personal agency. They refuse to conform to prescribed gender roles, expressing their desires and pursuing relationships outside the bounds of societal approval. Roy's portrayal of these acts of resistance encourages readers to question patriarchal norms and consider

alternative paths towards liberation. *The God of Small Things* examines the far-reaching consequences of patriarchy, both for individuals and society as a whole. Roy's narrative shows how patriarchy perpetuates a cycle of oppression, shaping the lives of characters like Ammu and Velutha, and ultimately leading to tragedy. However, amidst the turmoil, the novel offers glimpses of redemption and resilience, reminding readers of the potential for change and liberation from patriarchal constraints.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy confronts the theme of patriarchy head-on, weaving a tapestry of characters and experiences that expose its suffocating grip on individuals and society. Through her storytelling prowess, Roy highlights the oppressive gender roles, violence, and control perpetuated by patriarchy. Simultaneously, she offers moments of resistance and redemption, inspiring readers to challenge these oppressive systems and envision a world where the constraints of patriarchy are dismantled, and individuals are free to live authentically and without fear.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to wrap up the discussion by saying that nearly 90 years after Rokeya's passing, domestic violence and the murder of women for dowry are still frequent occurrences, and women's lives are still shaped by the choices and actions of the men in their lives. Parents still refuse to send their daughters to school out of fear of sexual harassment or violence. The zenana is still there today, more than a century after *Sultana's Dream* was originally published—not physically, but in people's thoughts and attitudes. The struggle is far from over. Moreover, current feminist authors like Arundhati Roy express the same anguish in their books. It is clear that the dream of women's independence remains a fantasy.

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