

OFFRED AS THE VICTIM OF TOTALITARIANISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This study uses descriptive qualitative method which focusing on the literary work in the novel and interpretation on the analysis. The main data is taken from the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood. This subject of study focus on the influences of totalitarianism held in the Republic of Gilead and how Offred resists totalitarianism in the novel. In order to analyze the text, this study uses the theory of Totalitarianism by Friedrich and Brzeziński and Hannah Arendt. The result of this analysis depicts the political system of totalitarianism in Gilead influences their societies, especially Offred and the way to resist against the regime. The features of totalitarianism are used to depict the characteristics of totalitarianism that happen in Gilead society. The totalitarianism ideology brings Offred's action to resist against it.

Keywords: Totalitarianism, Resistance, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

INTRODUCTION

Politics and religious norms are two common things used to control every aspect of societies. In some cases, politics in government establishes state religions and adopts laws with the origin of religion, sometimes even claims to have divine power. In *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, the government in the place used as setting uses a strict totalitarian system whose laws and theocracy are based on fundamental interpretation of the Christian Bible, especially the Old Testament. The literal meaning of "Theocracy" is the rule of God. Whereas in contextual sense it, a term that refers to a state dominated by a religious leaders. However, God is not known to rule the worldly government directly. Words in the strictest sense are usually understood by a priest as rules that have to be applied in government. Other than a priest, it can also be a self-appointed group that claims to speak and act in the name of God. While, Totalitarianism system is a government concept that the citizen should be totally subject to an absolute state authority.

The Handmaid's Tale tells about a handmaid named Offred. She is a handmaid recruited in the Republic of Gilead. The Republic of Gilead government in America applied the totalitarianism and theocratic because Gilead experience an extreme decrease in reproduction rates, so they claim women's bodies as political devices in order to gain control of reproduction and humanity. This system forces all women to lose jobs, lose the right to education, and many other basic rights. Most of them are shipped to the Rachel and Leah's Re-education Centre known as the Red Centre to get brainwashed before they are recruited to be handmaid. Handmaids are given duty to give birth to children who later are given to elite couples that have problem in fertility. Aunt Lydia looks after all the women in Red Centre, delivers speeches about how the women in the centre ought to behave towards men, and about their only duty of giving birth to children they will never own. Through this system, women are forced to obey the government rules, otherwise they will get punished. They should bow to men and their ideas and thoughts are strictly limited since access to literature is limited. The government uses readings of certain Biblical texts to convince women that their nature is to be subordinate to men. Using this system, they created a society where women become subhuman and are reduced to their only biological means, reproduction and fertility.

The novel *The Handmaid's tale* is written by Margaret Atwood. She is a Canadian writer, born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada. She graduated a bachelor degree in English from Victoria College at University of Toronto in 1961 and master degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Also, Harvard becomes one of many institutions to award her an honorary degree. She is internationally known author who has written award winning novel, short story, poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and children books.

The concept of totalitarianism describes a government that takes total or maximum control over every aspect of public's private life. The citizens' rights are all taken away by this totalitarian system. Nobody is able to run away from the system and they cannot do anything freely. Once they disobey the rules of the government, they will get punished. The story of this novel is like to be forewarning for the today's readers and alerting to the precariousness of the democratic world order. The tendencies in the democratic that lead to the imposition of the theocratic and totalitarian order are told in *the handmaid's tale* novel.

METHODS

The source of the data that used in this study is mainly on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood's. The analysis of the study will be presented as quotations, description, dialogues and monologues. From the novel then followed by critical explanation from the point of view of literature study. The data collection will be focused on the main character that influences the government system. The elements that will be analyzed such as plot, setting, conflict, characters and the others. Those characters will be analyzed into this thesis by using some theories by the experts. There are also some supporting theories guiding this study into good study. The methods of this study will be divided to intrinsic and extrinsic approaches.

Intrinsic approach in this study is use a close reading that focus on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Close reading is the main term to get valid data and evidence from the quotations, monologues, dialogues and description that related to the statement of problem and purpose of the study. The data will be analyzed using totalitarianism system to reveal the influence and how Offred as handmaid became the victim and resist against theocratic totalitarianism in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood's.

While, extrinsic approach in this study will be focused on other subject of the study. To analyze the topic, this study will focus on Government system, especially totalitarian system. The theories will be collected from some experts, and then applied to answer statement of the problems.

The Sosiology of Literature

To analyze this study, the researcher is using the sociology of literature as the main theme to get the theory. The sociology of literature is the study that focuses its attention on the relationship between the social structure and literary work in which it is created. There is a reciprocal relationship between social structure and literary phenomena; this reveals that the existence of literary creation has a determined social situation. The study sociology of literature is very useful for understanding socio-economic situations, the system of the social and political organization, and political issues. Literature sociology is a literary branch that aims at the relationship between literary works and their social context. Sociology itself is a systematic study about economic, social and political systems. According to Giddens, he stated that sociology is the study of human social life, groups, and societies :

“...the study about human social life, groups, and societies. It is compelling, having as its subjects matter our behavior as social beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of the global social process” (Giddens, 2006).

Therefore this theory is connected to political issues. So this study uses Sociology of literature to explain the political system because it is the branch of sociology of literature. There is a political system that can be easily categorized into two main types, including Dictatorship or totalitarian societies, Democratic societies. Then each of these two basic forms has several specific variations, for example, totalitarian societies. According to Carl Friedrich, he defined the political systems as involving four basic elements: Totalitarian ideology is a political doctrine that all of societies obey. Then secret police, that there exists an ideological police system

operates to uphold the existing political order as opposed to the simple upholding of a legal order. A single party organization, that the party has committed itself, be it communism, fascism or anything, to the expression of a particular doctrine of politics. The last is monopoly control and all areas of society-economic, political and ideological. Totalitarian regimes are economically and politically corrupt, as the exercise of power is limited and energy does not turn into power (Friedrich and Brzeziński, 1956). So, this theory guide to analyzing how social picture in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel.

Totalitarianism in Its Relationship with Theocracy

In its history, totalitarianism is closely related to theocracy. The government controls its society uses the values of religion. So, this study use totalitarianism theory to analyze. The totalitarianism theory has connected with the novel's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the problems. Totalitarianism is political concept of government system which restricts individual opposition to the state. That system considered as the most extreme form of authoritarianism. In the 20th century, the widespread use of mass media made it possible to reach all aspect citizens' lives. The totalitarian leader use secret police to create a sense of fear among people and destroy the opposition. Totalitarianism opposed the highest values created by Western democracies that are individual values, freedom, and human dignity. Totalitarian leaders contrive a method to control and persuasion the citizen, there are included the use of indoctrination, religious or ethnic persecution, terror, censorship and propaganda.

According to Friedrich, Totalitarianism is a concept that centers on the regime's efforts to rearrange and transform the society under its control in the frame of its ideology in all aspects of citizen's life. Under its control, it's argued that the world and social can change without limits, because their activities which rules is claim transformed into political action (Friedrich and Brzeziński, 1956).

Besides understanding by Friedrich and Brzezinski, Hannah Arendt also one of the literary feat on the idea of totalitarianism. According to Hannah Arendt totalitarianism deals with political system that installs political oppression, tyranny, and dictatorship to the system (Arendt, 1962). She approaches totalitarianism by emphasizes the difference between totalitarian and tyrannies form of government. She also emphasizes the importance of the personality cult of terror to understand the totalitarian phenomenon. The totalitarian system is the opposite of a democratic system. In this system the every individual get total control from the government, they cannot do anything free.

Hannah Arendt explained there are four characteristics of totalitarianism: the leader, propaganda, terror, and indoctrination. Totalitarian leader act as the motor that swings it into motion, and which used to frighten their members. Terror as the execution of an act of movement whose ultimate objective is not the welfare of men or the interests of one human being but the production of human beings, eliminates individuals, for the sake of the species, sacrifices "parts" in the sake of the "whole" (Arendt, 1962). When it is able to separate the moral individual from individualistic escape and take conscious choices that are totally questionable and equivocal, totalitarian terror reaches its horrible win (Arendt, 1962).

Meanwhile, theocracy is a government run by religious leader. The first term of theocracy appeared in Josephus' texts, the other is thorough the study of his job that required for an assessment of the roots of this idea. In order to reflect the theocracy notion as an alternative to the classical governmental model, Josephus combines the

early political and legal theory with Jewish social and religious values. Josephus criticized and insisted the instability and tyranny in imperial rule. Instead, a permanent policy must be constructed on a basis of law. Theocracy is a system by restricting the function of people and relying instead on sacred legislation. Despite the violence execute over this period, or its subsequent conversion, Josephus's Theocracy reflects the constitutional system intended with attention to liberty and legitimacy. Josephus as a first-century Jewish historian he stated:

But our legislator had no regard for any such form, but ordered our government to be what could be called theocracy by a strained expression, by assigning authority and power to God and by convincing everyone to look to Him, the authors of everything good, that is to say the good of all humanity or of every one in general and of everything they ought to be, in common. He told them that in either our external behaviour or in our inner thoughts, it was impossible to escape from God's observation (Josephus, 1905).

A study of Josephus's antiquity reaffirmation of the Bible showed that he systematically adjusted certain parts of the Bible to represent his unique political philosophy. Josephus underlines some various vital troops on governance in these sections, including the aristocratic (Republican) government's preference, the devaluation of monarchy and the promotion of the High Priest and Gerousia's (the council of the elders) judicial role. Moreover, Josephus also continuously exposes the vast danger of lawlessness which undermines a political system on greater grounds. Most strikingly, Josephus advances the rule of legislation over the rule of man over and over again.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* novel shows The Republic of Gilead is Governed by a Fundamentalist Christian theocracy, is called church state regime (Atwood, 1985). Theocracy is an ancient type of government, like monarchy. There is no legal distinction between church and state. The government claims to be led by God.

Concept of Resistance

Resistance is a struggle against the existing power, generally designated as legitimate by a movement. On the other hand, resistance simply defined as simply to act against. Resistance is an integral part of power relationships, domination, and subjugation can be viewed from different ideological points of view. There are numerous factors to build resistance, according to Robbins & Judge. All influences can be divided into two main which are individual sources and organizational sources. Individual sources of resistance arise from basic characteristics such as attitudes, personalities, needs, and desires. Specific examples of these individual sources include habit, security, economic factors, fear or the unknown and selective processing of information. Habits refer to programmed responses or the propensity of an individual to respond in a systematic or reprehensive manner. Security refers to the need for a person to feel safe in their environment and position with the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2010:247).

ANALYSIS

Totalitarian System in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Totalitarianism has become important studies to analyze because it depicts how the government regulates the overall aspect of the public and private life of society. Then theocracy as a guideline for governance is to use religious values. Gilead applied the totalitarianism and theocratic system because Gilead has a decrease in reproduction rates crisis, so they used women's bodies as political devices to gain control of reproduction and humanity

According to the ideology, this situation happens to the society in Gilead, especially it happens to Offred. Offred is one of a citizen in the Republic of Gilead. This story based on the point of view of Offred. She tells about her flashback as she can work, lived with her husband and her daughter, and she can do what her want. Then, totalitarian systems appear and make her have no freedom. Her separated from her husband and her daughter, the military caught her, when her want to try escape. Then, the military sent her to the Red Centre to get brainwashing to be a Handmaid.

The Influences of Totalitarianism toward Offred

In *The Handmaid* Margaret Atwood's novel, the government in place is used as an arrangement using a strict totalitarian system whose laws and theocracy are based on fundamental interpretations, especially the Old Testament. The literal meaning of "Theocracy" is the rule of God. A system used by Gilead when in a totalitarian state to ensure control of its people is simply the political manipulation of women. They guarantee that people will reevaluate their placement in society and their rankings, forcing each individual to reprogram the meaning of their freedom in a political country.

The role of the Handmaid is compared to do and Bilhah, the slave girl of Rachel and Leah, Jacob's wives, who were told by her employer to get in touch with their husbands to give birth to their offspring. This group consists of fertile women who are forced to give birth to children for couples from the high society who are unable to produce healthy children due to severe pollution and sexually transmitted diseases. Handmaids are reproductive machines. If the child is successful in giving birth, Handmaids are given the temporary right to care for the baby, to obtain breast milk. After that, she will be transferred to another elite couple who wants descent. Having been able to give birth, she will not change her status to unwomanly. The life and suffering of Handmaids is an antonym of emancipation. This is the statement from Bible below.

"And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. Genesis, 30:1-3" (Atwood, 1985).

The totalitarian theocracy in the Atwood novel is made by religious extremists believing that women must be given a traditional role as child caregivers and domestic helpers. Therefore, the Children of Jacob have ideologies close to Christian

fundamentalist groups in the 19th and 20th centuries. The originality of totalitarianism is terrible, not because certain latest concepts have come into the world, but because their actions are the cessation of all our traditions, they have exploded our political thinking category and our moral norms.(Arendt, 1962).

Totalitarianism showed the total control from the government to their society, especially the handmaid's, so it has an impact on the handmaid. They don't have freedom for themselves. They had been shipped to the Rachel and Leah's Re-education Centre called the Red Centre to get brainwashed before they are recruited to be handmaid, and their name was changed as the name of the commander. Offred is not her real name, her name is June. A nickname that given by the government to the Handmaid, consist of two words: "Of" that refers to the ownership, and "Fred" as the name of Commander, so "Offred" means "Fred's. This showed in the quotes below.

"My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to other."

In Gilead, there is a doctrine about the differentiation of colour in wearing clothes for every people. So, they have no power to resist. According to Friedrich, the essence of the doctrine of sovereignty was explained by an infinite powers to decide in the public interest by a certain individual or group of people (Friedrich and Brzeziński, 1956:7) . It is mentions in the quote.

"...Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen". "At the bottom of the stairs there's a hat-and-umbrella stand, the bent wood kind, long rounded rungs of wood curving gently up into hooks shaped like the opening fronds of a fern. There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red" (Atwood, 1985:4-5).

Those quotations above show that distinguish if colour to recognize every part of social structure influences the people in that society. Because of this Offred changed became the red woman or The Handmaid and she could not like her true colour. Beside that Offred and the other characters felt like lived in the cage because they are afraid to think what they want to.

"I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scare, for that. I am a national resource" (Atwood, 1985:45).

The government give a little freedom to the society who as handmaid. They can go to shop and can interact with their own society, but it's not real freedom because it still has control from government, so the handmaids can do anything what they want. The sign that appeared in Offred's body makes her could not escape. Even she always worries about herself every night. The tattoo used to guarantee that Offred belongs to

one group which given the tattoo. Unfortunately, it is also makes her could not belong to other group and it was torture her so much. Less is known about how the Gilead government operates; because the formal name contains the term “Republic” it can be considered that the country has a similar Senate or regulatory body. These government bodies are referred to as “Committees” or (at the local level) “Councils” as local Commander Boards. All citizens are obliged to follow Gilead's official version of Christianity, no other religious system or belief is allowed. Because Gilead was created in response to the decline in the birth rate crisis, the country's reaction was to use women's bodies as the tool of gaining their political sole purpose: obtaining reproductive and humanitarian control. Their bodies are so valuable that is mentioned.

The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive (Atwood, 1985:79).

The main purpose of women in a totalitarian society is to raise and raise children, which is given special emphasis because of the possibility of uncontrollable infertility present in North America at that time. Women are not permitted to take place in government, to be educated, own property or have careers. Legally, only women who are considered infertile, not men, blame the fertility crisis solely on women. Because of this belief, men cannot be "factually" barren. Roles in traditional gender place men as rational, strong, protective and decision-makers. While women are weak, emotional (irrational), submissive, and caring.

Offred's Resistance Against Totalitarian System

Freedom relates to every human being's fundamental right to behave, clothe and talk as he or she wishes. Women have such liberty in the United States. But they are often sexually abused. The Republic of Gilead is proud that women, especially Handmaid, are quite sacred and protected for their function. In such a society, women hold little freedom, but their fertility is very well-reserved and they are protected from the all kinds of sexual violence on the streets. However, Offred was fully conscious of how restricting her life as Handmaid is. She understands that every move towards freedom is limited: *“night is mine, my own time, must be done according to my will, as long as I am silent, as long as I don't move”* (Atwood, 1985:26). The Republic of Gilead is literary fighting for survival, especially focus on the survival of one individual-Offred. Offred is well aware of Gilead rules and Offred acknowledges the punishments and torture she will endure if she does not obey, but Offred disobey the rules to against the theocratic totalitarian regime.

Action and speech are important for Arendt, because through them someone reveals the identity. 'Whenever you go, you're a polis': these famous words haven't just become the slogan of Greek colonization but also the belief that action and discourse between participants that are able to discover their place almost anywhere (Arendt, 1962). One of Offred's actions to fight the regime is by saying her real name for her identity. This showed in the quotes below.

“We learned to lip read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma, Jannie, Dolores, Moira, June” (Atwood, 1985:2).

Names and words matter. The practice of calling them as the handmaids rather than their names makes them as private properties of men (literally Of-Fred), was all by purpose, dehumanizing step, meant to eliminate any mean of original independent identity. Calling the executions by “salvagings,” and “aunts” to the prison guards and indoctrinators made the dehumanizing actions more obvious and made the resistance harder to justify. It’s important to use real names. As long as in the modern era and more than the realization that the words which come out from the other people have a real impact on people’s lives. The language will always be an essential part of the resistance.

“They suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn’t even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. ...I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile”. “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood, 1985:129).

If Offred had joined the initial protest and more people are willing to be supportive to stop the injustice before it had a chance to flourish then the Gilead regime would never have had the chance to uphold their regime against them. But they failed to do that, therefore now the better move is to endure and never stop resisting. It is the mock-Latin message left for Offred by a former handmaid and it means that “do not let the bastards grind you down,” that is becomes the motivation for her as Gilead threatens to resist the regime which takes away their independence.

“Women can’t add, he once said, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, for them, one and one and one and one don’t make four”. “What the commander said is true. One and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique; there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for another”. “As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance”. “But now he says, “All right,” and thrusts his roller-tip pen across the desk at me almost defiantly, as if taking a dare. I look around for something to write on and he hands me the score pad, a desk-top notepad with a little smile-button face printed at the top of the page. They still make those things”. “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains” (Atwood, 1985:128-129).

The discussion between Offred and the Commander became a serious lesson: large-scale turned into small-scale resistance, and it is how individual exhibited by injustice that makes it worth to fight. There are some resistances of Offred to get her privilege as a woman such read the magazines and wrote something shows that her tried to make her life meaningful than before. Although all of something she did are not allowed by the regime, but she still did it with made a relationship towards her commander. In Gilead education is strictly controlled, magazines and book are banned and it is forbidden for women to read or write. “*Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects*” (Atwood, 1985:128).

It is explain that women use their trickery to break down men’s persistence, especially the Gilead Regime. Gilead's biggest mistake was that females could be interchanged, stamping out traces of individuality and treating everybody as a

disposable resource. It must be private resistance. It needs to be emotionally meaningful or no longer significance. Even if one believes that something someone does is a larger component of something, issues become a lot more manageable if they get diminished.

“I expect a stranger, but It’s Nick who pushes open the door, flicks on the light. I can’t place that, unless he’s one of them. There always that possibility. Nick, the private Eye. Dirty work is done by dirty people. You shit, I think. I open my mouth to say it, but he comes over, close to me, whispers, “It’s all the right. It’s Mayday. Go with them”. He calls me by my real name” (Atwood, 1985:201).

Nick told her to run away from her commander to go with Mayday and escaped from there. More likely it was Nick who, by the evidence of the very existence of the tapes, must have helped Offred. Nick was the commander driver and actually he also a Mayday activist who usually called as “The Eye”. The way in which he was able to do this marks him as a member of the “shadowy Mayday underground. A member of Mayday operatives are known to have infiltrated the Gileadean power structure at the highest levels, and the placement of one of their members as chauffeur to Waterford would certainly have been a coup; a double coup, as “Nick” must have been at the same time a member of the Eyes, as such chauffeurs and personal servants often were” The relationships between them keep continuing without attention of their commander, Serena Joy. Nick was finally released Offred by pretending to catch her because she involved with country scandals. Finally, Offred risks trusting Nick, she escapes by entering freely into the black van she ends up with. Unknown, whether she safely escapes or not, but at least she had enough freedom to tell her tale for some moment, according to the chapter of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Based on research questions mentioned in the first chapter, this study can be concluded into two major points. They are how does totalitarianism influence Offred and how does Offred resist against totalitarianism. The analysis focuses on the problems experienced by the main character that is Offred.

The first problem is totalitarianism influence Offred as a handmaid. Based on the result of the data analysis and discussion have been explained on previous chapters, it revealed that in The Republic of Gilead happens total control all aspect citizen’s life with religious values. According to Friedrich and Brzezinski theory, totalitarianism manages all aspects of the structure and function of institutions, including control over the economy, communities in the country, religion, education, the family to which the individual will works in accordance with the assignment and support the State’s objectives (Friedrich and Brzeziński, 1956). The totalitarian regime has a charismatic strong leader. Also, they included unification through cleansing and no organized opposition totalitarianism was also the first and most important political system in which the ruling regime held political control over the entire societies by leading important political and social institutions that sought to control and direct all aspects of life individuals through coercion and oppression, there is no freedom of speech and thought. The impacts of this regime toward Offred’s life which mentions are Offred to be a handmaid, separated with her husband and her daughter, she not allowed to work,

to own money and to own properties. Also, she not allowed to read or write. She cannot move without the supervision of the government, cannot escape. Her freedom is very limited. This condition makes Offred and the other women lose their power, Government takes their bodies as a tool to maintain the nation's interests.

The second problem is how does Offred resists against totalitarianism. The forms of Offred resistances are revealed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred disobey the rules to against the theocratic totalitarian regime, although Offred knows the punishment if she does not obey. Offred show her resistance, even the smallest act can be described as resistance. The resistance her do is to get better life for living in others country. She go with Mayday and escaped from Gilead. The presence of the resistance movement 'Mayday Underground' shows that the control of Gilead's physical space was created by opposition forces in it.

Suggestion

This Study has contribution in theocratic and totalitarianism study. *The Handmaid's Tale* gives a portrait of the political system in The Republic of Gilead which looks by the main character, impacts, and the resistance. Offred's life story gives descriptions how Gilead society get the totalitarianism is a communist ideology. Gilead societies in totalitarian era have no freedom in their life and their life was controlled by government, so from the condition they need to resist the regime to get a better life. In the future, this novel is worth to discuss in other issues viewpoints.

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