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Subversive spaces and regulated desires: The heteronormative gaze in R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131*

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Abstract

Constructing a cultural framework, the *heteronormative gaze* operates as a regulatory force that upholds heterosexuality as the normative ideal, marginalizing and pathologizing non-heteronormative identities. By privileging heterosexuality, it perpetuates binary structures and enforces conformity within public and private spheres. Highlighting the inherent queerness within Indian social structures, R. Raj Rao has always advocated the homosocial fabric that characterizes male relationships in his different texts. Drawing from examples such as Bollywood films like *Sholay*, Rao illustrates how male friendships (*yaar/dost*) subtly reconfigure homosocial spaces, allowing non-heteronormative desires to be expressed in coded forms. These interactions, while appearing innocent, blur the lines between normative camaraderie and subversive queer expressions. In *Hostel Room 131*, Rao captures the pervasive impact of the heteronormative gaze on queer life, documenting the lived experiences of Siddharth and Sudhir as they navigate a society that alternates between normalizing and criminalizing public male affection. The novel explores how societal pressures, homophobia, and attempts at conversion therapy are wielded to enforce conformity, leading to psychic and physical trauma. This paper aims to explore the extensive impact of the heteronormative gaze and its repercussions on queer individuals as portrayed in R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131*. It seeks to understand how the novel critiques Indian social frameworks by emphasizing the friction between homosocial environments and the imposition of heteronormative standards. Through an analysis of the relationship between Siddharth and Sudhir, this study investigates how public expressions of male affection, though outwardly accepted, transform into arenas of both regulation and resistance.

Keywords: Heteronormative gaze; Homosociality; Regulation and Resistance; R. Raj Rao; Non-heteronormative identities

1. Introduction

Denouncing the heteronormative matrix by foregrounding the inherent queerness embedded within Indian social structures, Rao (2017) calls attention to the homosocial fabric of Indian social order. Drawing on Bollywood films like Amitabh Bachchan's *Sholay*, Rao asserts that the phenomenon of *yaar/dost* (male friendships) operates not merely as an innocent display of camaraderie but as a re-articulation of homosociality that permits and even normalizes public displays of affection between men (Rao 97). The very accepted norms of strolling arm-in-arm with two male friends in civil society become a site of regulation and subversion. While such practices ostensibly reinforce heteronormative codes, they simultaneously create a space where non-heteronormative desires can be expressed, albeit in coded or circumstantial forms.

However, the homosocial space often acts as a site of contradictions. The continuous denouncement of the slight gender deviation creates a veil—obscuring the queerness they contain and allowing homosexual individuals or gender minorities to navigate public life under its cover. The duality, produced by the insistence on heteronormativity,

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intensifies the psychic dissonance. Thus, Homosociality suppresses the queer desire and systematically denies gender fluidity.

Acting as a regulatory mechanism, the heteronormative gaze rooted in the presumption of heterosexuality as the default perpetuates this arbitrary binary. Drawing from feminist cinema theory and extending into a wider socio-cultural sphere, this gaze penetrates the media, academia, and institutional frameworks, consistently presenting heterosexuality as both the standard and the best (Berlant and Warner 547). It pathologizes and portrays gay relationships as abnormal or deviant by legitimizing heterosexual partnerships as the only acceptable form of romantic expression (Rich 631). In so doing, the heteronormative gaze actively constructs and enforces a cultural landscape where heterosexuality is privileged while queer identities are marginalized, denied legitimacy, or coerced into invisibility.

R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* explores the gay subculture in India, characterized by an audacious and distinct narrative approach. The novel is structured into four sections, chronicling the period between 1978 and 1985—a time imbued with expressions of gay love and the manifold challenges that complicate the protagonist Siddharth's life. The narrative begins on May 18, 1982, highlighting Siddharth's profound longing for Sudhir after their separation. To reunite, Siddharth engages the police, lodging an FIR against Sudhir's parents, whom he accuses of confining and potentially mistreating him. Siddharth argues that Sudhir wishes to live with him, but their relationship—characterized by its homosexual nature—has been met with parental opposition following its discovery.

In 1978, Siddharth, a 23-year-old student, met with his 19-year-old roommate Sudhir while visiting his friend Farouq. An intimate yet complicated relationship begins when Siddharth is first drawn to Sudhir's slim figure, creating a deep and instant bond. The relationship dynamics, while personal and profound, like homosociality, also exist within any society. However, rigid heteronormative expectations abhor it.

Their relationship evolves from secretive touches to public displays of affection, defying societal norms and resisting dominant heterosexual expectations. Siddharth and Sudhir's interactions, ranging from subtle to overt, reveal the vulnerability of queer life in a restrictive society. Rao captures their realities, from sexual encounters to the trauma of societal pressures.

Sudhir endures conversion therapy and harassment by figures like Ravi Humbe, symbolizing homophobia and surveillance. Sudhir's wish for gender transition reflects a struggle for authenticity, and becoming Sumati Naidu marks a bold self-redefinition against societal disapproval. The novel ends hopeful as Siddharth and Sumati's meeting with Ms. Alison Brown at the US consulate hints at freedom. The prospect of asylum in America symbolizes liberation and a path to acceptance and fulfilment.

This paper aims to analyse the pervasive influence of the heteronormative gaze and its effects on queer individuals as depicted in R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131*. It seeks to understand how the novel critiques Indian social structures by highlighting the tension between homosocial spaces and the enforcement of heteronormative norms. By examining the relationship between Siddharth and Sudhir, the paper explores how public displays of male affection, seemingly normalized, become sites of regulation and subversion.

2. The Heteronormative Gaze: A Mechanism of Marginalization and Control

The concept of the gaze significantly influences identity and social interactions, particularly in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan. Both philosophers offer distinct but interconnected perspectives on how the gaze affects our self-awareness and relationships with others.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre explores “the gaze” as an essential part of human interaction. Sartre argues that when we realize we are being watched, it changes how we see ourselves. We start to view ourselves from the perspective of others, turning into objects in their gaze (Sartre 267). This shift often leads to feelings of shame, alienation, and anxiety as we lose some autonomy over our identity, now shaped by external perceptions.

Sartre's famous example of being caught looking through a keyhole illustrates this transformation: when the individual realizes they are being watched, they shift from subject to object, experiencing shame as they become conscious of how they appear to the other (Sartre 268). For Sartre, this dynamic reflects the complex tension between the desire for authentic self-definition and the pressures of external judgment, shaping how individuals form their sense of self about societal norms and expectations.

Jacques Lacan takes this idea further by introducing the concept of “the mirror stage” (1949). For Lacan, the gaze becomes crucial in early identity formation, as the child first encounters their reflection and develops a sense of self through the image they see (Lacan 78). This identification with the external reflection forms the basis of the ego, shaped not just by the self but through the gaze of others, such as caregivers or society. In Lacanian theory, the gaze relates to the “Other”—society or culture—and how individuals seek recognition and validation. The gaze symbolizes the constant search for approval, representing an unattainable ideal of how one wishes to be seen. This unfulfilled desire for validation results in a sense of incompleteness and shapes ongoing human interactions and self-perception (Lacan 80).

Michel Foucault (1976) adds another layer to the discourse on the gaze, arguing that it serves as a mechanism of power and control. In his view, societal norms, through the gaze, reinforce social hierarchies and perpetuate existing power dynamics (Foucault 43). The gaze thus becomes not just an interpersonal experience but a tool of social regulation, disciplining individuals to conform to normative behavior.

In his seminal text *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1991), Michael Warner conceptualized heteronormativity as the prescriptive assumption that heterosexuality constitutes the naturalized, default, and legitimate sexual orientation. This hegemonic ideology permeates societal frameworks, fortifying dichotomous paradigms of gender and sexuality while relegating nonconforming identities to the margins. Intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have rigorously interrogated the discursive and institutional mechanisms through which heteronormativity is constructed and perpetuated, revealing its profound implications for social exclusion and identity regulation.

Michel Foucault’s pivotal work, *The History of Sexuality*, delves into the intricate historical and cultural fabrication of sexuality, asserting that it is not an intrinsic biological reality but rather a construct shaped and governed by power dynamics. Foucault introduces the notion of *biopower*, a term denoting the regulatory apparatuses through which institutions exert control over populations by delineating norms and deviations. He argues that heteronormativity, rather than a natural or immutable truth, is a relatively recent socio-historical construct intricately linked to the vested interests of dominant political forces (Foucault 43). Through the regulation of sexual conduct, heteronormativity consolidates societal hegemony, embedding heterosexuality as the normative paradigm.

Expanding upon Foucault’s analysis, Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, interrogates the performative constitution of gender, contending that gender is not a stable or preordained identity but a series of ritualized acts and performances iterated to conform to hegemonic societal expectations. Similarly, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick critically examines the complex dynamics of sexuality and societal norms, deconstructing the rigid gender binary. Sedgwick employs the metaphor of “the closet” to elucidate how heteronormativity compels queer individuals to conceal their sexual identities. This enforced concealment, Sedgwick contends, serves as a manifestation of a broader socio-political system that privileges heterosexuality (Sedgwick 2). The closet, therefore, epitomizes not merely an individual dilemma but a structural expression of heteronormative power.

The heteronormative gaze, grounded in the assumption that heterosexuality constitutes the normative standard, functions as a mechanism of exclusion and erasure of non-heterosexual identities. It operates insidiously across various structures—media, education, and societal institutions. Such a framework not only privileges heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of romantic engagement but also pathologizes and marginalizes LGBTQ+ identities, creating a cultural terrain where the legitimacy of queer existence is constantly under threat, constrained by the very structures that seek to erase it.

Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory, introduced in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), provides a foundation for understanding the heteronormative gaze. Mulvey argued that classical Hollywood cinema objectifies women for male viewers’ pleasure. Expanding on this, Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix describes how cultural norms link biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation to naturalize heterosexuality. The matrix compels conformity to traditional gender roles through societal expectations and institutional policies, pressuring many LGBTQ+ individuals to hide their identities. Meanwhile, another concept of heterosexual imaginary by Chrys Ingraham in her 1994 essay, *The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender*, idealizes heterosexual relationships as the pinnacle of love and fulfilment, marginalizing queer experiences. Media portrayals often centre on heterosexual couples, relegating LGBTQ+ characters to stereotypes, further entrenching the marginalization of non-heteronormative identities (Butler 24).

Creating an unwelcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students, Curricula, textbooks, and classroom discussions often operate under the assumption that the gender binary is universal and, thus, sustains the heteronormative gaze by limiting individuals’ ability to express themselves authentically (Pharr 15). This reinforces feelings of invisibility and

pressures queer students to conceal their identities to conform. The heteronormative gaze further perpetuates discrimination, subjecting LGBTQ+ individuals to harassment, bullying, and violence. Consequently, many LGBTQ+ individuals feel unsafe and retreat into the closet as a form of self-preservation (Herek 23). The internalization of this gaze often results in feelings of shame, guilt, and self-doubt, exacerbating mental health struggles.

3. The novel *Hostel Room 131* as a Site of Heteronormative Gaze

The first part of the novel opens on 18th May 1982 and deals with the cravings of Siddharth, who is separated from Sudhir, the object of his lust, and, in his attempt to get Sudhir back, tries to seek the help of the police. He registers an FIR against the parents of Sudhir as he believes that they have locked Sudhir in the house and are probably beating him. Siddharth further tells the police that Sudhir wants to live with him, but his parents are against the decision as they come to know that there are homosexual relationships between Siddharth and Sudhir. The very opening of the novel highlights Siddharth's desperate attempt to reclaim Sudhir amid the oppressive heteronormative gaze. His FIR against Sudhir's parents underscores how societal norms use familial and institutional power to suppress queer identities. The narrative exposes the erasure of queer agency, showcasing the indifference of authorities and the violence of normative structures that force conformity and deny the legitimacy of same-sex love.

Set in an engineering college in Pune, the novel uses the hostel as a microcosm reflecting societal norms. This space enforces heteronormative scrutiny, upholding patriarchal ideals and regulating gender and sexuality. Siddharth and Sudhir's relationship, viewed through this lens, exposes how heteronormativity frames and limits expressions of same-sex intimacy.

The second part, set between December 1978 and May 1982, reveals pivotal moments of Siddharth's awakening to his homosexual desires, framed by the pressure of the heteronormative gaze. Siddharth, then a postgraduate from Mumbai, visits Pune and meets Sudhir at an engineering college hostel, a setting where conventional masculinity is enforced. Instantly attracted, Siddharth cautiously initiates subtle advances, mindful of societal scrutiny. As Sudhir does not resist, Siddharth grows bolder despite the ever-present threat of moral judgment. Their charged interactions—hand-holding and attempted intimacy during a Bollywood film—challenge heteronormative norms that deem such behavior deviant.

In the theatre, Siddharth and Sudhir find a secluded spot and engage in sexual activity as the lights dim, momentarily pushing back against the omnipresent heteronormative gaze. Their secretive acts underscore how heteronormative structures force same-sex desire into hidden spaces cloaked in darkness and silence. Lost in their passion, they only snap back to reality when the lights come on for the interval, a stark reminder of the societal norms that police and punish non-normative expressions of love. Siddharth's disinterest in the film reveals his fixation on reclaiming moments of intimacy that are not just acts of passion but assertions of queer existence against the conformity imposed by heteronormative expectations. Returning to the hostel, where Farouq's sleep provides cover, the hostel room becomes a contested space—a site where heteronormative control looms but is momentarily defied by their encounter.

It is not the social order itself but the individuals like Ravi Humbe who bear the bastion of the heteronormative gaze that must be held accountable for perpetuating its oppressive forces. Ravi Humbe, a fellow engineering student from Sudhir's village, embodies the intrusive heteronormative gaze as he vigilantly monitors Sudhir and Siddharth's relationship. Suspicious of their bond, which defies the strict, conventional parameters of masculinity and sexuality upheld within the hostel, Ravi grows increasingly determined to intervene. The hostel, symbolic of societal structures that enforce heteronormativity, becomes a site where Ravi's watchful eyes mark Siddharth and Sudhir's interactions as deviant.

Ravi's intentions are not purely those of a concerned peer but rather driven by an internalized commitment to preserving the norms of a heteronormative order. Seeing Siddharth's presence as a threat to Sudhir's future, Ravi becomes a self-appointed guardian of morality. His actions—surveillance, confrontations, and ultimately, betrayal—are mechanisms through which he seeks to align Sudhir with societal expectations, wherein male relationships are permissible only within the boundaries of friendship devoid of any erotic or emotional subtext.

Ravi's involvement escalates when he gathers like-minded peers, forming a vigilante group named *Siddharth Virudh Sanghatana* (SVS) that claims to protect Sudhir from Siddharth's 'corrupting' influence. This collective effort reflects the coercive power of heteronormative ideology to police and punish deviations from accepted norms. The group's motives, framed under the guise of safeguarding Sudhir's reputation and future, are steeped in the belief that same-sex intimacy is a deviant aberration needing correction. Their mission is clear: to isolate Siddharth as the instigator, the outsider whose desires breach the inviolable boundaries of accepted social conduct.

In his fervor, Ravi writes to Sudhir's father, exposing the relationship and attempting to enlist parental authority as an extension of heteronormative enforcement. The letter acts as both a moral indictment and a call to action, underscoring the patriarchal belief that family honor is intertwined with adherence to heteronormative standards.

This narrative thread reveals how heteronormativity, through individuals like Ravi, enforces its mandates by fostering fear, shame, and punitive actions. The hostel, already a microcosm of societal norms, becomes the battleground where intimacy is judged, and desire is met with surveillance and punishment, echoing broader societal mechanisms that deny legitimacy to same-sex love.

The revelation of Sudhir and Siddharth's relationship with Sudhir's father, Dr. Raikar, and the subsequent actions taken to protect Sudhir from Siddharth highlight the unnatural norms of familial expectations and societal norms.

The brutal portrayal of Sudhir's forced electro-shock therapy as part of an exorcism exposes the extreme measures taken to correct perceived deviance. This harrowing scene not only illustrates the violence inflicted upon those who defy normative expectations but also serves as a grim reminder of the lengths to which societies will go to maintain the status quo. The therapy, described with visceral intensity, is a stark manifestation of the heteronormative gaze's capacity for cruelty.

Thus, *Hostel Room 131* functions as a potent critique of heteronormative structures. Through its depiction of personal and social struggles, the novel illustrates how normative assumptions about gender and sexuality not only shape but also severely restrict the possibilities for non-normative relationships and identities. In this setting, every gesture, every relationship, and every deviation from the norm becomes a site of contention, revealing the profound impact of the heteronormative gaze on individual lives and broader social interactions.

In the novel's climax, the transformation of Sudhir into Sumati Naidu and the couple's hopeful venture to the United States encapsulates a journey from repression to self-affirmation. Sumati's transition, driven by a desire to live authentically, represents a radical departure from the heteronormative constraints imposed by their previous environment. The warm reception by Ms. Alison Brown at the US consulate starkly contrasts the hostile scrutiny they faced in India, suggesting a possibility of acceptance and belonging that was denied to them in their homeland.

4. Effects on Queer Individuals

The heteronormative gaze exerts a profound and insidious influence on queer individuals, shaping their experiences and self-perception in ways that can be deeply damaging. Central to this dynamic is the internalization of homophobia and shame, which emerges as a byproduct of societal norms that privilege heterosexuality and marginalize queer identities. This internalization often manifests in a pervasive sense of inadequacy and self-reproach, where queer individuals may come to view their desires and identities as aberrations incongruent with societal expectations. Judith Butler's concept of "regulatory norms" elucidates how these internalized scripts dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior and self-conception, leading individuals to police their actions and thoughts by dominant heteronormative standards (Butler, 1990).

The fear of disclosure and rejection is another significant consequence of the heteronormative gaze. The constant surveillance and judgment imposed by societal norms create an atmosphere of dread around revealing one's true identity. This fear is not merely a personal anxiety but a structural constraint that governs social interactions and personal disclosures. As exemplified in the novel, Sudhir's trepidation about being outed and the subsequent social ramifications illustrate the intense pressure to conceal one's queer identity to avoid ostracism and alienation (Rao 47). The threat of rejection can compel individuals to adopt performative masks, as seen in Siddharth and Sudhir's efforts to navigate their affection discreetly amidst an environment fraught with potential hostility (Rao 43).

The mental health impacts of the heteronormative gaze are profound and multifaceted, encompassing issues such as anxiety, depression, and other psychological strains. The constant internal and external pressures to conform to heteronormative ideals can lead to significant mental health challenges as individuals grapple with the cognitive dissonance between their authentic selves and the expectations imposed upon them. The emotional toll of living under a constant threat of exposure and rejection is reflected in Sudhir's intense distress and eventual retreat into a more conforming identity (Rao 172). The narrative powerfully illustrates how these experiences contribute to a cycle of psychological distress and self-doubt.

The erasure of queer identities and experiences is also a critical consequence of the heteronormative gaze. By enforcing a singular narrative of acceptable sexuality and gender, heteronormative norms systematically invalidate and render

invisible the diverse experiences of queer individuals. This erasure is not merely a matter of omission but an active denial of the legitimacy and validity of queer identities. As Butler articulates, the normative pressures exerted by societal structures are instrumental in constructing and maintaining the categories of identity that exclude and marginalize (Butler 33). The relentless societal push in the novel to conform and the attempts to “correct” or “normalize” queer identities reflect this broader pattern of erasure and exclusion (Rao 158).

5. Resistance and Coping Mechanisms

In the novel, queer individuals navigate and resist the dominant heteronormative gaze through a variety of strategies, revealing complex patterns of resilience and adaptation in the face of societal oppression. These strategies are articulated through their interactions, choices, and the subtle subversions of normative expectations.

Central to this narrative is the formation of queer support networks. Siddharth and Sudhir’s relationship, though marked by secrecy due to prevailing societal norms, fosters a profound emotional and physical connection that acts as a sanctuary against the external pressures of heteronormativity. Their public displays of affection, such as Siddharth’s arm around Sudhir’s shoulders at the cinema, challenge conventional norms and establish a form of resistance through visibility. This act of defiance is not merely about the public acknowledgment of their relationship but also about creating a space where their queer love can be expressed, albeit temporarily, without the overt endorsement of heteronormative values (Rao 43).

Engaging in activism and advocacy, though indirect, is also evident through the characters’ responses to their oppressive environment. The novel depicts a subtle form of resistance in the actions of Siddharth and Sudhir, particularly in their interactions with individuals like Gaurav and Vivek. The presence of gay porn magazines in their room symbolizes an underground queer space that offers a counter-narrative to the mainstream heteronormative gaze (Rao 92). This act of preserving and sharing queer material signifies a resistance to societal repression and the affirmation of their sexual identities.

Self-care and self-love emerge as critical components in their resistance. A profound personal transformation and self-realization mark Sudhir’s journey. His ultimate decision to undergo sex-reassignment surgery reflects a profound act of self-care and authenticity. As Sudhir articulates his desire to transition, he asserts, “I will become a woman” (Rao 231). This decision represents not only a personal reclamation of identity but also a resistance to the heteronormative framework that seeks to confine him. Despite societal expectations, his reflections on living authentically underscore the importance of self-love and personal fulfillment in the struggle against oppressive norms (Rao 231).

The novel also highlights the role of art, fashion, and performance as forms of subversion. The characters’ engagement with these forms of expression is not always overt but manifests in their everyday choices and interactions. For instance, Siddharth’s detailed and raw depictions of intimacy with Sudhir can be seen as a subversive expression. The explicit scenes, while confronting societal norms, also create a space where queer experiences are articulated and validated in ways that challenge traditional narratives (Rao 49). This artistic and performative dimension of their resistance reflects a broader strategy of reclaiming and redefining queer existence outside the constraints of normative expectations.

6. Conclusions

This can be said in the conclusion that *Hostel Room 131* by R. Raj Rao offers a layered exploration of the heteronormative gaze and its justification as both an instrument of control and a lens for societal norms in postcolonial India. Through the unfolding of Siddharth and Sudhir’s relationship, Rao dissects the pervasive surveillance mechanisms employed by society to enforce conformity. The novel’s portrayal of Ravi Humbe, an emblematic figure representing institutionalized vigilance, underscores how deeply the heteronormative gaze is embedded in societal consciousness. His formation of the Siddharth Virudh Sanghatana (SVS), a self-appointed moral police, amplifies the view of non-normative identities as threats requiring neutralization. This gaze is rooted in a protective yet exclusionary logic, wherein deviation from accepted masculinity is policed as an act of safeguarding cultural values.

The heteronormative gaze becomes justified in its logic through its framing as a necessary defence against perceived chaos. With its rigid codes of masculine behavior, the college hostel serves as a concentrated site for observing how individuals like Siddharth and Sudhir challenge these codes. When Sudhir’s parents intervene by confining him to their house, they reflect the wider societal impulse to rectify behavior seen as transgressive. This “justification” is further expressed in the brutal use of electro-shock therapy, a practice that embodies how the medical and familial institutions converge to ‘correct’ queerness, underlining the depth of violence embedded in maintaining heteronormativity.

Rao illustrates that the heteronormative gaze, while justified as a means to preserve tradition and social order, inflicts profound harm on those it targets. It not only seeks to police bodies and desires but to nullify the identities that do not conform. The outcome is a landscape where survival demands resilience and compromise. Sudhir's ultimate transformation into Sumati Naidu and his departure to the U.S. encapsulate a pursuit for an existence unmarked by surveillance and coercion. This signifies that while the gaze may justify itself in preserving collective cultural norms, it simultaneously compels individuals to seek liberation beyond the reach of such limiting optics.

The novel further asserts that while the heteronormative gaze may rationalize itself as a protector of societal norms, it fundamentally fails to acknowledge the validity of diverse identities, driving those it targets toward resilience or exile. The narrative holds a mirror to the inherent violence of maintaining heteronormativity, framing it as both a social force and a barrier to true inclusivity and freedom.

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