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### Cultural Hybridity and Identity Reconstruction: A Diasporic Study of Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019)

Sajeel Ahmed<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Naeem<sup>2</sup>, Zobia Mariam<sup>3</sup>, Shahzadi Sumra\*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student of BS English, University of Education, Faisalabad Campus

Email: [ahmadsajeel166@gmail.com](mailto:ahmadsajeel166@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Student of BS English, University of Education, Faisalabad Campus

Email: [mn6577162@gmail.com](mailto:mn6577162@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Student of BS English, University of Education, Faisalabad Campus

Email: [mn6577162@gmail.com](mailto:mn6577162@gmail.com)

<sup>4\*</sup>Lecturer in English, University of Education, Faisalabad Campus

Email: [sumra.shahzadi@ue.edu.pk](mailto:sumra.shahzadi@ue.edu.pk)

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**Corresponding Author:**  
**Shahzadi Sumra**, Lecturer in  
English, University of  
Education, Faisalabad Campus  
Email:

[sumra.shahzadi@ue.edu.pk](mailto:sumra.shahzadi@ue.edu.pk)

#### ABSTRACT

This study looks at cultural hybridity and identity reconstruction in Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019), with an eye toward how the story negotiates cultural convergence and postcolonial identity reconstruction. Examining the representation of hybrid identities and the impact of Western and South Asian cultural exchanges on the construction of personal and group identity are the main goals. Together with Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity theory, Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity and the third space from *The Location of Culture* (1994), offers the theoretical foundation. The study is important since it helps researchers to better grasp how diasporic literature captures the reality of cultural negotiation and identity development. The study also emphasizes how Kamal's work clarifies the dynamic, multifarious character of identity in diasporic settings and shows how well literature could explore cultural hybridity and identity development within cultural intersections.

## Introduction

Diasporic literature has become an increasingly important prism through which scholars and readers view issues of identification, belonging, and cultural negotiation. Often crossing both home and adopted cultures, this genre investigates the experiences of groups or individuals who have moved or been displaced. Especially remarkable in this framework is Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019). Kamal offers a modern version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) situated in modern Pakistan, therefore, addresses the cultural intersections and identity issues in a postcolonial nation. The work is important in its ability to create a dialogue between past and present, tradition and modernism by combining local South Asian issues with a colonial literary classic. As postcolonial theorist Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989) argue, rewriting classic works from a postcolonial point of view helps one challenge and reinterpret hegemonic narratives created during colonial authority. Kamal's rereading is a shining illustration of this; it provides a voice to persons the literary canon has excluded. The composite identities shown in *Unmarriageable* (2019) mirror what Bhabha notes as the "in-between" environment in which cultural interaction and negotiation occur. Kamal's characters, especially Alys Binat, have perfect hybridity as they face social constraints and personal aspirations molded by both indigenous traditions and western influences. From this vantage point, *Unmarriageable* (2019) becomes an arena where cultural issues are questioned, explored, and recreated rather than just a narrative. *Unmarriageable* (2019) reinterprets Austen's popular story in a South Asian setting using feminism, social criticism, and comedy. The book centers largely on Alys Binat, a middle-class Pakistani schoolteacher who questions established knowledge on marriage, gender roles, and society expectations. By putting Austen's story inside a postcolonial framework, Kamal asks readers to rethink the universality of his ideas and so underline the unique socio-cultural reality of South Asia. Edward Said (1993) recontextualizing European literature in non-western contexts reveals the inherent preconceptions of the original works and emphasizes the variety of world events, claims postcolonial historian. Alys Binat represents opposition against society expectations, reflecting Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern" seeking agency in a society run under hegemonic institutions. From Alys's vintage point in modern-day Pakistan, Kamal explores patriarchal policies and the influence of colonial ideas. The book stresses on how complicated cultural hybridity and identity reconstruction in postcolonial nations by stressing on

education, gender roles, and economic mobility. Diasporal writing emphasizes the variety of life between planets and links several cultures. It provides a setting for talking about hybridity, exile, displacement, and identity reconstruction. Such works are priceless for postcolonial studies since they help one to grasp how once colonised nations negotiate their colonial pasts and create new identities in a globalised society. As Hall (1990) points out, political, social, and historical context rather than a permanent essence shapes cultural identity, which is very fluid. Kamal's very work explores both the hybrid character of current South Asian identity produced by western influences coupled with indigenous traditions and colonial legacy. Diasporal stories, including Kamal's, showcase how history and memory could shape identity. Stuart Hall's distinction between "becoming", a continual process of change, and cultural identity as "being", a common inheritance provides a framework for examining the changing identities in diasporic environments. The way the book shows people navigating several cultural realms catches this paradox and shows how diasporic contexts either sustain or change identity. Kamal's works thus add to an increasing corpus of research examining the flow of identity in a worldwide society in which cultural borders are progressively dissolving. Under the postcolonial Pakistan backdrop, where colonial legacies still shape social systems, *Unmarriageable* examines traditional wisdom and redefines identity outside binary oppositions. In which the interaction of many cultural factors develops fresh cultural meanings and identities, the book catches what Bhabha (1994) defines as the "third Space of enunciation." Kamal places the story in this context thus shows the possibility of cultural hybridity as a location of resistance and invention. By means of its analysis of hybrid identities, *Unmarriageable* (2019) also links with more general issues of globalization and cultural interaction. The interactions among the persons having western education, culture, and values mirror the challenges of navigating identity in a worldwide society. As Appadurai (1996) points out, the flow of ideas, people, and products constituting the global cultural economy drives new kinds of cultural encounter and hybridization. Kamal's work catches this dynamic and shows how people and communities negotiate the benefits and drawbacks of globalization. *Unmarriageable* (2019) provides a complex picture of current South Asian identity by combining local and global components, therefore stressing the ongoing battle between tradition and modernism. The book's stressing of female agency and education underscores even more its relevance in debates of gender and postcolonialism, therefore proving its substantial contribution to diasporic literature and postcolonial studies.

## Literature Review

Particularly within postcolonial contexts, diasporic writing frequently questions identity, gender, and cultural hybridity. Because of its examination of these subjects, Soniah Kamal's 2019 *Unmarriageable*, a reworking of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* set in Pakistan, has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Kamal's work questions hegemonic systems by combining a colonial literary classic with South Asian socio-cultural reality, therefore stressing gender and cultural negotiations in postcolonial countries. Mariam Farooq (2022) on Kamal's demolition of phallogocentric systems in Pakistani society emphasizes "The phallogocentric gender binarism in *Unmarriageable* (2019) is explored and dismantled through characters like Alys Binat and Qitty Binat, who defy patriarchal norms by pursuing careers and education"(p.58). Using Derrida's idea of phallogocentrism, Farooq examines how education enables women in the book to challenge conventional positions. Likewise, the formalist study by Iqbal, Kamal, and Shafiq (2021) highlights the thematic emphasis on materialism, feminism, and the struggle between modernism and tradition. They contend, "The writer used language, settings, characters, and diction in ways that expose and critique social issues such as forced marriages and conservative mindsets" (Iqbal et al., 2021, p. 44). Marxists feminist readings match Kamal's focus on gender norms and female agency. "The protagonists of both Austen's and Kamal's novels struggle for survival in patriarchal societies but ultimately find themselves navigating compromises that highlight systemic inequalities (Hussain, 2023, p.15). Farooq (2022) underlines even more how Kamal's characters use education to challenge patriarchal dominance; Alys Binat is a teacher who "urges younger generations to value education over marriage" (p.59). This story emphasizes the transforming power of education as a means of both societal and personal emancipation. Postcolonial theory offers important new perspectives on the composite identities *Unmarriageable* investigates. Using Bhabha's Third Space idea, the book exposes the conflicting negotiations of identity in a postcolonial society. "The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual and conflictual," Bhabha contends (1994, p.3). As Kamal's characters negotiate Western influences and traditional South Asian beliefs, her story ep strains this ambivalence. Stuart Hall's contrast between cultural identity as "being" and "becoming" provides still another prism through which one may view Kamal's work. Hall notes, "Identity is always constituted within representation and is subject to the continuous play of history, culture,

and power" (1990, p. 225). Alys Binat's character clearly shows this mobility by rejecting essentialist ideas of identity by fusing feminist principles with conventional norms. Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019) adds to the expanding corpus of diasporic work challenging and redefining cultural and gender stereotypes. "By subverting the Eurocentric canon, Kamal provides a hybrid narrative that critiques patriarchal and colonial legacies", as Farooq (2022) notes. This act of rewriting emphasizes how postcolonial literature may promote cross-cultural communication and challenge accepted historical accounts. Academic debate on the novel emphasizes its relevance in feminist and postcolonial studies. Scholars have highlighted the multifarious investigation of identity, gender, and cultural negotiation of a work by using frameworks such as Derrida's phallogocentrism, Bhabha's hybridity, and Hall's cultural identity theory. In a postcolonial setting, Kamal's work not only questions structural injustices but also supports the transforming potential of education and agency.

## **Framework**

The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis to examine key themes of cultural hybridity and identity reconstruction in *Unmarriageable* (2019). The theoretical framework is grounded in Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "Third Space", as well as Stuart Hall's distinction between cultural identity as "being" and "becoming". Close readings of selected passages from the novel will be conducted to illustrate these theoretical concepts in action. By situating Kamal's work within the broader context of diasporic and postcolonial literature, this study aims to shed light on the ongoing negotiation of identity in postcolonial South Asia and the diaspora. Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1994) first discusses hybridity as a fundamental component of postcolonial identity creation. In the "Third Space," where cultural meanings are negotiated and new identities are created, hybridity reveals itself, claims Bhabha. "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination (Bhabha, 1994, p. 159). This perspective helps one to grasp the characters in the novel, who negotiate between Western principles and South Asian customs and live in this transitional stage.

According to Bhabha, the third Space is basically ambivalent and offers chances for opposition as well as a risk of more marginalizing impacts. "The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity," (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3). This emphasizes how culture and power cooperate to produce hybrid identities. Bhabha (1994) also questions ideas of cultural purity, arguing that "the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweaving of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood." (p. 7) Extensive research on Bhabha's ideas now underline hybridity as a site of opposition to cultural hegemony. Garcia (2021) for example says, "In the globalized world, hybridity functions as a form of cultural resilience, enabling communities to adapt and resist homogeneity" (p. 14). In a same vein, Khan and Patel (2020) argue that "hybrid identities are crucial as they allow individuals to challenge monolithic cultural narratives" (p. 233). Stuart Hall's work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) provides even another crucial viewpoint for this study. Hall distinguishes two ideas of cultural identity: one that sees it as a dynamic process shaped by power and history and another as a common, collective essence. He writes, "Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. (Hall, 1990, p. 226). As Alys Binat's identity develops through contact with feminist ideas and conventional Pakistani norms, this dynamic perspective speaks to her. Hall emphasizes, "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of it as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and constituted within representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 222). More theoretical developments confirm this point of view. "Diasporic identities represent a negotiation between memory and modernity, where individuals constantly reconstruct their sense of self," Ahmed remarks, (2019, p.56). Likewise, Singh notes that "Hall's theory remains relevant in discussions of globalization, where identity is fluid and hybrid, influenced by transnational cultural flows (Singh, 2022, p. 98). Hall's contention that "diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" emphasizes a major recurring element in Kamal's story (Hall, 1990, p. 235). Furthermore, Hall's idea of identity as "becoming" instead of "being" fits Bhabha's idea of the Third Space, in which identities are always renegotiated and rebuilt. "Far from being eternally

fixed in some essentialized past, identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power," Hall notes (p. 225). In this novel, Alys Binat's character shows how hybrid identities negotiate Bhabha's Third Space. Her relationships with both orthodox characters and those swayed by Western culture mirror the ambivalence and complexity Bhabha and Hall have detailed. For instance, Alys embraces facets of her cultural background while also questioning patriarchal conventions by insisting on female education and freedom. This two-fold participation reflects Hall's conception of identity as a dynamic process. Moreover, the story shows how hybrid identities may be used to question accepted social mores. While negotiating the demands placed on her community, Alys's opposition to conventional gender norms captures what Bhabha describes as "strategic essentialism"—the use of cultural identity as a tool for political resistance (p. 210). The way Alys is portrayed captures the larger problem diasporic people must continually reconcile conflicting cultural narratives.

## **Discussion**

Using humor and a contemporary rereading of *Pride and Prejudice*, Kamal questions society standards and investigates cultural hybridity. "But reading widely can lead to an appreciation of the universalities across cultures" (Kamal, 2019, p.115). Kamal crafts a conversation between colonial literature and postcolonial reality by fusing Austen's story with South Asian surroundings and characters. By subverting its set meanings, hybridity questions the authority of colonial discourse, according to Bhabha (1994), and Kamal's reinterpretation exactly accomplishes this. Alys Binat's classroom scenario, in which she teaches Austen's work to her students, for example, becomes a meta-commentary on the impact of English literature in postcolonial education. "When Alysba Binat began working at age twenty as the English-literature teacher at the British School of Dilipabad... Her new batch of ninth-graders was starting *Pride and Prejudice*, and their first homework had been to rewrite the opening sentence of Jane Austen's novel. (Kamal, 2019, p. 9). This is consistent with Hall's (1990) observation that resistance and portrayal always change cultural identity highlighting how satire operates as a weapon for negotiating identity in hybrid contexts. Kamal's storytelling technique also includes the sarcastic portrayal of social pressure over women's roles. Alys cynically responds to a question asked by her student Tahira, "What's the purpose of life without children?" as "The same purpose as there would be with children—to be a good human being and contribute to

society.” (p. 14) This criticism fits Bhabha's theory that satire can act as a sort of resistance inside the Third Space (p. 38). Likewise, Hall's 1990 idea of representation emphasizes how such events expose natural conflicts in society expectations, therefore subverting established ideas of cultural identity (p. 230). Kamal (2019) also emphasizes the conflict between modernism and legacy by use of sarcasm. Alys muses over marriage, "there is more to life than getting married and having children." (p. 14). This comment emphasizes the ongoing impact of patriarchal standards in a society struggling with modernity, an issue Bhabha finds to be fundamental in the negotiating of hybrid identities (p. 112). Furthermore, Rahman notes "postcolonial narratives often employ irony as a means of critiquing cultural hegemony, creating spaces for alternative identities to emerge" (2021, p. 92). By negotiating modern South Asian standards, the protagonist, Alys Binat, epi tribes a composite identity. Alys's education in an English-medium school and her strong conviction in feminist ideas help her to occupy what Bhabha defines as the liminal third Space, where cultural negotiation takes place. When Alys questions patriarchal customs, "Marriage should be a part of life and not life" (p. 16) her hybrid identity becomes clear. Rahman (2021) notes that "characters who embody hybrid identities often serve as mediators between conflicting cultural values, enabling a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial subjectivity" (p. 89). Alys's connection with Darsee also emphasizes the difficulties of cultural intersectionality. Alys first objects to Darsee's involvement because of his elitist background. "If you aren't a decent person, then your money and lineage mean nothing to me" (Kamal, 2019, p. 228). This inner struggle mirrors the concept of ambivalence in hybrid identities, in which characters negotiate between opposing cultural standards all the time. Singh (2022) contends that "hybrid characters negotiate the tension between cultural conformity and personal autonomy, illustrating the fluid nature of identity" (p. 102). Alys's friendship with Sherry lends still another level of complexity to the examination of mixed identities. Alys's idealistic search for personal independence contrasted with Sherry's practical choice to wed for stability. Whereas I find serenity in rebellion, Sherry found peace in compromise. This paradox shows Hall's thesis that personal decisions inside a greater sociocultural context define identity. Ahmed (2019) argues, "the multiplicity of hybrid identities in postcolonial literature stresses the diversity of responses to cultural hegemony" (p. 65).



Reflecting conflict between modernism and legacy, the book contrasts Western education with traditional South Asian gender roles (Kamal, 2019). Such crossings, according to Bhabha (1994), are essential for comprehending hybridity since they expose the ambivalence in cultural identity (p. 112). Alys's support of freedom and education questions conventional wisdom, yet her love of cultural legacy shows the negotiating that goes under multiple identities. Alys states, "I want my girls to at least have a chance at being more than well-trained dolls. I want them to think critically." (Kamal, 2019, p. 20). Kamal (2019) writes of a pivotal scene highlighting this junction: the Binat family's participation at a wedding where Western clothing mixes with traditional practices, "Jena was in a dove-gray silk sari, the muted color enhanced with a darker gray sequined blouse and a Kundan... At an event where everyone was dressed like a Brazilian parrot" (p. 55). As Hall notes cultural identity in diasporic settings is always a conflict between tradition and modernity—this scene captures the mixed character of modern South Asian identity. Alys's exchanges with Darsee draw attention even more on the junction of civilizations. She exhorts them to actively interact with both Western and South Asian works during a literary conversation: "a book and an author can belong to more than one country or culture. English came with the colonizers, but its literature is part of our heritage too, as is pre-partition writing" (Kamal, 2019, p. 113). This strategy fits Bhabha's hybridity idea as a tool for encouraging fresh cultural interpretations. The path of Alys Binat shows the transforming power of education and personal initiative in the reconstruction of identity. Diasporic identities, according to Hall (1990), are dynamic and always changing through interaction with social and cultural elements (p. 226). Alys's choice to keep single and seek intellectual gratification captures this dynamic process. "There is a vast difference between remaining unmarried and choosing to stay single." (Kamal, 2019, p. 16) so aptly captures Alys's claim of personal agency. In 2019 Ahmed contends that "education serves as a critical tool for marginalized individuals to assert agency and redefine their identities in postcolonial contexts" (p. 58). Alys's rejection of society conventions clearly reflects Bhabha's (1994) idea of hybridity as a space of resistance and redefining: "Do any of you have the courage to live life as you want?" (Kamal, 2019, pp. 16-17). Alys's observations on her job as a teacher further investigate the interaction between personal and society transformation: "It wasn't that she was averse to Mrs. Mom, only that none of the girls seemed to have ever considered traveling the world by themselves, let alone been encouraged to do so" (Kamal, 2019,

p. 13). This fits Hall's thesis that the development of identity is intrinsically connected to more general sociopolitical settings. The story exposes how communal dynamics affect cultural negotiation, therefore challenging colonial and patriarchal legacies. According to Bhabha (1994), hybrid identities develop not just on the personal level but also inside societies involved in cultural interaction (p. 55). Kamal shows how collective identity is rebuilt via conversation and opposition as a nation struggling with the dual legacy of colonialism and patriarchy. This is clear in the way the Binat family is portrayed, as different ideas about gender and tradition generate conflict and support development. "But the future is built on a past, good and bad" (Kamal, 2019, p. 120), so symbolizing the collective battle for identity reconstruction at the climax of the book, when Alys faces society expectations during her sister's wedding. Asserting that "narratives of resistance are integral to postcolonial identity development, as they challenge dominant historical narratives," Patel (2020) emphasizes the part literature plays in creating communal memory and identity (p. 135). Emphasizing the need of critical thinking in rebuilding collective identity, Alys's efforts to motivate her students reflect this theme: Think for yourselves, question everything. Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019) powerfully shows Bhabha's idea of the "Third Space" as a dynamic location of cultural negotiation. The Third Space, according to Bhabha (1994), lets hybrid identities arise that go beyond strict cultural boundaries (p. 37). Alys Binat questions and patriarchal systems, stating. "Unfortunately, I don't think any man I've met is my equal, and neither, I fear, is any man likely to think I'm his. So, no marriage for me." (Kamal, 2019, p. 15), therefore highlighting the potential of the Third Space to inspire resistance and creativity against social conventions. Alys's encounters with many characters throughout the book draw attention to the ambivalence and complexity of negotiating hybrid identities. Her relationship with Darsee, for instance, changes as both characters negotiate their cultural differences until they finally find common ground in respect and understanding. This resolution captures Bhabha's belief that hybridity generates venues for cultural change: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112).

Understanding the character development in the novel depends mostly on Stuart Hall's conception of identity as "becoming" instead of "being". According to Hall (1990), historical, social, and cultural settings all help to define a fluid and continuous process that is identity (p. 225). From a socially limited teacher to an empowered individual, Alys Binat's path exemplifies

this idea of identity as always changing: “I’ll never be lonely... because I’ll always have books.””(Kamal, 2019, p. 96). The story development of supporting characters like Sherry, who chooses to negotiate society expectations by compromise, helps Hall's idea of identity as "becoming" to be even more evident. This juxtaposition emphasizes the several hybrid identities seen in postcolonial settings. In 2020 Patel argues that "Hall's theory remains relevant in contemporary postcolonial literature, where characters often embody identities in flux, negotiating between tradition and modernity" (p. 140). The study highlights how cultural hybridity impacts identity development, therefore greatly adding to postcolonial literary discourse. According to Bhabha (1994), “hybridity disturbs prevailing narratives and provides venues for underprivileged voices to surface” (p. 210). Kamal's book shows this disruption through its heterogeneous characters and locations. Moreover, new research emphasizes how such stories help to redefine cultural limits. Sharma and Gill (2023) "postcolonial texts that employ hybridity as a narrative strategy challenge the essentialist views of culture and identity, offering a more fluid and inclusive perspective" (p. 112). Kamal achieves this by combining Austen's story framework with traditional South Asian themes, therefore producing a hybrid literary style that resists classification. Furthermore, Kaur and Desai (2023) states, "diasporic narratives not only capture the tension of belonging but also provide a means of reconciling historical memory with contemporary identity creation" (p. 76). *Unmarriageable's* portrayal of cultural hybridity speaks to modern diaspora experiences, in which people negotiate several cultural influences. Diasporic stories often reflect the ambivalence of belonging, where characters must reconcile their inherited traditions with the demands of modern life.

## Conclusion

*Unmarriageable* (2019) by Soniah Kamal is an amazing illustration of how postcolonial writing interacts with concerns of hybridity, cultural negotiation, and identity. By means of its investigation of Homi Bhabha's idea of the "Third Space" and Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as a dynamic process, the book emphasizes the flux and complexity of identity in postcolonial and diasporic settings. Kamal deftly combines Western inspirations with South Asian customs to create a story that questions dominant narratives and promotes cross-cultural communication.

Reimagining *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in a South Asian context helps Kamal (2019) expose the transforming power of hybrid identities as well as challenge colonial and patriarchal legacies. The challenges and victories of the characters highlight the ambivalence of belonging and show how hybridity may be a place of cultural innovation, resistance, and creative inspiration. Kamal's writings, then, greatly advance postcolonial studies by providing a sophisticated perspective on how historical, social, and cultural processes continually alter and change identities. In the larger sense of globalization, this work highlights the continuous confrontation between modernism and tradition, therefore exposing the opportunities and difficulties of cultural hybridity. The book emphasizes in rebuilding identities and bridging cultural gaps the need of knowledge, autonomy, and critical thinking. Kamal's story speaks to readers to challenge and reinterpret their own cultural narratives by means of its perceptive depiction of hybrid identities and critique of society standards.

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