

Suppressing Agency: Transitivity Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) explores the notion of female body in the context of a dystopian society, the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead, where female body is considered as the essential source of breeding. Defined by their reproduction ability, the handmaid's body is constantly controlled, oppressed, objectified and exploited by different means of power. This paper attempts to delineate the power relations between the main characters by analysing the role of participants and processes in different situations. Theories on transitivity introduced by Halliday (2004), Simpson (1993) and Ryder (2006) have been employed here to examine how different processes assign different degree of power to the characters. The focus of current study is mainly on the parts where the protagonist's body is foregrounded as the sexual object used for the government's reproduction goals. The analysis attempts to show how the female body is objectified and oppressed by different means of power and how consequently it becomes alienated from the main character who does not directly affect anything or anyone and remains passive throughout the novel.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, transitivity, female body, agency, power relation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Handmaid's Tale represents a dystopian society of Gilead that has replaced the United States. In this Christian totalitarian theocracy, due to the decrease in reproduction rate, women are taken as sex slaves to produce children for the higher classes, i.e. the Commanders and their barren wives. The handmaid's body is highly controlled and any oppression is justified by religious doctrines. The events are narrated by the protagonist, Offred, a fertile handmaid who has been forced to bear children for the barren elite. Reflecting on her past and present situation, Offred attempts to resist the limitation on her freedom. The body and its objectification is the main focus of the novel, thus it is important to analyse how it is perceived and treated by different characters.

The present study focuses on the transitivity choices associated to the body. As the novel portrays, the handmaid's body is used as the mere object of reproduction for the totalitarian government of Gilead, and in this sense, any control and intrusion to female body is justified. This paper attempts to explore how intruding the female body creates different power relations between the characters and how it contributes to the passivity of the protagonist. Theory of transitivity has been chosen as the framework to explore the ways in which choice of different processes and participants affect meaning and contribute to the characters' perception and oppression of the body.

The excerpts chosen for this paper are from the parts in which the concept of body and its oppression is foregrounded. Some examples from the novel are selected for explaining different transitivity categories and three excerpts are chosen for analysing Offred's body in relation to other major characters (i.e. the doctor, the Commander who is one of the members of the regime which defines certain ideologies, and his wife Serena Joy) in different situations. In this stylistic analysis, Simpson's (1993) account of Halliday's model of transitivity has been used as the

main framework. Ryder's (2006) transitivity study and some notions like coding participant's power and responsibility in transitivity choices have also been used as an application to uncover power relations between the characters.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON TRANSITIVITY

A linguistic analysis of transitivity has been conducted by many scholars in different genres. The first is Halliday's (1971) study on William Golding's novel *The Inheritor* (1955), in which he believes certain transitivity choices reveal different world-views and each choice represents significant position of characters in relation to others. Burton (1982) has employed transitivity choices to represent how using different processes can contribute to the character's agency or passivity. Her study on an excerpt from Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) shows that the narrator cannot control herself and her environment and is the victim of hospital staff in her electric shock treatment. Burton's stylistics analysis represents certain power relationship between the patient and the doctors. The inequality of power demonstrates that the female patient is helpless in influencing anything, while the doctors actively influence the whole process. In this case, Mills (1995) claims that using a high number of material action intention processes in which the characters perform voluntarily actions reveal their control over themselves and their situation; however, mental processes contribute to the introspective characterization and supervention processes make them appear passive and inactive. (Types of process will be introduced in section 3). Mills employs a feminist stylistic approach in examining the text and uncovering ideology behind it. She believes that notions like agency and transitivity choices could be stylistically explored to describe gendered views in the text. Mills states that transitivity choices in syntactic level has a significant role in characterization: "The extent to which a character is the passive victim of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action, is one of the concerns of feminist stylistics" (p.144).

Other scholars have also taken a stylistic approach in examining transitivity choices. Kies (1990) explores the linguistic devices used in George Orwell's *1984* (1949) to show how the narrator's agency is suppressed and how it contributes to his powerlessness in relation to the totalitarian government. Passives structure, nominalization, intransitives, depersonalization, negation, etc. are some stylistic devices employed in his study to uncover the character's passivity and lack of control in the action he is involved in. Simpson and Canning (2014) explore the methods of encoding actions and events in fictional works and analyse a passage from Joseph Conrad's novel *Chance* (1913) to reveal character's struggle to make sense of his situation. Kennedy (1982) examines a murder scene in Conrad's story *The Secret Agent* (1907). He analyses the stylistic choices which represent the murderer's detachment from the actions and focuses on the verbs which reveals the murderer's lack of responsibility for the murder. Ezzina (2016) explores the linguistic structure of Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to reveal postmodernist techniques employed by the writer. She analyses different processes and participants' roles to uncover power relations between them.

3. THEORY ON TRANSITIVITY

The following study on introducing transitivity is taken from Simpson's (1993) model of Halliday's notion of transitivity (2004) and Ryder's (2006) findings in his stylistic application. The transitivity model is part of the Systematic Functional Grammar and it refers to the representation of meaning in sentences. Transitivity is considered as an ideational function of language and explores how language reflects the "mental picture of reality" and the world (Simpson, 1993, p. 82). Transitivity carries out this function "by expressing *processes*" in the clause (p. 82). Clauses are composed of three parts: *process*, *participants* and *circumstances*. They are expressed by the verb, noun, and adverbial clauses respectively. Processes are classified by actions, speech, states of mind and states of being. Process is categorized as *material*, *mental*, *relational*, *verbal* and *existential*. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) present Simpson's transitivity categories in a model which is introduced in the following section:

Main category	Sub-category	Further sub-category	Participants
Material	Action	Intention	Actor (animate) (Goal)
	Action	Supervention	Actor (animate) (Goal)
	Event		Actor (inanimate) (Goal)
Verbalisation			Sayer (Verbiage) (Target)
Mental	Perception		Senser Phenomenon
	Reaction		Senser Phenomenon
	Cognition		Senser Phenomenon
Relational	Intensive		Carrier Attribute
	Possessive		Carrier Attribute
	Circumstantial		Carrier Attribute

Fig. 1. Simpson's (1993) transitivity categories summarized by Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, p. 73)

Material processes are the processes of doing and happening. There are two participants in material process - the *actor* and the *goal*. The actor is the doer of the process and the goal is affected by it. The process performed by animate actor is called *action* process; the one performed by inanimate actor is referred to as *event* process. Action processes can be done voluntarily (*intention*) or unintentionally (*supervention*). In the following example, *I* (Offred) is the actor and *avoid* refers to the material action which is done intentionally:

- (1) I avoid looking down at my body.

The doer of process can be inanimate, for example body parts, so it is referred to as an event process:

- (2) A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me.

The doer is the agent if the process contains a goal as well. In the following example *he* (the Commander) is affecting the goal *my body*:

- (3) He is stroking my body.

Verbal processes are the process of saying. The participant who is speaking is the *sayer* and the one who is addressed by it is called *target*. What is said is called *verbiage*, as in this quote which is said by the Commander (sayer) to Offred (target):

- (4) "I thought you might enjoy it for a change."

Mental processes are the process of sensing. They are subdivided to *perception*, *reaction* and *cognition* processes. The participant is called *senser*. What is induced from the state is called *phenomenon*. "While material clauses are concerned with our experience of the material world, mental clauses are concerned with our experience of the world of our own consciousness" (Halliday, Christian and Matthiessen, p.197). Mental processes thus involve those events perceived by the state of mind. For example:

- (5) I felt uncouth.

I (Offred) refers to the Senser and *uncouth* refers to the Phenomenon.

Phenomenon can also be coded as subordinate clause (*to be held and told, to be valued, to be totally clean...*) as the following examples:

- (6) I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued.
 (7) I wish to be totally clean, germless, without bacteria, like the surface of the moon.

Processes of being are called relational processes. They represent a relationship between two participants and are divided in to three categories as *intensive*, *possessive* and *circumstantial*. According to this classification, relational processes have different functions. They can have the function of "identifying", "attribute" or "possession" (Halliday, 2004, p. 171). In the following examples, *strange, too important, too scarce, a national resource, containers, disembodied and two-legged wombs* have an identifying role to the body:

- (8) My nakedness is strange to me already.
 (9) I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource.
 (10) We are containers, it's only the in-sides of our bodies that are important.
 (11) Without it [a real body] I too am disembodied.
 (12) We are two-legged wombs.

Relational process can assign an attribute role as in:

- (13) My body seems outdated.

It establishes a possession function like:

- (14) I have viable ovaries.

Or a circumstantial role as in the sentence:

- (15) His hand is between my leg.

Behavioral processes are positioned between material and mental category. They represent "the outer manifestations of inner workings, the acting out of processes of consciousness ... and physiological states" (Ryder, 2006, p.41). The participant behaving is called *behavior*:

- (16) They were planning to get me across the border there.

Existential processes are categorized between relational and material processes. They are concerned with existence and happening of an event and are composed of only one part - the *existent*. In the following example, the clause (*something dead about it*) represents existent.

(17) There's something dead about it.

Ryder (2006) states that choosing particular processes and participants reveals significant power relations and responsibility between them: "Participants have significantly different degrees of power depending on how eventlike the process is in which they are involved" (p. 42). Ryder further classifies the participants according to the degree of power they have: The existent in existential processes and the identified in relational processes "are the least powerful or active" (p. 42). The sayer in mental processes, the behavior in behavioral processes and also sayer in verbal processes are more active since they are doing something, but they are not very powerful in a sense that they "do not directly affect someone or something else" (p. 42). In transitivity category, material processes are considered as "the most eventlike" (p. 42). The variety within material processes assigns different degrees of power to the participants. Ryder claims that if participants act as the medium, they are active but since their action does not affect other entities, they are not particularly powerful. In two-participant processes, if the process involves a goal, "the Agent's power will be greater if the Goal undergoes a change of state rather than just a change of location" (p. 43). In the novel, there are many examples in which Offred is the doer of actions, but she does not affect others: 'I take off my clothes, and leave them folded on the chair, I lie down on the examining table, I pull the second sheet, I reach my hand out, fumble for the small lever ..., pull it back...'; 'I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head' (Atwood, 1985/1996, p. 105); 'I lie there like a dead bird' (p. 267). In these examples, Offred is acting on her environment for adjusting herself. She does not affect other characters and is also unable to change her circumstances.

As discussed, choosing different types of processes represents participants with different degrees of power and responsibility. Lexicogrammatical metaphor does the same by allowing the author "to create more complex stylistic effects by upgrading or downgrading processes" (Ryder, p. 43). Ryder considers William Golding's novel *The Inheritors* (1963) as a classic example of lexicogrammatical metaphor in which Neanderthals do not play an active role, instead, the role of agent or medium is assigned to their body parts or inanimate objects. In this sense, the human beings as natural agents and goals are absent or indirectly referred to and this assigns less power to their participation. Thus,

In general, any metaphorical encoding that recodes Goals as less affected participants or Circumstantials will decrease the perceived power of the natural Agent, and any encoding that codes less central entities as Goals will increase the perceived power of the entity coded as Agent (p. 43).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are some examples in which the body parts play the role of agent or medium. For instance, when Offred is examined by the doctor, most of the actions are done by the doctor's hands or fingers: A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me, the finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws, and: his hand, sliding up my leg (Atwood, p. 70).

4. APPLICATION OF TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS

There are different strategies of selecting passages for stylistics analysis. Two of them are considered as the most common method. One is a random selection of few passages based on their importance; the other is identifying linguistic features "on the basis of some interpretive rationale" and examining their occurrence in the text. Both strategies can be "evidently incomplete and partial" but they can also reveal "distinctive frequencies" of some certain elements in the text and thus "highlight data which can become the grounds for improved hypotheses about textual functions and effects" (Toolan, 1990, pp. 64-65).

The three following excerpts are selected based on the second strategy. They are chosen from the parts where Offred as the main character and focalizer interacts with three other major characters; the doctor, the Commander and Serena Joy. These characters control or intrude Offred's body for their own benefits. The analysis seeks to explore how participants act or affect others, and the way it uncovers power relations between them. The focus is mainly on material processes to explore how participants affect or are affected by different actions. The whole excerpt is inserted here for understanding the particular setting in which the events are taking place, but only important processes which are related to the purpose of discussion have been selected for the analysis. Modality structures have been omitted since they are concerned with interpersonal aspects of language not the ideational ones.

The first excerpt is taken from Offred's visit to the doctor and describes the usual check-up she has for her pregnancy test. After some monthly check-ups, she is not pregnant yet. The doctor mentions that the Commanders are not fertile and brings up the suggestion of impregnating her himself so that she could be saved.

Excerpt 1. After I've filled the small bottle left ready for me in the little washroom, *I take off my clothes, behind the screen, and leave them folded on the chair. When I'm naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of*

chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only. When I'm arranged I reach my hand out, fumble for the small lever at the right side of the table, pull it back. Somewhere else a bell rings, unheard by me. After a minute the door opens, footsteps come in, there is breathing. He isn't supposed to speak to me except when it's absolutely necessary. But this doctor is talkative. "How are we getting along?" he says, some tic of speech from the other time. The sheet is lifted from my skin, a draft pimples me. A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me, I am poked and prodded. The finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws. "Nothing wrong with you," the doctor says, as if to himself. "Any pain, honey?" He calls me honey. "No," I say. My breasts are fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot. The breathing comes nearer. I smell old smoke, aftershave, tobacco dust on hair. Then the voice, very soft, close to my head: that's him, bulging the sheet. "I could help you," he says. Whispers. "What?" I say. "Shh," he says. "I could help you. I've helped others." "Help me?" I say, my voice as low as his. "How?" Does he know something, has he seen Luke, has he found, can he bring back? "How do you think?" he says, still barely breathing it. Is that his hand, sliding up my leg? He's taken off the glove. "The door's locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his." He lifts the sheet. The lower part of his face is covered by the white gauze mask, regulation. Two brown eyes, a nose, a head with brown hair on it. His hand is between my legs. "Most of those old guys can't make it anymore," he says. "Or they're sterile." (Atwood, p. 70)

Table 1. Examples of process types in the excerpt 1.

No.	Process Type	Example
1	Material	I take off my clothes, and leave them folded on the chair. I lie down on the examining table. I pull the second sheet, the cloth on, up over my body. It intersects me. He deals with a torso only. I reach my hand out, fumble for the small lever..., pull it back... A draft pimples me. A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me. The finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws. The breathing comes nearer. I smell old smoke, aftershave, tobacco dust on hair He lifts the shit. His hand, sliding up my leg.
2	Mental	... So that the doctor will never see my face.
3	Behavioral	-
4	Relational	When I'm naked... His hand is between my legs
5	Verbal	"Nothing is wrong with you," the doctor says, as if to himself.
6	Existential	At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling.

As the table represents, material processes are used abundantly in this extract. Seven of them are assigned to Offred as the doer, two to the doctor and five to inanimate objects. It seems that the amount of action done by Offred is more, but the kind of processes shows that she is not really active. In the actions done by her, she takes the role of the agent like: I take off my clothes, and leave them folded on the chair, I pull the second sheet, the cloth on, up over my body, I reach my hand out, fumble for the small lever ..., pull it back; or the role of Medium as in: I lie down on the examining table. All the actions are related to the objects around her; she is simply preparing for the examination or setting the chair to place. She is not affecting animate objects. The doctor is involved in two process: he lifts the sheet, and: he deals with torso only, but his body parts act on their own and intrude Offred's body as in: a cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me, the finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws; and: his hand sliding up my leg. Offred is represented as a passive entity and her body is examined and obviously intruded by the doctor. The doctor body parts act the most on Offred's body. The passive structure in: I am poked and prodded, and: my breasts are fingered, also represents Offred's lack of agency.

The second excerpt represents the monthly Ceremony between Offred, the Commander and Serena Joy in which Offred is used as the fertile handmaid for the reproduction process. Offred is placed under Serena Joy's body and is in her control. The Commander does the act of mutilation on Offred's body.

Excerpt 2. *Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thigh on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge. My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. Therefore I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up. Maybe I'm crazy and this is some new kind of therapy. I wish it were true; then I could get better and this would go away. Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who's being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful, and the Commander fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he's humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It's as if he's somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. There's an impatience in his rhythm now. But isn't this everyone's wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say. What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely, like jazz garters or beauty spots: superfluous distractions for the light-minded. Outdated. It seems odd that women once spent such time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them, worrying about them, writing about them. They are so obviously recreational. This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.* (Atwood, pp. 104- 105)

Table 2. *Examples of process types in the excerpt 2.*

No.	Process Type	Example
1	Material	I lie between them. She holds my hands. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. Below it, the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. Serena Joy grips my hand. The Commander fucks. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.
2	Mental	I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter. I wish he would hurry up. I wish it were true.
3	Behavioral	-
4	Relational	Her legs are apart. My head (is) on her stomach. Her public bone (is) under the base of my skull. Her thigh (is) on either side of me. Each of mine (is) in each of hers. She is in control, of the process and thus of the product. He is preoccupied. What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It seems odd that women once spent such time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them, worrying about them, writing about them. They are so obviously recreational. This is not recreation, even for the Commander.

		This is serious business.
5	Verbal	-
6	Existential	There is an impatience in his rhythm now.

As the above findings represent, most of the processes (twelve) are relational. It seems that Offred basically describes the scene mostly in terms of circumstantial types of information as in: my head (is) on her stomach, her public bone (is) under the base of my skull, her thigh (is) on either side of me, and also attributive information like: she is in control, he is preoccupied, what is going on ... is not exciting, this is serious business, which shows her perception of the whole process. From nine material processes, only two is done by Offred and in both of them she is only the medium and affect no one: I lie between them, and I lie still.... Four actions are assigned to the Commander and in all of them he is affecting Offred's body: below it, the Commander is fucking, what he is fucking is the lower part of my body, the Commander fucks, the Commander, too, is doing his duty. The material processes in which Serena Joy is involved show her control over Offred's body: she holds my hands, and Serena Joy grips my hand. In both sentences, Serena Joy has the role of agent and Offred's body parts are the goals and the affected entities. The Commander plays the significant role in the process of Ceremony, Serena Joy has a controlling function, and Offred is a passive participant whose body is an object in the service of others and she herself does nothing but only recollects her perception from the situation she is put in.

The last excerpt is selected from one of the Commander's secret meetings with Offred. She is taken as a partner to Jezebels. When party is finished, she is alone in the room with the Commander and he initiates the sexual intercourse. Here, she is treated like a sex object, something to be possessed and entertained with.

Excerpt 3. *He's stroking my body now, from stem as they say to stern, cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg. He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership. I remind myself that he is not an unkind man; that, under other circumstances, I even like him. His hand pauses. "I thought you might enjoy it for a change." He knows that isn't enough. "I guess it was a sort of experiment." That isn't enough either. "You said you wanted to know." He sits up, begins to unbutton. Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? He's down to the shirt; then, under it, sadly, a little belly. Wisps of hair. He pulls down one of my straps, slides his other hand in among the feathers, but it's no good, I lie there like a dead bird. He is not a monster, I think. I can't afford pride or aversion, there are all kinds of things that have to be discarded, under the circumstances.* (Atwood, pp. 266-267)

Table 3. *Examples of process types in the excerpt 3.*

No.	Process Type	Example
1	Material	He's stroking my body now. He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle. His hand pauses. He sits up, begins to unbutton. He pulls down one of my straps, slides his other hand in among the feathers. I lie there like a dead bird.
2	Mental	I remind myself that he is not an unkind man. ... under other circumstances, I even like him. He knows that it isn't enough. He is not a monster, I think.
3	Behavioral	-
4	Relational	It means ownership. That isn't enough either. It's no good.
5	Verbal	I thought you might enjoy it for a change. I guess it was a sort of experiment. You said you wanted to know
6	Existential	... there are all kinds of things that have to be discarded, under the circumstances.

The material processes are the most recurrent processes here. Almost all of them is done by the Commander: he's stroking my body, he stops at the foot, he sits up, begins to unbutton, he pulls down one of my straps, slides his other hand, or his body parts: his fingers encircling the ankle, his hand pauses, and in all but the last sentence, the Commander is the Agent and Offred's body is the Goal and the affected entity. Here again, Offred does not actively participate, she is only the doer in one process; that is "lying". The simile used (like a dead bird) also intensifies her passivity. She does not even interact in the verbal processes said by the Commander. Another highlighted process in this extract is the mental process in which Offred tries to tolerate the situation by accepting the Commander as a good man: I remind myself that he is not an unkind man, under other circumstances, I even like him, he is not a monster, I think.

5. CONCLUSION

Focusing on transitivity choices, this study attempts to suggest the passivity of the protagonist in relation to her body and other major characters. The analysis reveals that Offred is not the active participant in the processes she is involved; she is rather a goal of both animate and inanimate doers or the medium of processes which do not affect anyone or anything. In most cases, Offred's body parts stand away from her and different characters intrude or control them. Other major characters' body parts seem to act more than Offred herself. In general, she is alienated not only from her bodily functions but also from the characters who inflict power on her. She seems unable to change the states of events happened to her and is simply the witness of processes taken place around her. Although analysing transitivity choices can be helpful in uncovering meaning in the text, it is not an absolute device in interpreting meaning. Like other stylistics analysis, transitivity choices reveal different meanings depending on the context in which it occurs. Regarding the novel's totalitarian oppressive context, it is probable to consider the transitivity choices in relation to the first character's body as manifestation of lack of freedom, power and agency.

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