CHAPTER-IV

ALTRUISTS
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Altruism is a psychological process – a process that awakens the ideas of superconsciousness. Even in the religion scriptures of Hindu Mythology more especially in the Bhagvad Gita, it is the guilt consciousness which enkindles the superconsciousness of the inner awakening or the moral consciousness. An analytical interpretation thus reveals the fact that human nature in general combines the guilt-consciousness and the superconsciousness in himself. It is the structural and the contextual realities that make or mar the total development of human personalities. The same is true of the regenerated or the altruists of Desai’s novels.

Anita Desai’s novels reveal the fact that there is a series of events that goes inside the psychic depth of her characters. This series of change creates in them a glow, a self-realization to convert them into the altruistic purposiveness. An altruist is the person who discovers the secret of an inner happiness in the welfare of others. In the novels of Anita Desai the characters who feel frustrated either because of marital disharmony or loneliness in life are shown to indulge in social or religious activities. These characters generally avoid to be benefited for their selfish motives. They ingeniously work to help or provide benefits to others. The female protagonists such as Sarah, Sita, Ila Das, Nanda Kaul, Bim, Mira Masi, Lotte and Lila can be regarded as altruists. Apart from these female protagonists the male protagonists like Nirode, Deven Sharma, Baumgartner and Matteo can also be ranked as altruists. As K. Meera Bai observes:

Instead of withdrawing from the people and the world, they sublimate their happiness by substituting their loss
with a sense of achievement by means of social work or recourse to a Guru.¹

Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* becomes also as altruist when she gives up her own identity for the sake of her husband. Her readiness to join Adit as he plans journey back to India is her attempt to resolve the persistent clash between her conscious and unconscious, when Sarah would, “sacrifice anything, anything at all in order to maintain however superficially a semblance of order and discipline in her house, in her relationship with him.”² It is appropriate at this point to place Sarah in the perspective of Tony Wolf’s models and also in the letter and spirit of the format of this presentation. She represents the positive and favourable mother archetype which stands for the “protective, homemaking and sheltering attitude.”³ Gifted with patience and love, she has the ability to comprehend her husband’s needs and commitments. Her kind and sympathetic attitude to his problems vouchsafes the cherishing and protecting components of her personality. Her sufferings, dilemma and cross-cultural shock do not affect her relationship with her husband. Unlike Maya and Monisha, she suffers from no persecution complex.

With a remarkable sense of understanding, she negotiates the tortuous convulsion of her existence without any residue or sourness. And realizing Adit’s dislike for British broths and stews, she attempts to cook Indian food for him. Her sincerity, truthfulness and integrity in rational commitments exalt her to a feminine par excellence. Her obligation for her husband’ sake is a way of leading her to be an altruist. Altruism is the base of her regeneration. She truly makes reconciliation and follows the concept of Indianess as well as the concept of an Ideal wife:
It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye. That was what hurt—not saying good-bye to England, because England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance from her, but always within the scope of a return visit.4

Even a bit of work sincerely done in one’s small place, intended to bring about the goodwill and selfless love is also altruism. In the end of the novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Sita reconciles and compromises with her life situation and accepts life in its natural stride. She comes back at home with her husband, Raman. She understands that the truth of life lies in relatedness and not in escapism. The harmony in her life is achieved by balancing the negative and positive attitudes of life. Sita’s alienation is the result of her emotional imbalance. When she learns the full meaning of life, she turns from negation to affirmation. Her resolution to go back to the main manland with her husband, though a painful compromise, indicates her goodwill and selfless love for all family members. Sita’s final acceptance of life with all its ups and downs and dark as well as bright aspects denotes the change of attitude, from egoism to altruism. Lawrence’s poem illumines and enlightens her to choose a course so as to be a part of the world:

The wild young heifer, glancing distraught.
With a strange, new knocking of life at her side
Runs seeking loneliness.
The little grain draws down the earth to hide.
Nay, even the slumbrous egg as it labours under the shell
Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell.\textsuperscript{5}

Sita has to make this choice because she is a part of the earth, of life, and can no more reject like the slumbrous egg or the heifer or the grain. The lines enable her to bridge the gap between her and the world. Thus Sita transcends egotistical constraints, pettiness and clears shadow residues.

In \textit{Fire On the Mountain} Ila Das is the only character in the novel that does not have a negative streak in her temperament. She works as a welfare officer about the benefits of family planning, various diseases and tries her best to prevent them from practicing social evils and superstitions. As a sad and disappointed lady, she exhibits those attributes of social obligation, which distinguish her from the others in the novel. Ila Das has sacrificed all her personal pleasures and comforts first for the sake of her family and then for the sake of society. She has met deception after deception. She has ever been deceived by her sons and husband. She leads a life of a broken lady. Mrs. Kaul has seen in her “many pieces” and “broken bit.”\textsuperscript{6} The novelist has analyzed the inner potentialities of a woman in her:

It was this cackle, this scream of hers, Nanda kaul thought that held all the assorted pieces of her life together like a string or chain. It was the motif of her life, unmistakably. Such a voice no human being ought to have had: it was anti-social to possess, to emit such sounds as poor Ila Das made by way of communication.\textsuperscript{7}

As a woman broken into pieces, Ila Das shows a will to resist the evil in life and at the same time prepares herself to face the challenges of the adverse circumstances of life. She decides to resign all her egoism and tries to realize herself through social obligations. As a social welfare officer, she
wages a war against the social evils prevailing in the society. She serves as a lecturer but she resigns from her job and embraces the life of a social servant. She always lives ready for “call for humanity.” After her resignation, Ila Das suffers from the pangs of poverty, as she reports it to Mrs. Nanda Kaul:

For a while her sister had kept her... then Nanda Kaul had heard of the course in social service which, if Ila was willing to take it, would definitely lead to a Government job and with it would go the usual emoluments of pension, provident fund and medical aid that now seemed like pieces of gold to her. She had taken the course, triumphantly collected the rubber-stamped document qualifying her to be a social worker, and arrived in the Himalayan foothills to do her duty amongst the peasants, woodcutters, road labours and goatherds.  

In spite of her poverty and adverse circumstances, Ila Das does not give up hope for a good life in society. She fights for positivisms of life until she is destroyed by the negative forces of society. Like a “Karma Yogi” she never thinks of the results that might baffle her novel existence of social obligations. Ila Das has opposed the marriage of the infant daughter of a farmer as a social welfare officer. As O. P. Budsulia observes: “She awakens in herself the feeling of an altruist and prepares to serve the society with disinterested motives in life.” She confesses frankly to Nanda Kaul: “Darling, I am growing old.” She struggles for prevailing cruelties and injustices like malnutrition, child-marriages, disparities between the male and female world and the corrupt practices of society. She observes “The deepest gloom” on the faces of the poor and downtrodden of the society:
Nanda, if you only saw the havoc played amongst the children by conjunctivities and trachoma, how many of them are doomed to blindness? But will they believe me when I tell them they need to go to the clinic for treatment?  

Ila Das has tried to assert her identity in her own way. She has never asked for help or begged and has tried to make two ends meet as best as she could. As a woman of principles, Ila has the wisdom and grace to see that she, in spite of her poverty, is much better off than the poor people around her. Her job as a welfare officer of the government gives her “This little bit of security, this tiny bit of status... as a welfare officer, employed by the government.” With the honesty of her heart, she goes about working among the people, trying to reach out to them to improve the lot of the villagers.

Leading the life of an altruist and a social servant, Ila Das faces crises in her life, symbolizing the perversion of human values. The acts of violence at last culminate in the rape and tragic death of Ila Das by Preet Singh and his gang. Ila Das has lodged a complaint against him for breaking the law of child marriage as he had married his adolescent daughter with an old man. In the evening when Ila Das comes through the forest path, Preet Singh behaves roughly with her. The figure of Preet Singh emerging from the rock is a ghastly sight in the still quiet hillside:

Just then a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock, that last rock between her and the hamlet, and sprang soundlessly at her, she staggered under it weight with a gasp that ripped through her chest.
It has her by the throat. She struggled choking, trying to stretch and stretch and stretch that gasp till it becomes a shout, a shout that the villagers would hear, the red dog would hear, a shout for help.\textsuperscript{14}

Hearing this shout, nobody comes to her help. The fingers of Preet Singh tighten and Ila Das lies dead, “Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark.”\textsuperscript{15} This is the culminating point of humiliation for a woman.

\textit{The Village By The Sea} is a novel which is basically concerned with the tracing of the social and psychological progression in the lives of Hari and Lila, brother and sister. Anita Desai while outlining their gradual progression delineates skilfully the predicament of their family. Mr. De Silva has altruistic motivations on humanitarian ground by helping Hari, Lila and her ailing mother. Mr. De Silva promised Hari a good job if he came to Bombay. Mr. Silva is fully conscious about social obligations. He gets Lila’s mother admitted to the hospital at Alibag. He has also paid all the amount for the treatment of Lila’s mother. On the other hand, when Hari struggles in Bombay for money, Mr. Pan Wallah helps him with altruistic purposivness. In the company of Mr. Pan wallah Hari develops self-confidence. He develops willpower to face the life boldly; he learns the skill of watch mending.

Anita Desai in \textit{Clear Light of Day} chooses the concept of ‘New Woman’ who is contemplative about her predicament and fights against the general, accepted norms and currents. Bimla, as a altruist, is the chief protagonist in \textit{Clear Light Of Day}. She sacrifices her life for the responsibilities of family instead of marrying. For the fulfilment of
responsibilities she is emotionally and economically independent. Bim
gathers her ruined family by “massage of love” and “the gospel of
integration, altruism and agape.”

She never wanted to marry: “I can think
of hundreds of things to do instead.”

She performs her familial
responsibilities very carefully and adds:

I shall never Baba and Raja and Mira masi.... She raised
her hand to her hair, lifting it up and letting it fall with a
luxuriant, abundant motion. I shall work. I shall do
things, She went on, I shall earn my own living and look
after Mira masi and Baba and-and be independent.
There’ll be so many things to do.

Bimla comes out invariably with love and nourishment in any
tsituation. Being herself young and also intellectually attractive to Bakul. She
betrays no visible or invisible ripples of desires, avarice and jealousy etc.
when Bakul comes with a proposal for Tara’s hand. Tara’s views of Bim’s
gray hair, fading youth and charm is only a reflection of grossness lacking
the subtlety of a life of integrated wholeness. This all is withstanding the fact
that Tara tells her “you looked so like Mama from a distance.”

Tara also finds a motherly figure in Bim. Bim is poised, controlled and balanced in all
situations. These are the virtues emphasized by Jung in his discussion of the
Mother archetype:

... Maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority
of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that
transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; for all
that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains. that fosters
growth and fertility.
Anita Desai uses the technique of flashback skilfully to narrate the depth of human relationship with the historical perspectives and the flight of an individual in search of her existence. As Virender Parmar observes rightly: “Bim of all the heroines makes it for this union with a translucence which is an experience of altruism.” She reveals different kinds of human relationship, she faces the tragedy of social perversion and distraction of human trust. Bim sacrifices all her personal comfort with altruistic motivations for the sake of her family. When she meets failure in her mission, she entirely dedicates herself to the depth of her emotions in order to realize the light – the light of soul, which may dispel the darkness inside her. As O. P. Budholia remarks: “From her childhood onwards, Bimla cherishes and sustains the feelings and thoughts that lead her to a life of social obligations.... She is involved deeply in her symbolic search of the archetypal sustaining mother.”

The novel displays the cordial relations between two brothers- Raja and Baba and two sisters- Bimla and Tara, until they attain their youthful days. After the death of their parents, only Mira-masi remains in the family to look after them. As the time passes, Tara marries Bakul and leaves India for Ceylon. Raja also shifts from Delhi to Hyderabad and settles there with his family. In Old Delhi, in their parental house, only Bim lives with her neurotic brother Baba. Like a altruist, Bim sacrifices all the pleasures of a young lady just for the sake of her physically handicapped brother Baba. As Virender Parmar observes rightly:

If Tara ‘knits’ for her children, Bim ‘knits’ for humanity.

In fact, she has already transcended the personalistic core to embrace the summits of altruism.... From the
personalistic commitments to Baba and Mira masi, Bim extends her maternal umbrella to her students in specific and to humanity in general... she stands firm as a light house, a mentor guiding its destiny to a safer shore.\textsuperscript{23}

Tara and Bim present a sharp contrast to each other. Tara being dull at studies invites reprimands from her teachers and Bim endowed with keen intelligence and intellectual curiosity regarding school, teachers and lessons takes it as a challenge. Further, while Tara hated going to the mission hospital to distribute fruits and blankets donated by her school to the non paying patient on Thursday, Bim, on the humanitarian ground, regarded it an opportunity to be of service to the ailing. Bim from very childhood has developed the altruistic vision as social obligation. Besides family feuds, she creates altruism as the base of her regeneration. At school on every Thursday:

The girls were sent, two by two, with a teacher at the head, to the mission hospital on the other side of the thick stonewall, to distribute fruits and blankets to the non-paying patients. These blankets were made up of squares of red wool that the girls knitted during craft class on thick, blunt wooden needles.... Tara suffered genuine physical agonies.... The next Thursday she pretended to be ill. Other weeks, she made the most preposterous excuses, trying anything to be let off going to school on charity Thursday. But Bim realized what was going on and told Aunt Mira... said Bim. Too fine a lady to step into the hospital ward.\textsuperscript{24}
Further more, on growing up, while Tara got married and settled down as a housewife, Bim refused to marry as she idolized “Florence Nightingale alone with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses.” Significantly, Bim succeeds in living up to the ideal and plays Nightingale and Joan of Arc in her own circle by looking after Raja in his illness and her aunt. Bim looks after Mira masi carefully. She lifted, turned and dressed her. As Bim is also more conscious about Aunt Mira’s “pulse beating like a bird’s under her finger – less than a bird, beating like the pulse of an embryo in a fine – shelled egg- only the merest flutter that she had to strain to feel and keep between her thumb and finger, safe.” Her family doctor, Dr. Biswas observes the sacrificial role of Bimla in the following lines:

Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others-to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them.

As an altruist, she finds the base of herself as she admits honestly and sincerely the consequences of her action. She thinks of her existence like an old woman who “is longer watched and need no longer pretence.” She removes all her doubts and comes to develop a positive mindset. The irony of the novel is that in spite of her sacrifice at the familial altar everyone is busy in his or her family and she gets nothing but acrimony and bitterness.

There are some fine parallels between Saroj and Bimla. As a chief protagonist in Kamla Markanday’s Two Virgins Saroja like Bimla works for altruistic purposiveness of life. Saroja is sensitive to the suffering of others
and commiserates them. Commenting on Saroja, K. Meera Bai points out: “Saroja is affectionate and attached to her mother, father and aunt... one of Markanday’s finest and most attractive creations.”²⁹ As a self sacrificing being, Bimla may be analyzed on two levels- the sense of self and pure awareness. Jayant Deshpandey observes:

‘An individual may be characterized as a combination of physical body, its internal connection that gives rise to memories, skills, behavior and of course, consciousness: the sense of self or personal identity, pure awareness, the spark of life or even the soul.’³⁰

In her attempt to take care of everyone, in ignoring her humiliations and others’ ingratitude, in facing the harsh realities of life and in reconciling herself even with those forces which had been associated with the dust storm such as the actions of Raja, Bim becomes “symbolic of mother India herself who accommodates all, rejects none.”³¹

Another character is Mira Masi who is also altruist and it becomes her base or regeneration. Younger than her mother, Mira falls in whirlpool of her sorrows at the age of twelve. She leads the life of frustration and isolation. Mira seems “absent minded ectoplasmic”³² as she is nervous and sorrow striken. After the death of Bim’s mother, she looks after the entire family. Despite fueds, she develops altruistic motivations for social obligation. Masi feels exhilarated in nursing and serving the small children of Bim’s family:

The first summer that Aunt Mira was with them, Bim and Raja caught typhoid. They were fortunate to have her in the house since she nursed them alone. They were so ill
they were often unconscious, drifting about without any moorings in the luminous world of fever and then returning to the edge of consciousness in a kind of daze, not really aware who it was that lifted their heads and spooned barely water in to their mouths and held cold sponges to their foreheads.... Nursing was all, he said, and nursing was what Aunt Mira did best.\textsuperscript{33}

Mira Masi offers motherly affection and duties to these children. In spite of her in-law's bad treatment with her, she develops feeling for social obligation. She looked after children so well that they had become fond of her and starts depending on her support as they grow up:

She would be just the old log, the dried mass of roots on which they grow. She was the tree, she was the soil, and she was the earth. Touching them, watching them, she saw them as the leaves and flowers and fruits of the earth, so beautiful, she murmured, touching watching – so beautiful and strong and living.\textsuperscript{34}

In \textit{Baurmgarner's Bombay}, Lotte, a German cabaret dancer in a hotel, also becomes altruist when she shares the suffering of Hugo. His acquaintance with Lotte is not new. She had been Hugo's childhood friend in Berlin and she is like a sister to him. Now Lotte was settled in Bombay and has had a false marriage with Kunti Sethia to avoid the prison life of detention camp and to get Indian nationality. In the company of Lotte, Hugo develops friendship. He can bravely face his isolation and endure his situation. Lotte's company is a source of consolation and is like an oasis in a desert:
It was only Lotte who kept him in touch with the German tongue – but that was not why he went to see her. He saw Lotte not because she was from Garmany but because she belonged to the India of his own experience; he was different in may ways but still they shared enough to be comfortable with each other, prickly and quick-tempered but comfortable as brother and sister are together.\textsuperscript{35}

The story of the novel is narrated after the death of Hugo. Lotte, his close friend, finds some cards in which she finds the entire life-story of Baumgartner and she informs police and narrates all the incidents to police. It is humanitarian on behalf of Lotte for the help of Hugo. She becomes an altruist. Like an altruist Lotte visits the blood stained and smeared Baumgartner’s room where he was murdered by another German neurotic boy Kurt.

In \textit{Journey to Ithaca} Anita Desai reveals the spiritual and humanitarian notes in abundance. Laila is an altruist. Being mother at Ashram is a way of leading her to be altruist. The work, which is done in the process of sainthood and teaching to disciples is an altruistic process. She is born in agnostic and academic family. She is sent to Cairo for schooling. There she comes in contact with Muslim girls and although she is not much interested in institutionalized religion, yet she joins Koran classes. Instead of joining Westernized girls, she prefers to make friends with a single devout Muslim girl Fatima, and with her goes to the Mullah who teaches recitation of Koran. She wondered about Fatima, “what was this creature, a good Muslim? It had never ventured into her parent’s agnostic, academic home.”\textsuperscript{36} The Koran classes were different from the French classes where pupils took
the liberty of giggling and winking: "No one took such liberties with the Mullah. The girls kept their eyes to the written page... and Laila saw a way of learning that had no opening to debate, discussion, doubt or argument as it had been in her parent's home. Here was a book, a subject a doctrine that did not allow questioning. It was powerful and authoritative in a strange and inexplicable way, it pleased her even as it puzzled."³⁷

From Cario, she is sent to Paris to live with her aunt for study. She hates the discipline of the house and behaves in her own defiant wayward manner to the chagrin of aunt Francoise. She declares that she wouldn't eat meat and when insisted upon by the aunt, she bursts out: "I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals. Do you know what you are eating? Have you been into a butcher's shop to see it when it is raw?"³⁸ In Paris she loses interest in French literature "Even if Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Musset had invited them into this world once, the invitation had lost its warmth, leaving nothing, not even a scrap."³⁹ She preferred roaming in the Luxembourg Gardens and the Jardin Des Plaubes where there were several animals in the cages. There she cultivated a peculiar rapport with a panther: "Reaching out one of its gigantic paws, it dangled it before her, quite gently, as if inviting her to shake hands.... She began to smile, and then laugh, as one might laugh at the play of a child, merging into its delight in a moment of unconsciousness, a moment when time either pauses or even moves back instead of forward.... They were the only two that existed in that enclosed world they had made... They ambulated together, panther and girl, keeping pace, sending out messages of mutual admiration building a web between them of delicious complacency."⁴⁰ This relationship with the
animals grows further, and she would communicate with them in an ashram in India.

At ashram, Laila, known as the Mother, finds pleasure serving the humanity and preaching to adopt the path of selfless duty. In the ashram, she treats all equally and believes in existence of eternal truth in the hearts of all. She herself says: “I am a seeker after truth and have given up all orthodox religions.... I find them the repositories of ignorance and suppression.” She is like a saint who goes here and there in search of truth. The mother advises her devotes to try to attain complete consciousness in one’s inner spiritual life. The gist of the Mother’s philosophy is that the soul progresses from individual body to community, from community to universe and universe to infinity.

At first, Laila is attracted by the statues and paintings but later graduate to serious books on Indian culture and one day opens up the *Aitereya Brahmanan* of the *Rig Veda* and reads what would become her own life. The life of a seeker:

> There is no happiness for him who does not travel, Rohita! Thus we have heard. Living in the society of man the best man becomes a sinner.... Therefore, wander!

> The feet of the wanderers are like the flowers, his soul is growing and reaping the fruit: and all his sins are destroyed by his fatigues in wandering, therefore, wander!

> The fortune of him who is sitting, sits; It rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps, it moves when he moves, therefore, wander!  

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This way of life leads man to a state of pure joy. The mother also preaches that in his consciousness, man must clearly realize some central truth, which will give him perspective over the widest possible field. Talking about the divine love, she suggests that clarity of mind is the prime requirement to "The way of Bhakti... the way of love. Here we teach only love.... Here we dedicate ourselves to love.... What we do here, we do out of love."^43 For altruist purpose Matteo also leaves his luxurious home and affluent family in search of something more and beyond his mundane existence. This he hopes to find in spiritual enlightenment in the Ashrams of India. By relating himself to the vision and insights of the great sages, he can have the first hand knowledge of truth. He tells Sophie: "It is spiritual experiences for which you must search in India, nothing else."^44 Matteo tries to do what sadhus do on the sand banks of rivers. He sees all the activities of sadhus as swimming across the riverbank even when the river is in full spate.

Matteo moves from Ashram to Ashram and from one yogi to another but the peace of mind and inner happiness elude him. He gets a book entitled The Mother. The photograph of the mother becomes an epitome of eternal bliss to him. Reaching the mothers Ashram, his joy knows no bounds. First time he experiences a sense of unity. He describes to Sophie: "The unity of the spiritual with the physical, the dark with the light, the human with the natural."^45 Matteo feels further enlightened to hear the mother speak about the Divine light. The mother believes in motto "Work is worship": she assigns duties to all the devotees as altruistic purposiveness in the ashram and explains to them:
This effort this endeavour, this exercise. It is Sadhana? If
the artist performs this exercise, it is artistic. If the farmer
performs it, it is spiritual and it all leads to
achievement.\textsuperscript{46}

Desai portrays such women who feel frustrated either because of
marital disharmony or loneliness in life are shown to indulge in social or
religious activities. Participation in some external activity provides some
ventilation to their emotional tension. Hence the sense of loss felt by the self
is compensated by the sense of involvement in other fields.
References

5. Ibid. , p. 150.
7. Ibid. , p. 111.
8. Ibid. , p. 124.
9. Ibid. , p. 125.
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13. Ibid. , p. 124.
15. Ibid. , p. 143.
18. Ibid. , pp. 140-141.
19. Ibid. , p. 2.
25. Ibid., p. 126.
26. Ibid., p. 97.
27. Ibid., p. 97.
28. Ibid., p. 176.
33. Ibid., pp. 111-112.
34. Ibid., pp. 110-111.
37. Ibid., pp. 163-164.
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40. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
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42. Ibid., p. 196.
43. Ibid., p. 117.
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