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Mystic Language and Symbols: Unity of Being and Pakistani Women Fiction Writers

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of unity of being in fiction by Pakistani women writers. The usage of mystic language and depiction of mystical and Sūfī symbols in literature can be traced back to ancient texts. However, it has been deemed alien for women to be Sūfīs and have mystic experience, apart from a few exceptions. Indulging in formulating mystical symbols and using mystic language by women has not been perceived as too womanly. The main reason for this is the fact that women's world-view has been restricted and thus deemed limited. Complete works of fiction by Pakistani women writers writing in Urdu have been explored for this research. There are two steps in sample selection i.e. women fiction writers and their fiction. Women writers are selected on the basis of set criteria. Selection of text is done through theoretical sampling. Women fiction writers have used mystic symbols meaningfully at innumerable places in their works. By the study of these works, it can be concluded that women writers have indulged in using mystical language and symbols and have done it in a crafty manner, though retaining the traditional usage of these symbols and metaphors.

Keywords: Sūfism, mysticism, mystic language, mystic symbols, unity of being, Pakistani women fiction writers

Introduction

Pakistani women fiction writers have a significant contribution to the bulk of literature produced in Urdu language.¹ Women have been telling stories since times unknown, but their names as associated with the pen arrived late in the history of language and literature.² Another concern is that despite being a part of writing community, they were not recorded properly in history of the pen.³ It remained a global phenomenon; women wrote under pseudonyms or with the initials of their names. In the history of literature of Indian

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¹Waqar Azeem, *Dastan se Afsane tak* [From Legend to Short Story] (Lahore: Al-Waqar Publications, 2010); Khalid Ashraf, *Barr-e-Sagheer mein Urdu Novel* [Urdu Novel in the Subcontinent]. (Delhi: Kitabi Dunya, 2003).

²Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1980).

³Ambreen Salahuddin, *Feminism in Modern Urdu Poetesses* (Lahore: West Pakistan Urdu Academy, 2005).

subcontinent, women's names have emerged in the initial genre of legend writing,⁴ then novel writing⁵ and short story writing.⁶

Women's skills of analysis, concept formation and abstractions have always been questioned.⁷ The language that they write in is also taken as a language that they should be writing in; it must be womanish. If they write in abstraction, it is seen as too alien or can be commented on as writing in a manly fashion.

As far as writing in mystical or Sūfī terms is concerned, this particular way of writing and expression that is writing in mystic or Sūfī way has no definite definition or boundaries. It's symbols, metaphors, phrases and terminology varies according to religious trends, cultural bends and traditional expressions. The symbols, signs and metaphors overlap and differ as per era, geographical locations, language, culture and civilization. Tseng wrote in his article titled as "Symbolic Discourse: Mystical writing as anti-Language," "Underhill (1962: xix) defines 'mysticism' as 'the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order.' Mystical writings refer to the texts expressing or recording such a subject matter."⁸

Mystical writings reflect the dimensions of knowledge, insight, vision and intuitive expressions. They reflect the knowledge of that particular religious or dogmatic background they are banking on. There are two angles through which these writings can be explored; the purely linguistic dimension where the deconstruction of language is important to understand the direction of word-meaning puzzle which is the epistemological approach, and the poetic expression enveloped in mystery and curiosity which can be deciphered in connection with dogmatic, ritualistic and religious connotations which is a theological approach in essence. In the current study, the linguistic and epistemological angles are not focused, rather the traditional usage of the language and its symbols are discussed.

We are mainly concerned with literary symbols in this research. It should be kept in mind that the symbols of literary nature cannot be treated in a similar way as the symbols created by primitive man for need of communication. There is indeed a whole universe of symbol inside the mind of every individual man who may or may not comprehend it or communicate it effectively but those all are not of a fine literary quality or have a specific

⁴K Akber, *Urdu ki Afsana Nigar khawateen* [Women Short Story writers of Urdu] (Unpublished MA thesis). (Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1962).

⁵Dr M. Sultana Bakhsh, *Pakistani Khwateen ka Nasri Adab mein Kirdar* [Pakistani Women's Role in Prose Literature]. (Islamabad: Allama Iqbal Open University, 2011).

⁶S. J. Akhtar. *Urdu ki Novel Nigar Khawateen* [Women Novelists of Urdu]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997).

⁷Ambreen Salahuddin, Muhammad Zakria Zakar and Ahmed Usman, "Threshold: A Spatial and Ideological Barrier in South Asian Fiction - A Case Study of Pakistani Women Fiction Writers," *South Asian Studies* 31. No. 1 (2016): 175-185.

⁸Ming-yu Tseng, "Symbolic Discourse: Mystical Writing as Anti-Language," *Language and Literature* 6, no. 3 (1997): 181-195.

thread of meanings attached with them. The whole scheme of symbols in literary world is a “consciously constructed system of symbols in thought.”⁹ For some writers, new inventions and elements of life seem like new symbols and for others these are not. They are of the view that these symbols are newer shapes of older symbols. It is evident that the ancient symbols prevail still and there is not a system as encompassing to replace that universe of ancient symbols. But it can happen that newer meaning is attached or attributed to those symbols or a novel pattern of meanings is added. It is also a fact in itself that the creation of a symbol and perception of a symbol are two different avenues as well. It is said that in present day literature, ancient symbols have changed and rather have become contradictory. It may be that the contexts have changed or there is an effort to deconstruct prevalent symbols. Such changes, however, must make a systematic whole and must be coherent with the text in a meaningful manner. If not, then such texts and symbols both will be meaningless and would not add anything new to literature. In addition to this, there are also different ways symbols may be utilized.

There have been considerable research as far as mystical literary writings are concerned, but there is a lack of the research as regards to women writers writing in Sūfi terms. As far as women fiction writers of Pakistan are concerned, there is research on individual works or writers in various perspectives. There is dearth of research focused entirely on Sūfi way of writing or usage of mystical symbols and metaphors by women writers.

It must be highlighted here that it has been usually expected of woman writers that their writings involve limited themes and usually circle around a man’s love or issues of women i.e. violence, domestic life and their suppression etc. The fact is contrary to this understanding. Women fiction writers have written on diversity of topics and variety of expressions. The novelty of expression is well-emphasized through this current article where excerpts from select works are discussed to emphasize deeper understanding of diverse notions of metaphysical nature, abstract concepts and issues of humanity, through Sūfi expression.

The women fiction writers, writing in Urdu language, whose works are included in the current study were selected on the basis of the publication of at least two works of fiction; novels or collections of short stories.¹⁰ Another criterion was the fact that they were

⁹Ambreen Salahuddin, “Women’s Lives and Images: Traditional Symbolism in Pakistani Fiction,” (unpublished Doctoral Thesis). (Lahore: University of the Punjab, 2015).

¹⁰Ambreen Salahuddin, “Pakistani Khawateen ke Fiction mein Lakshman Rekha ko paar karne ki Alamat: Iradi aur Gher Iradi Amal ka Qazia,” [Crossing Lakshman Rekha in Fiction by Pakistani Women Writers: The Debate of Intentional and Unintentional Act]. *Mayar* 21 (Jan- June 2019): 143-152.

published by credible editors and were acknowledged by esteemed critics.¹¹ The selection of texts is done through theoretical sampling technique. According to Coyne,

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection whereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes and analyses the data in order to decide what data to collect next. Deciding where to sample next according to the emerging codes and categories is theoretical sampling.¹²

2. Findings and Discussion

Women writers have used mystic symbols in their writings at innumerable places. Language is particularly important in mysticism and Sūfism. The meanings of a term take varied shapes and show various hues and shades once used in a mystical fashion. Certain terms and expressions have a peculiar connotation when used in Sūfī terms. As far as this study is concerned, it is the manner in which these expressions are utilized by women writers is explored, that in turn tells of their grasp over certain ideas and usage of those terms in a sheer Sūfī manner. For example, observe the use of the term *Inkishāf* in the given excerpt. “By concentrating on words, one can have *Inkishāf* [intuitive experience] of what is beyond word. I am that which is beyond word, said Hari Shankar.”¹³ *Inkishāf* is a mystical symbol. It literally means unveiling. In Sūfī terms, it is the exposition of the heart to the divine revelation or intuition. This extract points towards mystic experience and intricacy of the philosophical etymology of word-meaning. Women writers have used mystic symbols to share their universal and humanistic approach towards life. Haider is a prominent name in novel writing and her novel *Aag ka Darya* [River of Fire] published in 1959,¹⁴ is at the top of the list of Urdu novels, according to critics, when Urdu novels of all times are listed. She wrote three novels during her stay in Pakistan and this is one of them. *Paro*, a character from one of Perveen Atif’s short stories, in the following excerpt is calling herself as *khali bhandā* [empty utensil] which is also a mystical notion pointing towards the emptiness of unsatisfied inner self.

*My whole utensil is empty Paro... there is nothing but a strange empty noise all around. Nobody has ever perhaps opened the door... You know me that I cannot live without people... maybe now my utensil will fill up... I am dependent on all of these people...*¹⁵

There are many places in the texts explored, where spiritual notions of inner fulfillment are found. Mystic texts make one intoxicated, so these are sometimes taken as something unreal and surreal. They have more mystery and curiosity surrounding them which attract

¹¹Sohail Ahmed Khan, “Alamaton ke Sarchasme,” [Roots of Symbols] in *Majmooa e Suhail Ahmed Khan [Collected works of Suhail Ahmed Khan]*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2009).

¹²Imelda T. Coyne, “Sampling in Qualitative Research, Purposeful and Theoretical Sampling; Merging or clear Boundaries?” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26, no. 3 (1997): 625.

¹³Qurat ul Ain Haider, *Aag ka Darya* [River of Fire] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2000), 10.

¹⁴Qurat ul Ain Haider, *Aag ka Darya* [River of Fire] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2000).

¹⁵Parveen Atif, *Mein Maili, Piya Ujle* [I am Impure and my Beloved is Untainted]. (Lahore: Al-Faisal Publishers. 2003), 284-285.

the sensibilities of the readers and they have to plunge into the realm of unknown to unfold their true connotation. Sometimes terms and phrases are not needed to point towards a mystical experience of inner fulfillment. For instance, Syed writes:

*...Fulfillment of desire which you call happiness... happiness that you try to find in the outer world... for which you travelled thousands of miles.” “No”, I replied dully. “It is actually inside you.”*¹⁶

So the emphasis on looking into the inner self, points towards the Sūfī dichotomy of body and soul, the outside and the inside. As written by Kugle, “Theologians also accepted this gap as an ontological gulf between the soul trapped in matter and the transcendental immaterial God, to be bridged by rightful belief and eventual resurrection. Sūfīs, in contrast, were dissatisfied with these stopgap measures... Sūfīs insisted that “the next world” is imminent in this world.”¹⁷

So this pantheistic notion is supreme to Sūfī belief and becoming one with one’s beloved’s being is an important view of Sūfī sm that is annihilation of the self in another self or the Self. This notion of unity of being can be observed in the following excerpt by Syed,

*After that day whenever I spoke, voice of Fareeday came from my throat. I became amazed that what is this matter. When I walked, it was Fareeday’s gait, as if I was not walking but she was walking. Like a chemical reaction, she had sublimated unto me. Separation wasn’t parting now. I was drenched in my lover’s reflection. Doors of a world of beauty had opened inside and outside me.*¹⁸

Hashmi also wrote about the similar notion in the following excerpt,

*If the sea is watched for long time, head starts eating circles and then it seem if a person is moving in circles, dissolving. Along with waves, being sucked into this big ocean and then a person annihilates, only a roaring, scaring sound remains.*¹⁹

Hashmi writes in her novelette, “I want to give myself to this blueness... But how to give myself to that water which is written about in books which was of gods?”²⁰ In her celebrated novel on Mansoor Hallaj, the celebrated Sūfī, titled as *Dasht e Soos* [The Desert of Soos], first published in 1983, Jameela Hashmi writes about his (Hallaj’s) *kefiyat* [condition] of oneness with Allah, this annihilation, in following words:

As if he was a tone in which hidden songs were becoming keen. As if he was a musical instrument and the *ragas* trapped inside were dying with restlessness. He was not only a

¹⁶Atiya Syed, *Hikayat e Junun* [Tales of Wildness]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2001), 87.

¹⁷Scott Kugle. *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁸Atiya Syed, *Hikayat e Junun* [Tales of wildness]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2001), 91.

¹⁹Jameela Hashmi, *Apna apna Jahannum* [Everyone’s own Hell]. (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Jadeed Press. 1973), 21.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 47.

prison but a prisoner too in which snakes of helplessness and hopelessness were hissing. And then he was tambourine and plectrum was snatched from his fingers.²¹

The expressions regarding the notions of oneness and unity of being take varied forms in the works of many writers. Jameela Hashmi's narrative is very strong and very effective. In another excerpt, she narrates the practices of Sūfīs, "The dervishes hold hands and the bosom is shaken by the *Zarb* [emphatic chanting of the name of God, in which the heart feels concussions] of *Hu* [Oneness of Allah] *Tanana Hu, Ya Hu... Tanana Hu, Ya Hu...* my eyes are fixed at *Halqa-e-Sulaiman* and I am in the state of dream. Voice of the Dervish is raised like a minaret."²²

As discussed earlier about the dichotomy of body and soul, the Sūfī concept that the "soul is imprisoned in body like parrot in cage",²³ is repeated at many places with a good sensibility of this notion by fiction writers. According to this Sūfī notion, soul is yearning to leave the cage of human body and unite with the One. Ibn e Arabi writes;

The soul sees that it sees God through God, not through itself, and that it loves God only through him, but through itself. So God is He who loves Himself – it is not the soul that loves God. The soul gazes upon God in every existence by means of every eye. Hence it is known that none loves God but God. God is the lover, the beloved, the seeker and the sought.²⁴

This idea is also shared in a peculiar fashion by eminent fiction writer Khalida Hussain. Hussain presented very sharp images of the inner conflicts²⁵ and constant struggle of in a mystical manner too. For instance, talking about the struggle and constant work by women, she gave example of Prophet Sulaiman as he stood with his stick and ages after his death it was revealed that he was dead long ago as termites ate the stick, she emphasized on how it is after a woman is disappears, she is noticed.²⁶ Following is another excerpt from her works,

Upon the descent of night, how two worlds start to merge into each other those humans while walking on solid earth start to fly in air and this merging of the two worlds was very frightening because there was a danger of extermination and disappearance of many things? But there is a pleasure in it. So Shireen used to lie awake in her bed when the rest of the house was filled with the raga of sleeping breaths and Shireen felt as if she had the

²¹Jameela Hashmi, *Dasht-e-Soos* [The Desert of Soos]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2007), 254.

²²Zahida Hina, *Qaidi Saans Leta hae* [Prisoner Breathes]. (Karachi: Roshan khyal. 1990), 129.

²³Bano Qudsia, *Hasil Ghaat*. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2003), 43.

²⁴Ibn Arabi, "The Divine Roots of Human Love," Translated by William C. Chittick, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*, XVIII, (1995): 331.17.

²⁵Ambreen Salahuddin, "Khalida Hussain ki Gung Shehzadi aur Hélèn Cixous ki Medusa ka Qehqaha," [Khalida Hussain's Gung Shehzadi and the laugh of Hélèn Cixous's Medusa], *Bunyad* 11 (2020).

²⁶Ambreen Salahuddin, and Ahmed Usman, "Beyond the Threshold: Emancipation or Entrapment? The Feminine Archetypes in Pakistani Women Fiction Writers," *Journal of Research (Humanities)* LIII (2017): 22.

same relation with all humans which was the mystical experience of Syed Ji. And she felt that she was breathing in other humans, rather they were breathing in her.²⁷

This notion is repeatedly seen in fiction. One manner in which this idea is powerfully shared and reflected is the notion of worshipping. This worshipping also has oneness with the one being worshipped. Bano Qudsia has a strong craft and the civilization and spiritualism of Indian sub-continent is her main theme. All her novels, novellas, plays and short stories have an essence of Sūfism in them. The Sūfi concept of worshipping can be seen in the following.

I sat near Seemi and cleansed myself in tears early in the morning. Then placed the Tilak [mark on forehead that Hindus place] of deprivation on forehead, wore the Jaymala of misfortune in neck. Put on the shoes of renouncement in feet and before exile like Raja Gopichand, placed a parting glance at Seemi²⁸

The above mentioned excerpt is from Bano Qudsia's celebrated novel *Raja Gidh* [Vulture King] published in 1981. She has discussed the notion of lawful and unlawful in this novel and has used a deep Sūfi expression grounded in mythology and classical texts of this region, while developing a parallel world of animals and birds to elaborate her thesis. The following extract by Haider takes this notion of being one with the other whilst worshipping, to another domain. It merges mythological notions with Sūfi ideals of unity of being. "There is the cremation ground; Kali is dancing in it... Kali which takes unto it the universe upon its end... Only that human can worship it without being scared of it whoever can end his desires and merge in its being."²⁹

Some other similar and powerful excerpts by women fiction writers, using the Sūfi notions artfully and in a crafty manner, are quoted here. The following excerpt is from Hussain's short story where the notion of being one with the beloved is artistically narrated using the metaphor of colours of the beloved's bangles, while the next excerpt is from a short story by the same author is expression of anguish and helplessness while the desire to be one with the universe call out to the character of the short story:

What should I do, the shore is far away my friend... what to do... Jantay took out lentils in a bronze plate and placed it in front of him. At that moment everything was piercing in his heart (as if all had become the green and red bangles of Jantay). He wanted to embrace earth and cry loudly.³⁰

On all four sides, helplessness was ruling over the universe. Everything was calling out... what I should do... what should I do...? Helplessness of a weak earthen pitcher came in

²⁷Khalida Hussain, "Zameen," [Land]. *Majmooa e Khalida Hussain* [Collected Works of Khalida Hussain], (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. 2008), 175.

²⁸Bano Qudsia, *Raja Gidh* [Vulture King], (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 1981), 191.

²⁹Qurat ul Ain Haider, *Aag ka Darya* [River of Fire], 169.

³⁰Khalida Hussain, "Dahaan e Zakhm," [Opening of the Wound]. *Majmooa e Khalida Hussain* [Collected Works of Khalida Hussain], (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. 2008), 156.

him. World was a weak earthen pitcher, was flowing in the storming possibilities of surrounding.³¹

As can be observed, destruction of self and annihilation into the being of the 'Other' or other, are focused more from all Sūfi themes. Hussain writes: "Listen, Shah Hussain pass from here every night. But turn away. Bibi you have something bad in you. Your heart is in destruction."³² Another example of this conception is given below:

All destruction came at that time when I swept inside me and burnt aloe sticks and sprinkled rose water. Then like a poppy-clad beggar, sat on my knees and swore with myself... a swear grasps human heart in a strange clamp... whether one swears in heart or in front of anyone, it becomes troublesome for self. A man is trapped in a bottle and for how long a man stay in a bottle, even if that bottle is of cut glass?³³

The religious symbol of *Man-o-Salwa* emerges in a mystical connotation in Qudsia's novel *Raja Gidh* [Vulture king], where she has presented her theory of the lawful and unlawful food. Here in this excerpt she is talking about a kind of food that is above these divisions of lawful and unlawful; the food for Prophets, Martyrs and *Man-o-Salwa* for Israelites. She has come up with her thesis that the food descended from skies by God bring revolutionary changes to their beings and since Israelites were bestowed with *Man-o-Salwa*, so they have super-intelligent genes and have excelled in this life.

Remember... there is another kind of food... distinct from being lawful and unlawful... which is given to the martyrs... acquired by the prophets... comes to sacred Mary... once Allah gave this food to His chosen nation of Israelites too. This food is neither lawful nor unlawful... and it generates a kind of self-awareness, gives birth to mystical learning. It is a kind of madness for an ordinary person. But it is not needed that one should understand this madness, nor can one understand it, because it is born by the food that descends from above. . Due to which genes evolve in seconds instead of centuries... which can happen with a pure mutation of epochs. Can't you see what super intelligent people are born in Israelites? This is the consequence of the same *Man-o-Salwa*.³⁴

As far as other abstract and metaphysical mystical symbols are concerned, there are many examples in works of women fiction writers of Pakistan. A brilliant example of abstract symbol is the mystic circle in one of Syed's stories. She writes: "Circle encompasses all. It is the end that which is the beginning. For freedom and peace, we have to swim with the flow of the circle."³⁵ In a similar manner, Jameela Hashmi writes about

³¹Khalida Hussain, "Mukalima," [Dialogue]. *Majmooa e Khalida Hussain* [Collected Works of Khalida Hussain]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. 2008), 343.

³²Khalida Hussain, "Namabar," [Messenger]. *Majmooa e Khalida Hussain* [Collected Works of Khalida Hussain]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. 2008), 209.

³³Bano Qudsia, "Paband," [Constrained]. *Naqabil-e-Zikr* [unmentionable], (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 2009), 27-28.

³⁴Bano Qudsia, *Raja Gidh* [Vulture King], 281.

³⁵Atiya Syed, *Hikayat e Junun* [Tales of Wildness], 95.

whiteness and light, “White is the color of victory. There is strength in white. Light has the power to collide against any overpowering supremacy.”³⁶

Mysticism is one domain where Zahida Hina has also stepped into many times. She talks in mystic language and picks the mystical symbols for her narrations. Two examples may be: “No it is the third stage, it is called the fire of separation.”³⁷ And “On the floor of the chamber of being, the fuel of moments is burning, and its reflection on the walls of being create and destroy strange mysterious imprints.”³⁸ In these quotations, we can sense the delicate mystery and ambiguous dimensions of mysticism, making the texts more attractive to the hearts of readers.

3. Conclusion

After a careful study of all works by selected women fiction writers, it can be concluded that women writers have indulged in writing mystically, which can be seen more in the works of Bano Qudsia, Jameela Hashmi, Qurat ul Ain Haider and Khalida Hussain, though Hussain indulged more in using pure religious symbols rather than Sūfī ritualistic interpretations.³⁹ Some other writers with a few works of this nature include Zahida Hina and Perveen Atif. It is observed that women writers have written in an informed manner, understanding the delicacy, intricacy, connotation and history of the terms, symbols and metaphors of Sūfism. They have, however, retained the traditionally defined notions in their true existing colours and have not brought any innovation to the usage of these terms. It is seen that most of the Sūfī concepts of annihilation and submission, which originate from this region, already use the voice and gender of a woman in them. It seems that this adoption by Sūfī men, of the female gender, already implies in some manner that this language is more near to the being of a woman and so the luxury of using and reusing these mystic and Sūfī notions comes rather comfortably to the pen of a woman writer. Although, it should be emphasized that Sūfī men use the voice of a woman mostly in places where they are expressing submission and subjugation, hence implying the submitting, submissive and subjugating being of a woman as compared to the authoritarian, ruling and commanding self of a man.

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³⁶Jameela Hashmi, *Talash-e-Baharaan* [Search for Spring], (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. 2003), 141.

³⁷Zahida Hina, *Qaidi saans leta hae* [Prisoner breathes] (Karachi: Roshan khyal. 1990), 63.

³⁸Zahida Hina, *Qaidi saans leta hae* [Prisoner breathes] (Karachi: Roshan khyal. 1990), 87.

³⁹Ambreen Salahuddin, “Usage of Religious Symbols in Fiction by Pakistani Women Writers,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, Issue 1, (2018).

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