



## Freedom—The Presence of An Existential Element in Putul Khela and Rakta Karabi by Shombhu Mitra

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**Abstract:** Existential freedom consists in creating one's own essence through authentic choices, without determinism, taking responsibility for one's life. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the most influential figures in the existentialist movement, and his concept of freedom occupies a prominent place in his thought. As a major figure of existentialism, Sartre develops a radical conception of human freedom that rejects any form of determinism and affirms the individual's total responsibility for their choices and actions. This absolute freedom of choice and decision can be distressing for some, as it implies total responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

To explain existential freedom, we have chosen Putul Khela and Raktakarabi. Putul Khela is influenced by the original work of Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian writer, and Raktakarabi is influenced by the original work of Rabindranath Tagore. In this study, we will discuss the notion of freedom as an important element of existentialism and a feminine approach to freedom. We will also elaborate on the traces of freedom in both works, Putul Khela and Raktakarabi, and finally, we will conclude whether the aspect of freedom explained in these two works is the same or not. In both works, the main protagonists seek their own path in a society created by men. In Putul Khela, Bulu seeks individual freedom in her family life, and in Raktakarabi, Nandini seeks collective freedom in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Existential Element, Putul Khela, Rakta Karabi, Shombhu Mitra, Existentialism, Theatre

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## INTRODUCTION

The aspect of freedom is strongly present in the works of Shombhu Mitra, a legendary Indian cinema and theatre actor, director, playwright, reciter, and a prominent figure in Indian theatre. He is especially known for his involvement in Bengali theatre, where he is regarded as a pioneer. He dedicated his entire life to the evolution of Bengali theatre. For this study, the works *Putul Khela* and *Raktakarabi* were selected. Among these, *Raktakarabi* is influenced by the original work of Rabindranath Tagore, and *Putul Khela* is influenced by the original work of Henrik Ibsen "The Doll's House", a Norwegian writer.

Not only the storytelling, contemporary society, but also the philosophical representation by the popular playwright Shombhu Mitra was greatly inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, who introduced the idea of existentialism in India. His protagonists often speak of individual freedom and collective freedom in his works. Mitra emphasized the inner struggle of characters against oppressive social norms. In his theatre, Mitra valued human autonomy and the importance of personal choices in the face of society. In Shombhu Mitra's plays, collective freedom is manifested through solidarity and the fight against social injustice. He used the stage to denounce oppression and encourage collective awareness. His works promoted the unity of individuals in the face of adversity to transform society.

In this article, we will explain the notion of freedom as an important element of existentialism and a feminine approach to freedom. We will also elaborate on the traces of freedom in both works, *Putul Khela* and *Raktakarabi*, and finally, we will conclude whether the aspect of freedom explained in these two works is the same or not.

### The Notion of Freedom as An Existential Element

Freedom in Sartrean existentialism occupies a central and fundamental place. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the most influential figures of the existentialist movement, and his concept of freedom holds a prominent position in his thought. As a major figure of existentialism, Sartre develops a radical conception of human freedom that rejects all forms of determinism and asserts the total responsibility of the individual for their choices and actions.

According to Sartre, the essence of human existence lies in the fact that we are free to create our own reality and give meaning to our existence. For Sartre, freedom is inseparable from human existence. He argues that humans are essentially free, not in the sense of external or political freedom, but in the sense of inner freedom that, according to him, defines the very essence of being human. Unlike other philosophical currents that view the essence of man as pre-existing his existence,

Sartre argues that we are thrown into existence without any pre-established meaning to our lives.

This absolute freedom of choice and decision can be overwhelming for some, as it entails total responsibility for our actions and their consequences. Sartre illustrates this with his famous phrase: "Man is condemned to be free." Thus, we are responsible not only for our actions but also for the creation of our identity and essence as we act. Here, we can add the analysis of freedom by Talip Karakaya. In his article "The Problem of Freedom in Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Muniér," he mentions:

"Thus, [...], my life is indeed my own; what makes me depend on it is what I make of it; external determinisms do not dispossess me of myself, but only emerge against the backdrop of my freedom. Therefore, there is no destiny other than that of my irreducible freedom to be a subject: I am condemned to be free. One can never rid oneself of oneself; I am bound to my freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Sartrean existentialism also rejects any form of excuse or determinism that would seek to diminish the individual's responsibility. According to Sartre, we cannot blame external circumstances or higher forces for our choices, as we always can choose our attitude and response in any given situation. The individual is faced with concrete situations and specific circumstances but remains free to decide how to act in response to those situations. Even in the most difficult and limiting conditions, Sartre asserts that freedom lies in our capacity to choose our attitude and response to these situations. In this context, while explaining freedom according to Jean-Paul Sartre, Talip Karakaya elaborates in his article:

"But it is I who decides my relationship to all these prior and external data; it is I who chooses to accept or resist them: it is in my freedom that they acquire their meaning."<sup>2</sup>

However, this thought does not mean that we are free from everything. Sartre recognizes the limits of this freedom in a world that often constrains us through factors like society, politics, and even our own bodies. Yet, even in these limiting circumstances, we still retain the freedom to choose how we will face them, how we will react, and how we will make sense of our experience. We can choose to passively accept our fate, or to revolt and take action to change things. Furthermore, freedom in Sartre's view is not limited to the isolated individual.

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<sup>1</sup> KARAKAYA, Talip, *Le problème de la liberté chez Jean Paul Sartre et Emmanuel Muniér*, D.E.U. Ilahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi, XVII, 2003, Page-327

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Page-326

<sup>3</sup> KAUFFMAN, Walter, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky To Sartre: Basic Writings of Existentialism by Kaufmann, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Others*, England, 1989, Page-350

He believes that everyone's freedom is connected to that of others, and that we are also responsible for that latter. The freedom of everyone is somehow coextensive with that of a group or society. Thus, our responsibility for our own freedom also entails a responsibility for the freedom of others. Regarding this concept of responsibility towards others, Sartre mentions that a person always chooses the best in each situation, and this choice is the best when it is the best for all, for a community, a society. This concept is well explained by Walter Kaufmann in his book, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky To Sartre: Basic Writings of Existentialism by Kaufmann, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Others*.

"Choosing between this or that simultaneously affirms the value of what is chosen; for we are never capable of choosing the worse. What we choose is always the best; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all."<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, the notion of freedom in Sartre's thought is deeply linked to his existentialism. For him, man is first and foremost free, thrown into this world without any pre-established reason and without a fixed nature. This freedom implies total responsibility for our choices and actions, and it explains our capacity to transcend ourselves and create our own reality and identity. Although we are faced with external constraints, our inner freedom allows us to choose how we will respond to them. Finally, the freedom of everyone is connected to that of all others, which reinforces the importance of our communal responsibility in exercising our freedom.

### Freedom - A Feminine Approach

In *Putul Khela* and *Raktakarabi*, both protagonists are women. Bulu and Nandini are the main characters in *Putul Khela* and *Raktakarabi*, respectively. Thus, we find a feminine approach to the aspect of freedom. In both plays, we see that women seek their own space in society and can achieve this by defying their predetermined destiny. They envision themselves as human beings who choose their own paths without adhering to universal criteria. Opposing the traditional conception of moral choice, it is the woman as an individual who determines her own worth through her actions and interactions with others.

In *Putul Khela*, Bulu embodies a woman trapped in a patriarchal marriage, seeking freedom through personal emancipation. She leaves her home to liberate herself from social expectations and redefine her

"To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all". (translated by the author the article)

identity. As the mother of the family, she manages daily affairs, yet her husband and father dominate her in every aspect. She lacks the right to decide about her individual life; rather, she cannot possess her own voice or identity. Ultimately, however, she protests for her individual freedom and leaves her family to find it.

The image of the model housewife and accomplished homemaker now overlaps with that of a dynamic career woman—a new demand that does not exhaust the modern woman of the earlier era. However, society conveys other contradictory demands. This change is exemplified by events like the Gulabi Gang in India.

"Together, the women intervene and force the husband to confess his acts against them and put an end to them. What started as a modest movement against domestic violence has since expanded to a state level: today, a 'gang' of several tens of thousands of women dressed in pink (gulabi) confronts the social injustices faced by women in the state and inspires similar uprisings across the country."<sup>4</sup>

In *Raktakarabi*, Nandini symbolizes the feminine spirit of rebellion and renewal in the face of capitalist oppression. She defies the forces of power and inspires the community to embrace love and freedom. Here, Nandini embodies the essence of liberty and resistance against oppression. She exists in a kingdom controlled by an invisible and tyrannical king, where workers are reduced to machines, enslaved by a brutal economic system. Through her charisma, beauty, and indomitable spirit, Nandini becomes the central figure of rebellion. Her quest for freedom is not limited to herself but extends to an entire people chained by invisible power structures. She rejects greed and dehumanization, inspiring others to break free from their servitude. Her love for Ranjan, a free and rebellious man, symbolizes a connection to nature and authentic life, contrasting with the artificial world of power. Through her boldness and desire for truth, Nandini urges the characters to recognize their need for inner and spiritual freedom, thus challenging the reign of the invisible king. According to her, man must be free. She sees the inhabitants of Yakshapuri as human beings who should possess a free voice and think with their own choices. She plays not only the role of a woman in society but also the role of a free human being. As found in the book *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir,

<sup>4</sup> <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/timeline/womenite>  
(Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>5</sup> PARSHLEY, H.M. *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (Translated and edited), Panbooks, Page-631

"...she is no longer mother, wife, housekeeper, but a human being; she contemplates the passive world, and she remembers that she is wholly a conscious being, an irreducible free individual...she is living not for others but for herself. Any woman who has preserved her independence through all her servitudes will ardently love for her own freedom in nature."<sup>5</sup>

On one hand, she depicts a realistic image of women in the society of her time—submissive to patriarchy—while on the other hand, she emphasizes that one should not overlook the mental strength of women. She is disappointed by the other sex but takes her voice and seeks her freedom in a patriarchal society.

Both works highlight women's quest for freedom, not only against societal constraints but also as an affirmation of their individuality and humanity.

### Examples of Ideological Freedom in *Putul Khela*

Consequently, the struggle between family members and the woman is a very common theme in contemporary Indian life. This struggle pushes women to seek their own place as free and individual beings. We see this in the work *Putul Khela* written by the popular playwright Shombhu Mitra. According to him, Bulu, the main protagonist of the play, a devoted mother and wife, spends most of the play thinking of others before herself. Her actions portray her as a puppet in her family, who has no right to think or act.

"No, no, you remain my Bulbuli..."<sup>6</sup>

According to her husband, she was meant to stay like a "Bulbuli," who can only follow her husband's choices. Thus, Bulu must remain a puppet whose strings are pulled by her husband.

"No, no. I want you to stay as you are, just like my Bulbuli."<sup>7</sup>

She has never been regarded as an important subject. Thus, the role of women in contemporary society is described by E. Kalaivani in her article "Women's Role in Society and Family."

"Women are an indispensable part of society... The development of future generations depends on the education of women... Children learn their manners and behaviour at home, and most mothers are responsible for cultivating good practices in their children."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> MITRA, Saoli, *Shombhu Mitra Rachana Samagra, Putul Khela*, Part-1, Ananda publishers, Kolkata, 2016 Page-514, (translated by the author of the article).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Page- 514. (translated by the author of the article).

<sup>8</sup> KALAIVANI, E, *Women's role in Society and family*, International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, Vol 6, February 2019, ISSN:2321-788X.

But her husband no longer considers her an important member of the family when she expresses her desire for freedom, when she makes a decision without her husband's consent. In the play *Putul Khela*, we find:

"But I cannot entrust you with the responsibility of the children. No, I can no longer trust you."<sup>9</sup>

She believes that her life has no meaning if she does not care for her husband and other family members. By playing this role, she realizes that she represents a doll. She also understands that she must act according to her husband's wishes, the patriarch. Her choices hold no value for her husband. Her life has lost its freedom. Thus, in the play *Putul Khela*, Bulu had no freedom of expression; she was absolutely not free to express herself. It was forbidden to share her own feelings. To her, freedom was dead. Her emotions, once free, were captive to the patriarchal system of contemporary Bengali society. She had no freedom and could not question her family situation. She also had no right to think according to her choices: her life had "no meaning." But the desire to present herself as a free individual was hidden deep in her heart.

"If you want to give me something, then give me money. Whatever you can. Then I will buy something according to my wish."<sup>10</sup>

She no longer wanted to live the life predetermined by her husband. Her decision to borrow money while her husband was ill was a significant step for Bulu: it was proof of her individuality. She projected herself as an individual who does not accept the life predetermined by others. The patriarchal system plays an important role in all aspects of life, and this system controls women's movements. Men, as the larger part of this system, also control these same movements. Women do not have the power to decide their actions. They always follow men. They resemble each other, like products of domestic life. In the play *Putul Khela*, there is a clear limitation on women's freedom. According to the decisions of her husband and father, the events in Bulu's life take a turn. She wants to express her quest for freedom by tearing apart familial rights. She desires to scream for her freedom. She is tired of being depressed by the men in her life.

"Sometimes, I feel like screaming in the darkness of the terrace, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't tell anyone. I kept my thoughts to myself."<sup>11</sup>

Bulu had a great fascination for freedom, as seen in her desire. She always wanted to express her existence as a free being. Her quest for freedom, then, is her strength in seeking a life of liberty. Despite the suffering of being captive in her life, she seeks her freedom to speak, to decide her choices, to express her opinion. As the poet John Milton said,

"Give me the freedom to know, to express myself, and to debate freely according to my conscience, above all liberties."<sup>12</sup>

She seems ready to go against the more of social traditions. This desire for freedom of expression can be found in an article, *Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression Article 19 (1) (a)*,

"Freedom of expression has been humanity's aspiration throughout ancient and modern times."<sup>13</sup>

We understand that freedom of expression is an absolute symbol of individual freedom. Thus, Bulu's disgust for her captive life forces her to seek her individual freedom. Therefore, the act of leaving her symbolic family is a declaration of her independence in her family life. It is an act of freedom of expression.

Bulu always has the same voice as her husband. She doesn't try to tell him her true feelings; but by the end of the play, the opposite occurs. Bulu decides to show her resistance by expressing her true feelings to her husband when nothing happens according to her desires. Her struggles reveal her desire to fight for her freedom of expression, for herself. Finally, she wipes away the vermilion and frees herself from the marriage.

"I give you all the freedom, and I will consider myself a completely free human being."<sup>14</sup>

According to Bengali culture, the removal of vermilion is another symbol of freedom from a relationship. As a result, Bulu becomes free in her heart and soul from all social ties. Thus, she declares her freedom and leaves her family.

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<sup>9</sup> MITRA, Saoli, *Shombhu Mitra Rachana Samagra, Putul Khela*, Part-1, Ananda publishers, Kolkata, 2016, Page 565 (Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, page-513. (Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page-522, (Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>12</sup> SULLIVAN, Daniel F, Milton's Areopagitica & Freedom of Speech on Campus, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ744032.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression Article 19 (1) (a) [https://patnalawcollege.ac.in/notice/88274-e\\_content-art\\_19.pdf](https://patnalawcollege.ac.in/notice/88274-e_content-art_19.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> MITRA, Saoli, *Shombhu Mitra Rachana Samagra, Putul Khela*, Part-1, Ananda publishers, Kolkata, 2016, Page-572,

### Examples of Ideological freedom in *Raktakarabi*

Shombhu Mitra is different from other writers in the way he portrays women in his works. *Raktakarabi* is one of the first representations in Bengali literature of the bold emancipation of women. However, in this play, we find a different image of freedom. When compared to the play *Putul Khela*, we can see a completely different portrayal in *Raktakarabi*. The main protagonist, Nandini, symbolizes life, love, and beauty. She is free and possesses great respect for humanity. In this popular work, she conveys messages against enslavement and advocates for individual freedom. She values human qualities with her free expressions: she never accepts a life of captivity. To her, life is akin to freedom and must be free. Nandini attracts everyone from outside Yakshapuri: everyone is captivated in an instant at the sight of this radiant woman. The king wants to seize Nandini, just as he extracts gold—by force. But love and beauty cannot be obtained in this manner. Here, Nandini is free and thinks freely. For her, a captive life no longer exists. She spreads a message of freedom around her. According to her, freedom of thought is a fundamental right that allows each individual to explore, question, and express their ideas without fear of repression. She embodies intellectual diversity, fostering innovation, creativity, and progress. It forms the foundation of democracies, ensuring the informed participation of citizens. However, she must demonstrate a certain level of responsibility to prevent abuses. Freedom of thought is the cornerstone of a dynamic, tolerant, and evolving society, where ideas can flourish freely. Freedom of thought also includes rational thinking, as noted in an article written by Alian Cugno.

"But the freedom to think is not just the recognized right to have opinions and express them. It is an exercise of rationality that is otherwise demanding, mobilizing the entirety of the being that engages in it. It presupposes the ability to transform one's environment, to reflect on it, to participate in collective life, and to have an impact on the world. And it is precisely thought as such that is called upon in this ultimate decision-making space regarding what is valuable and what is not in the realm of spoken and heard words."<sup>15</sup>

Nandini is not captive like Bulu from the previous play; she is different and represents women born free, asserting her freedom with her only adornment being the jewellery made from *Raktakarabi* flowers. True to her nature, she is unrestrained, intact like a river whose essence is freedom, chastising the King for hiding behind his enclosure, captive to his Sardar, who capitalizes on the King's visible absence. Nandini possesses a desire for freedom and declares a conflict between freedom and exploitation. In Yakshapuri, freedom of speech and

freedom of thought are absent among the inhabitants. People live their lives in captivity, but Nandini brings new hope for individual freedom.

« It's wonderful. That's why I am telling you, come to light, keep your foot on the ground, the earth will be happy.»<sup>16</sup>

Nandini believes that human beings are free from birth. No one can control an individual's freedom. No one can capture ordinary people if they possess a free heart, their own thoughts, and a free voice. These reasons motivate Nandini to sow the notion of freedom among the inhabitants of Yakshapuri. She makes them aware of the taste of freedom; it was the sole purpose of her life. She wanted them to understand the joy of freedom. Throughout the play, we find the message of freedom spread by Nandini,

"I have come, I have come to free you from here. I will break their golden shackles."<sup>17</sup>

Here, "their" refers to the inhabitants of Yakshapuri. They are forced to dig the earth in search of gold and are not allowed to exercise their will. Nandini liberates the human souls oppressed by bureaucratic machines. The King is driven by his thirst for power and fear of wealth. There is no room for love or beauty in his greedy life. He transforms human beings into machines for mining gold. People are not even referred to by their names but by an identification number. Calling them by identification numbers is highly symbolic of the loss of an individual's freedom, as a name is tied to a person's identity. Here, the King strips away that freedom. They are just numbers. In this darkness of captivity, Nandini carries a message of self-expression. Thus, we find a deep struggle between autocracy and democracy: in autocracy, the King seeks to fulfil his desires. In *Raktakarabi*, the battle between autocracy and democracy is a powerful metaphor. Autocracy, represented by the King, oppresses the people and stifles freedom. In contrast, democracy, symbolized by the rebellious character of Nandini, embodies the struggle for equality and justice. In the end, we witness the downfall of the oppressive authority before the democratic aspirations. The King himself wishes to be liberated from this autocratic system.

In the play, there is a declaration from the King,

« You want to fight with me. So come closer. Do you have the courage to trust me? Come with me. Today make me your companion Nandini. To fight against me but put your hand in mine. The battle has started. This is

<sup>15</sup> CUGNO, Alain, Sur la liberté de penser, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-projet-2005-1-page-85.htm>

(Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page-438, (Translated by the author of the article)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page-461, (Translated by the author of the article)

my flag; I break it and you tear it up. Let your hand hit me , hit me hard, that will be my freedom.”<sup>18</sup>

In these two plays, *Putul Khela* and *Raktakarabi*, we find two different portrayals of freedom as described in Sartre’s definition. Freedom, according to Jean-Paul Sartre’s view, is a fundamental existential condition where the individual realizes they are responsible for their choices and their own becoming. It implies the absence of absolute determinism, thus offering the possibility to create one’s own essence through authentic actions. Sartre emphasizes the need to confront the existential anxiety resulting from this freedom, as well as the fact that each choice shapes our identity. For him, freedom is a privilege, giving meaning to our existence in a world devoid of intrinsic meaning. Nandini practices this privilege by establishing her existence as an individual. On the one hand, Nandini embodies the intensity of freedom; on the other, Bulu struggles throughout her life to be free. However, according to Sartre’s description, the condition of this freedom remains the same: freedom explains an absolute existence with the individual’s own choice. A free being does not choose their existence, but by existing, they take actions that express their essence.

#### A Comparative Approach to The Notion of Freedom

It is true that both plays are based on the concept of freedom, but the concept is not the same in both. In *Putul Khela*, individual freedom is at the heart of Bulu’s journey. Bulu, initially presented as an obedient wife and mother, lives in a marriage that, despite its apparent normality, deprives her of all autonomy. Her husband, Tapan, treats her like a fragile child, a "doll" to protect and control, never acknowledging her individuality or her own desires.

Bulu’s quest for freedom begins when she realizes that she has never really made decisions for herself, whether in her marriage or in her life in general. Her illegal loan to save her husband is an attempt to take control of her situation, but it also reveals her isolation and lack of real power. At the end of the play, Bulu makes the radical decision to leave her husband and children to discover who she is as an individual. This shocking act for the time is an affirmation of her need for personal freedom, her right to autonomy, and the necessity of breaking free from oppressive social expectations.

In contrast, in *Raktakarabi*, collective freedom is manifested through the struggle against systemic oppression imposed by an invisible and dehumanizing power. The work is set in the kingdom of Yaksha, where the invisible king ruthlessly exploits the workers, reducing their existence to mere economic production. In this environment of servitude, the workers are cut off

from their humanity, chained by a system that deprives them of collective freedom.

Nandini, the central character, embodies resistance to this oppression. Through her radiant presence and spiritual strength, she inspires others to rebel against this oppressive order. Her love for Ranjan, a free and rebellious man, symbolizes the connection to true freedom, far from greed and tyranny. She awakens in the workers a desire for collective redemption and urges them to reclaim their humanity. The quest for freedom in *Raktakarabi* is not limited to the individual but extends to the entire oppressed community. Nandini represents the spark that awakens collective consciousness and incites revolt against injustice. Thus, the play becomes a metaphor for collective liberation, where individual emancipation fuels broader social transformation.

## CONCLUSION

In *Putul Khela*, freedom is above all individual: Bulu frees herself from patriarchal expectations by leaving her husband to rediscover her identity and autonomy. The quest for freedom focuses on personal emancipation in the face of oppressive social norms.

In contrast, in *Raktakarabi*, freedom is collective. Nandini embodies the rebellion against a tyrannical system, inspiring an entire community to break free from exploitation. Here, freedom concerns not only the individual but also the liberation of an entire people, uniting personal emancipation with that of society. Thus, we can conclude that the aspect of freedom described in the two plays is not the same.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, page-503,(Translated by the author of the article))

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