

## **The Surprise As A Communicative Technique Of Deviation In Alice Walker's Novel (The Color Purple)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study aims to examine the element of surprise in the novelistic discourse as an important text that can establish a communicative relationship between the speaker and the recipient in light of the theory of receiving and acceptance. The element of surprise was not fully taken into account in Alice Walker's novel (*The Color Purple*), and there has been little debate about it in light of the reader's receiving and acceptance. The results of the study revealed the active role of the surprise in circulating a positive discourse of interaction between the text and the reader.

**Keywords:** Surprise; Deviation; Alice Walker; *The Color Purple*.

### **1. Introduction**

Critics argue that when a speaker seeks influential aesthetics in his methods, he necessarily resorts to violating the expected things and bringing the unexpected that produces pleasure in the recipients' minds. The degree of this pleasure is formed according to the ability of the creator and the capacity of his imagination. So, deviating the standard was the way of writers through the ages to excite the listener. However, modern writers had a deeper and more advanced view of displacement and alienation from the base. So, the art of reporting the possibilities of violating the prevailing language constitutes what is known as the poetic language. The structural stylistic Jean Cohen (1977) sees that the permanent and continuous shift of language from the user and the known achieves a measure of literacy and that monitoring the phenomena of deviation in the text can help a deductive underground reading to move away from the surface and marginal reading. Thus, the phenomenon of deviation is the same indicative and suggestive dimensions give rise to surprise, and therefore its presence in the text becomes able to make language exciting that can exercise impact over the reader through the element of surprise and strangeness.

Among the modern writers, the idea of surprise occupies large dimensions in the creative process, as they have made it a principle and a starting point for their creations. Therefore, the writer practices the act of writing not only to overwhelm the reader with surprise but also to convey some messages to him. To use another meaning, writing is mainly done for the purpose of communication. Accordingly, critics indicate that surprise is used not only for the purpose of influence but also to preserve the communication between the writer and the reader (Cohen, 1977).

The element of surprise and amazement, emitted by the recipient and by the influence of emotional currents embodied in different levels of deviation, makes the literary work a compound text on which the creator leans to let the reader participate in the creative process. In such doing, the reader is invited to take part in framing the events of the literary text. Furthermore, it is the variety of stylistic and expressive possibilities in the literary text that takes it to the extent of effectiveness in the part of the recipients. The variety of these possibilities creates the influence and attraction of the literary text to stimulate the recipient and make him an active partner in the text. In such doing, this technique of enrolling the reader in playing a significant role in framing and decoding the events of the text surprisingly motivates the reader. With such a kind of surprise, the recipient's presence frames a distinctive sign in the text and an active

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influential element of the surprise. For this reason, the inflated element of surprise in a text is defined by Kibede Varga to be the style itself (Doležel, 2010).

The stylists took an interest in the element of surprise and went on to explain its sources and effects, as a way to link them to every movement of deviation or moderation of style. According to Todorov (1986), departing from the expected to another form of the unexpected makes the spirit move into new spaces.

The Surprise is a new element of critical studies. It is not necessarily based on absurdity as it is often serious and justified. It investigates the effect that other methods and techniques may not achieve. The search in the element of surprise expands the fields of vision and perception. The recipient of the phenomenon often connects the result of the surprise and the introductions that lead to it. With such a kind of connection, an artistic relationship is created in the context of the novelist, a linguistic composition, or in an image-making. The nature of the style, in terms of narration, installation, or photographing, offers the writer the possibility to turn it over, exposing new artistic techniques.

As for the impact of the surprise on the recipient and the value of the text, it is varied in different ways. One of its ways is to conceal the secret of the surprise of the hero and the reader until they are revealed to them together at the same time. Another way is based on dialogue which is the main conveyer of the surprise and its effect on the readers. We may not find the benefit and the pleasure of the surprise presented without a keen reading of the dialogue given.

In short, the element of surprise in the novel makes readers feel really surprised because what happens exceeds the expectations of readers. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) is chosen for the present study not only because of its important implications in surprising the reader but also the element of surprise had been professionally used. This novel is well arranged because each event in the novel is not only acceptable but also logical according to the artistic element. However, the element of surprise had not been dealt with in detail in the previous studies. Accordingly, the present study comes to address the important implications of a surprise to clarify their importance in taking the readers into new areas of understanding and giving a new perspective of reading.

Finally, the element of surprise is addressed in light of the reader's receiving and acceptance because any literary work cannot be called creative except when it is completed with a recipient who interacts with the text via understanding, extrapolation, and interpretation, and produces it again. Throughout its induction process, the text is transferred from the artistic area to the field of the aesthetic one, to become a life project for recipients, and to be granted a new reading of creativity.

### **Black Lesbianism As A Technique Of Surprise In *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Award as well as the American Book Award for first fiction in 1982. This novel explores different facets of lesbian love and friendship. In *The Color Purple* Lesbianism is described as a choice woman consciously makes as an alternative to oppressive heterosexual relationships. This novel portrays an authentic and honest portrayal of black lesbianism and its implications. Besides, it portrays strong black woman characters caught in explicit exploitative heterosexual relationships who eventually broke the chains of male-dependence and turned toward each other for mutual love and support.

Also, *The Color Purple* continues to cause controversy for a long time after its publication in 1982. Some of this controversy view the novel as "a landmark in the traditions of black women's writings" (Froula, 1986). On the other part of this controversy, others censure "Walker's depiction of violent black men who physically and psychologically abuses their wives and children" and blame her for her frank "depiction of lesbianism" (Royster, 1986). Such twin depictions of violent and abusive black males and central Lesbian relationships are related in the novel text to convey a severe criticism of some sufferings of the black woman. *The Color Purple* comes across these sufferings to create such an explicitly lesbian and womanist novel.

Furthermore, *The Color Purple* is a historical novel in the traditions of African American lesbian literature as it transfers the term lesbian from its limited sexual definition to a new and different space. Lesbianism, in female culture, applies to sexual activity among women only, as males view homosexuality as a negative reaction to men. The

different space of this novel recalls the term "lesbians" from their sexual connotations and enriches them more by revealing the unexplored aspects of women's love for each other.

Walker via *The Color Purple* redefines female sex and transmits female identity by realizing it through the homeopathic lens. In her novel, lesbian sexuality is not only independent of men but also free in nature. Celie's choice of lesbianism comes to highlight the innate bisexual potential of all people. *The Color Purple* encodes a woman's love for each other. The book, written in an epistolary style to comprise diary letters written by Celie, addressed to God, and later to her sister Nettie. Fourteen-year-old Celie is repeatedly raped, impregnated and silenced by the man she believes is her father. The novel begins with the first case of Celie's first anguished letter to God:

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give a sign letting me know what is happening to me. (Walker, 1983, p.1)

Fourteen-year-old Celie is repeatedly raped, impregnated and silenced by whom she believes to be her father. The novel begins with the first letter from Celie to God to surprise her readers with this cruel message addressed to God. The letter is expressed as true evidence of her suffering. In this context, the suffering appears to be very evident and shocking at the same time as it is used to surprise the reader. This surprise aims to prepare the reader to receive more difficult situations and circumstances around this black girl.

Another surprising situation is presented in her step father's death threat against her mother. Hovering over this message dangerously is her father's threat to kill her mother "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1983, p.6). The double negative threat from her step-father sentences Celie to vocal exile and serving the mother-daughter bond. Celie, being robbed of her voice, can neither confide in her ailing mother nor talk to her black sisters in the church. Since she can "not never tell nobody" she seeks out an alternative mode of expression which is interpreted to be her letters to God.

Celie never loses her primary identifications with women despite her mother's screaming and cursing she never feels mad at her "I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her !" (Walker, 1983, p.6). Unable to cope with the psychological trauma of incest coupled with the sheer physical pain of repeated rape and impregnation, Celie pleads to God to help her know what is happening to her. The novel exposes the patriarchal silence as a tool of perpetuating continual psychic and physical violence against women. Adding to this, the severance of bonds between women which render them vulnerable and accessible for male violation.

The reader comes face to face with a guilt-ridden, and sexually abused fourteen-year-old protagonist for whom her letters are her lifeline that is the only mode of expression and the only way to tolerate her pain. When Celie marries Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, he becomes a successor to the system of male oppression handed over to him by Pa. The scene in which marriage negotiations take place between Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Pa is suggestive of a slave auction:

Pa call me. Celie, he say....Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ want  
another look at you. I go stand in the door....  
He's still up on his horse. He look at me  
up and down.... Turn around, Pa say. I turn  
around. (Walker, 1983, p.12)

Celie is reduced to a status of a mere object used profitably in male transactions. She is no better than the cow that accompanies her. Her marriage to Albert/Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ further denies her identity as a subject and merely serves to reinforce her status as an object. For Celie marriage to Albert/Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ seems analogous to enslavement where her submission is enforced through violence. The novel exposes marriage as a social institution that legalizes rape and other brutalities against women, sanctions female enslavement and dictates her silence. The novel makes it clear how marriage as a part of a male-dominated culture operates to the advantage of the male. In stark contrast to the sense of alienation she experiences about men, Celie never loses her primary identification with women. In spite of her mother's

screaming she never feels mad at her."I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her" (Walker, 1983, p.6). The little support she ever receives comes from women. The first thing she notices on seeing Shug's picture is that "Shug Avery was a woman"(p.7). Since Shug is a woman she immediately becomes someone with whom Celie may affiliate positively.

Constant male sexist exploitation leaves indelible scars on Celie's body and mind. Years of sexual and psychological abuse by Pa and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ arrest the development of her self-esteem, that "being alive begin to seem like an awful strain" (p.262). "Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh" (p.266).

Celie's introduction to sexuality is through rape which again leads her to regard her body in negative terms, as a site of her exploitation which cannot be loved and desired but only used against her will. Celie possesses no control over her body and sexual organs. Through Celie's sexual violation at the hands of men, Walker reveals rape and systematic sexual violence to be manifestations of the politics of male domination.

The only way for Celie to cope with the unrelenting abuse and violence is to totally desensitize herself. She isolates herself in order to fend off her pain; "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself Celie you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men" (Walker, 1983, p.23). The usage of the tree as a metaphoric image is a significant surprise. A tree's sheer immobility and helplessness on encountering the man who may chop it at his own will reflects surprisingly Celie's condition. Being completely powerless against his brutal strength is a real surprise. She is like a tree whose growth is stunted and flowers withered. In stark contrast to Celie, Shug appears as a full-fledged tree blossoming in her identity and rooted in her identity. Celie's surprising words and emotions because of her sense of alienation reduce her to "a mechanical obedient automaton" that "feel nothing at all" (p.44). Trudier Harris (1984) sums up:

Plowing a man's field for twenty years and letting him use her body a sperm depository leaves Celie so buried away from herself that it is hard to imagine anything stirring her life. (p.158)

It is open to surprising speculation whether Celie is a latent lesbian or not. She might have developed a heterosexual desire. She got acquainted with sexuality through rape and serving as a sexual commodity. Having received only pain and oppression in her heterosexual relationships, surely it becomes a surprise when later in the novel she chooses to love a woman. Celie's obvious admiration for a woman so unlike herself, living entirely on her own terms, induces her to welcome Shug into her own house. It is Celie who stands up "her condition for her text" (Walker, 1983, p.46). It is Celie who stands up for her, welcoming her in her life, showering her with love and affection. In turn, Shug mothers Celie and transforming her world-view and enabling her to reconstruct her identity within a feminine sphere.

Shug, exuding raw sexuality, re-awakes Celie's "buried" desires. She makes her conscious for the first time of her long-repressed physical needs:

First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with its black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into man. (p.5).

In her heterosexual relationships, Celie acted as a passive sexual- object to the repeated violation. She remains stranger to any feeling of arousal. In her sexual relationship with Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ Celie never experiences desire or longing. She tells Sofia "I do not know nothing about it. Mr\_\_\_\_\_ clam on top of me, do this business in ten minutes us both sleep" (p.69).

Furthermore, the novel surprisingly exposes family and marriage as the prime sites of sexual violation of females. Celie's rape by her step-father discloses that "A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (p.42). It brings out mothering as an integral part of love between women. Celie, as a child received little affection from her mentally disturbed mother whom she lost early in her life. Her step-father sold her little children and severed a potential mother-daughter bond. Her sole loving connection remained with her sister, Nettie whom Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ threw out of his house and isolated them from any form of female contact. Celie finds love and nurturance with Shug. Sleeping with her, Celie is reminded of

how she used to feel sleeping with grandma and Nettie all "warm and cushiony" (p.119). Shug becomes her surrogate mother and an adopted daughter whom Celie nurses like her long lost baby. "Then I feel something really soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while I act like a little lost baby too" (p.118).

For Celie coupled with the discovery of sexuality and identity comes a host of other discoveries that subvert and redefine patriarchal ideology. The most important involves the redefinition of God. Celie believed God to be a white man, grey-bearded and blue-eyed to whom she addressed her letters. She soon realizes that this white patriarch that she had been worshipping was like any other man "Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown" (p.199). Shug saves Celie from losing her faith by giving a radical feminist redefinition of God "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (p.202). Linda Abbandonato (1993) points out that the moment the connection between 'man' and 'God' is severed, phallocentrism collapses. It is a moment of truth that Celie finally finds spirituality in the natural world; the trees, the stars, the sky, and the color purple.

The epilogue of the novel may be read as Celie's surprising exhortation to Shug as she asks her to "show me how to do like you, show me how to do it". Shug, in turn, shows how to live her life and to be herself no matter what, how to act more manly than most men and therefore become "womanly" (Walker, 1983, p.276). The surprise lies in Shug's personality as she becomes pivotal in re-establishing the once severed link between Celie and her sister Nettie, by locating Nettie's letters. In one of these letters, Celie is confronted with the shattering news "Pa not Pa" (p.183). This piece of revelation, though causing an identity crisis, relieves Celie from the long suffered trauma and guilt of incest. It marks another step toward her healing process. The needle becomes her tool for anatomy and creativity. Shug encourages Celie to make pants. Sewing, which initially began as an outlet for Celie's rage and grief, finally becomes her means of financial power and her liberation.

Shug plays the most crucial role in Celie's journey from silence to speech, from negation to assertion and from slavery to liberation. While Celie finally leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to start a fresh life with her mentor, lover, and guide Shug Avery, the patriarchal rule breaks down. In Memphis, Shug and Celie create a female-centered world of love and friendship. Patriarch norms that dictate female dependence and subservience do not apply here. Shug is quick to make her understand "You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (Walker, 1983, p.218). Celie's pants subvert these norms by creating pants for everyone, male and female. For females, these pants signify mobility and sexual appeal and independence. These pants are the outcome of her unlimited creative power.

Alice Walker wanted *The Color Purple* to be a historical novel that communicates the modern reader stating that she writes to show that "my history starts not with the taking of lands or the births, battles, and deaths of great men, but one woman asking another for her underwear"(p.356). The unconventional yet significant act of exchange of underclothes creates the context within which the novel operates. This strategy of breaking the conventions is deviating practice throughout the womanist texts. Shug "acts more manly than most men" and Sophia usurps male privileges by insisting on lifting the coffin of her deceased mother. God is changed from the traditional "He" to an "it". These instances create the context of deviation within which it becomes possible for Celie and Shug to transmute their social conditioned roles and enter into a lesbian relationship.

Moreover, it appears that the deep analysis of Cilly's personality conveys a communicative message to the modern man, reminding him of social ties and constructions. The novel suggests that Celie's homosexual act is not innate or biologically grounded. In the novel, she is repeatedly and violently raped by men. Walker makes sure that Shug and Celie meet when they are both on the downslide, Celie as Mr's victim and Shug struck down by disease. These instances allow them to relate to each other and support each other's needs. In contrast to Celie's status as an abused sexual object in her relationships with men, in loving Shug she becomes the lover and the loved. Her relationship with Shug is a source of energy that introduced her to voice and desire and self-knowledge. Her healing touch heals Celie's wounded body and mind and awakening her to her own identity. Finally, faced with the dual choice Celie consciously chooses the lesbian love over heterosexuality. In *The Color Purple* lesbianism is neither biological determined nor

innate. Celie's choice is undoubtedly informed by her social circumstances along with the catalytic presence of Shug Avery.

In addition to the issue of the genesis of lesbianism, this novel also adopts surprisingly different perspectives regarding the meaning and implication of the term 'lesbian'. To Alice Walker, the term lesbian does not seem suitable for Black women which, perhaps, explains why she does not use it even once in the novel. She surprisingly prefers to call the woman who loves another woman sexually or otherwise as a "whole woman" from "wholly" or "holy" woman. These are women who love other women but are also concerned for their fathers, sons, and brothers disregarding how they feel about other them as males. Walker writes:

My own term for such women would be "womanish"...a word that said more than that they choose women over men. In fact, to be consistent with black cultural values... it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world. rather than separation, regardless of who worked and slept with whom. (p.81).

Walker surprisingly puts surprisingly forth a universalist view of lesbianism which advocates women's love for each other without implying a rejection of men. For her, a womanist is not a separatist. The characters of Shug and Celie are in keeping with Walker's universalist vision.

Dissatisfied with the clinical limitations of the word 'lesbian', Adrienne Rich (1983) coined the term "lesbian continuum" to "embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life and receiving of practical and political support" (p.156). *The Color Purple* enriches the lesbian continuum. In addition to the relationship between Celie and Shug, the novel brings to light the Black sisterhood.

Shug's bisexuality speaks of her ability to love both men and women. Celie through Shug's friendship gains not only the knowledge of self but also how to relate to others. This helps her to overcome her initial hatred towards other men. The novel ends with the whole family together celebrating their reunion. *The Color Purple* celebrates surprisingly women's love for each other and its ability to transform their lives. Celie's real surprise lies in her transformation from self-negation to self-actualization which occurs through her bonding with her black sisters. It is as in the words of Charles L. Proudfit (1991):

This "Female Bonding" which occurs over an extended period of time, enables Celie, a depressed survivor... to resume her arrested development that was thwarted in infancy and early adolescence. (p.13).

The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie surprisingly flourishes against a backdrop of a supportive and nurturing community of sisters. The novel highlights female bonding as a real surprise that may create the key to real love and solidarity among women. According to lesbian writers, only women can give each other a feminine self that gives a sense of commitment, love, and emotional support. *The Color Purple* encodes female bonding as a lifeline to women. Whenever this solidarity is ruptured it is inevitably followed by negative consequences. Celie, for instance, overcome with jealousy, instigates Harpo to beat Sofia. But this act leaves her guilt-ridden and shamed as she realizes that she had sinned against Sofia's spirit. Her acceptance of her guilt leads to her purgation at the end. *The Color Purple* is a landmark in the tradition of African American lesbian literature in the way it rescues the term lesbian from its limiting sexual definition. In male culture, the term lesbian applies only to sexual activity between women. The male views a lesbian as a potential sex object and lesbianism as a negative reaction to men. This novel reclaims the term lesbian from its solely sexual connotations and embraces many more forms of primary intensity between and among women.

However, Walker, in *The Color Purple*, portrays a situation of surprise in which it is possible for a lesbian to transcend role-playing and relate to each other on the same level. It is this aspect of surprise that saves and redeems the relationship between Celie and Shug from being maltreated by men. This novel serves to undermine surprisingly the myths and stereotypical caricatures associated with the lesbian in popular fiction. Ann Allen (2000) points out:

The stereotypical fallacies surrounding Black lesbians under the guise of facts are ludicrous. Black lesbians are labeled "too ugly to get a man", "man-haters; and "man-woman" physically. (p.85)

These myths fog up the image of a lesbian obscuring her true identity as a normal person. This novel surprises its

readers in documenting the truth over myths through its authentic portrayal of lesbian characters. Shug comes across as the epitome of femininity embodying deep sensuality, raw female sexuality, and a magnetic persona. Furthermore, Lesbians have been labeled as "man-haters" merely because they choose women over men as their love object and life patterns. This label seems contrary to the bisexual behavior of Shug who continues to indulge in a heterosexual relationship long after her involvement with Celie. Celie, on the other hand, does hate men initially but it may be related to her victimization at their hands. The *Color Purple* deconstructs the myth of the "mannish" lesbian and reveals that it stems from the society's deep-seated hatred of lesbians. The novel, therefore, helps to disseminate the obscuring fog surrounding the lesbian and help to recognize their true identity.

Besides, the heterosexual relationship in the novel reveals a constellation of violence, psychic and physical abuse, and sexual violation that informs the lives of women. For Celie, the victim of incest and rape, only a perverted and abnormal relationship with Shug can provide her with economic and sexual independence. While heterosexuality leaves her inanimate, her deviancy leads her to achieve maximum autonomy of human expression. Society brands lesbians as 'perverts' although they are yet to invent anything that heterosexuality cannot or do not do. It is not lesbians who rape their fourteen-year-old daughter, beat their women to pulp and enslave wives. It is not homosexuality which is deviant but as David F. Greenberg (1997) puts it as:

It is believed that homosexuality is evil, sick or undesirable and the corresponding efforts to punish, cure or prevent it that makes homosexuality deviant. (p.2)

The element of surprise is also expressed in Celie's feeling of being a "female". Although she was raped multiple times and later becomes a wife for twenty years, she is still a "virgin" whom Shug initiates into eroticism. Shug calls Celie a virgin because she is yet to experience her organism. After being sexually exploited and raped by way or another, Celie invented the role of a woman when she perceives another woman through the male grid of role definition viewing them as sex objects and therapy. Celie's last letter in the novel is addressed "dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky" (Walker, 1983, p.292) increasingly encodes her ability to identify with the circle and of being female that surprises the male who stepped aside from such a world as being a passive influence. Celie and Shug now have their independent world, able to relate to each other on the same level.

## CONCLUSION

*The Color Purple* comes across as an explicitly lesbian novel qualified to be included in the category of "lesbian fiction". It assumes a critical stance towards the politics of heterosexual relationships as manifested in the social institutions of marriage and family. The novel focuses on the erotic relationship between women. It explores various facets of lesbian love and friendship. It undertakes an in-depth analysis of the meaning and implications of lesbianism. This novel comes across as a landmark work in the African American lesbian literary tradition. It demonstrates the variety and diversity of the Black lesbian experience and emphasizes its presence in the annals of African and American literary canon. By making the invisible visible, and the marginalized at the center, it brings a clear surprise of black lesbianism within the framework of representation and celebrating it as a valid socio-sexual identity. Walker, in *The Color Purple*, advocates the need for unconditional love and a supportive female network as the key to survival and wholeness of womanhood.

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## المفاجأة كتقنية اتصال مشتركة في رواية أليس ووكر اللون الأرجواني

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### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة عنصر المفاجأة في الخطاب الروائي كنص مهم يمكن أن يقيم علاقة اتصال بين المتحدث، والمستلم في ضوء نظرية الاستلام والقبول. إذ إن عنصر المفاجأة لم يؤخذ سابقاً في الحسبان بشكل كامل في رواية أليس ووكر اللون الأرجواني في ضوء تلقي القارئ وقبوله، وكشفت نتائج الدراسة الدور النشط للمفاجأة في تعميم خطاب إيجابي للتفاعل بين النص والقارئ.

الكلمات الدالة: المفاجأة، الإتحراف، أليس ووكر، اللون البنفسجي.

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