

THE COLOR LINE UNVEILED: INVESTIGATING RACIAL INEQUITIES IN BRIDGE OF SIGHS BY RICHARD RUSSO

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Abstract

The present research attempts to show how in the white dominant society in America the blacks are treated as represented by Russo. This issue has to be dealt with under the Critical Race Theory (CRT) which is applied to the text of the novel Bridge Of Sighs written by Richard Russo, an American novelist. The content of the text indicates how blacks have been historically and culturally suppressed. This research is important in the sense that it does not only highlight and present the construction of various forms of oppression based on racial identity like deprivation and degradation but also represents them by covertly voicing the stance of the Black community. Therefore, this study provides a new angle to the research at hand, in the discipline of art of interpretation. The analysis has been conducted paragraph-wise and the critical discussion is done under the Critical Race Theory. It allows the researcher to analyze the societal role in shaping various identities of blacks in relation to the white-dominant society.

Keywords: Black identity, Oppression, CRT, Society, White Supremacy.

Introduction

Throughout history, power struggles and conflicts have driven individuals and societies to war and domination. While power can be acquired through concrete means such as wealth and resources, those without these privileges, often living in poverty and facing limited opportunities, find themselves marginalized and deprived (Foucault, 1976). In some cases, power dynamics may undergo ideological shifts, with dominated groups challenging and denying power to the dominant ones, leading to civil disobedience or rebellion (Gandhi, 1927). These struggles often give rise to

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various conceptual frameworks, and one such concept is "Race" or "Racial Identity," which becomes a catalyst for discrimination and societal divisions (Omi & Winant, 1994). Today's world is marked by unrest arising from these racial dilemmas, resulting in binary divisions based on wealth, religion, race, education, and social status (Khan, 2019). These divisions lead to the creation of social groups, shaping individual identities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Black identity is one among the various racial identities, influencing individuals' characteristics and their societal placement based on these traits. In nearly all countries, people of Black race are assigned an inferior status, experiencing degradation and deprivation across various aspects of life. They face dominance by white individuals in areas such as healthcare, employment, education, and equal rights (Fanon, 1952).

Richard Russo's novel, *Bridge of Sighs*, addresses different themes including family dynamics, male dominance, white society, and Black oppression, with the latter being the central theme. Set in the town of Thomastan, New York, the story revolves around characters like Louise Charles (Lucy) Lynce, his wife, Sarah, his best friend, and Bobby. The Black characters reside in a rough neighbourhood, engaged in manual labor. Their interactions with other characters primarily serve to teach lessons or offer assistance. Gabriel Mock Junior, a character in *Bridge of Sighs*, exemplifies both the Black experience and exposes the true nature of white society.

1.1 Statement of the Problem:

The existing societal system portrays the powerful status of white individuals while subjecting Black people to a degraded and deprived situation. This system is either constructed deliberately or perceived as an unchangeable natural order. Therefore, this research aims to examine the themes of race and Black oppression in Richard Russo's novel, *Bridge of Sighs*. Furthermore, the study investigates the construction and evolution of Black identity over time.

1.2 Research Questions:

To what extent does *Bridge of Sighs* depict racism in a post-racial American society?

How do cultural and historical factors contribute to the victimization of Afro-Americans portrayed in the novel?

1.3 Research Objectives:

To analyze Richard Russo's *Bridge of Sighs* (2007) with a focus on racial issues.

To examine the role of culture and history in the oppression of Afro-Americans depicted in the novel.

Literature review

Frantz Fanon's influential contributions to post-colonial studies and critical theory have left a lasting impact on the discourse surrounding liberation struggles. As a French psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary author, Fanon actively supported the Algerian struggle for independence, and his works served as catalysts for anti-colonial movements worldwide (Fanon, 1961).

In his seminal work, "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952), Fanon delves into the profound psychological effects of colonial subjugation on black individuals. He posits that black people exist with dual dimensions—one among their fellow black individuals and another in relation to the white man. Fanon attributes the self-division experienced by black individuals to the oppressive nature of colonial subjugation (Fanon, 1952).

Langston Hughes, a prominent figure in American literature, examined the intricate dynamics between black and white communities, shedding light on the tense nature of their social interactions (Hughes, 1990). Hughes' writings serve as powerful reflections of the racial divide and the challenges faced by African Americans in their interactions with white society.

Jim Crow laws played a pivotal role in institutionalizing segregation and deepening the isolation of African Americans. Historian C. Vann Woodward (1955) argued that these laws perpetuated the belief that African Americans were inherently incapable of assimilating into white society, leading to their segregation in various aspects of life. Segregated schools, prisons, hospitals, and even cemeteries reinforced the marginalization of African Americans and reinforced their separation from the white mainstream (Woodward, 1955).

Research methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis of the novel *Bridge of Sighs* to explore the theme of black identity and its construction over time through the influence of powerful entities. The researcher aims to examine the reasons behind the victimization of Black individuals in American society by closely examining the novel.

To analyze the novel's representation of racial issues and the identity of Blacks, the researcher utilizes the Modern Critical Race theory developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. This theoretical framework provides valuable insights into the reasons behind the victimization experienced by Black individuals. By employing this perspective, the study seeks to shed light on the impact of racial problems on the attitudes of both Black and White communities in American society.

The research utilizes multiple sources for data gathering. The primary source of data is the text of the novel itself, "*The Bridge of Sighs*." Additionally, secondary sources such as articles and internet resources have been consulted throughout the research process to provide further context and insights.

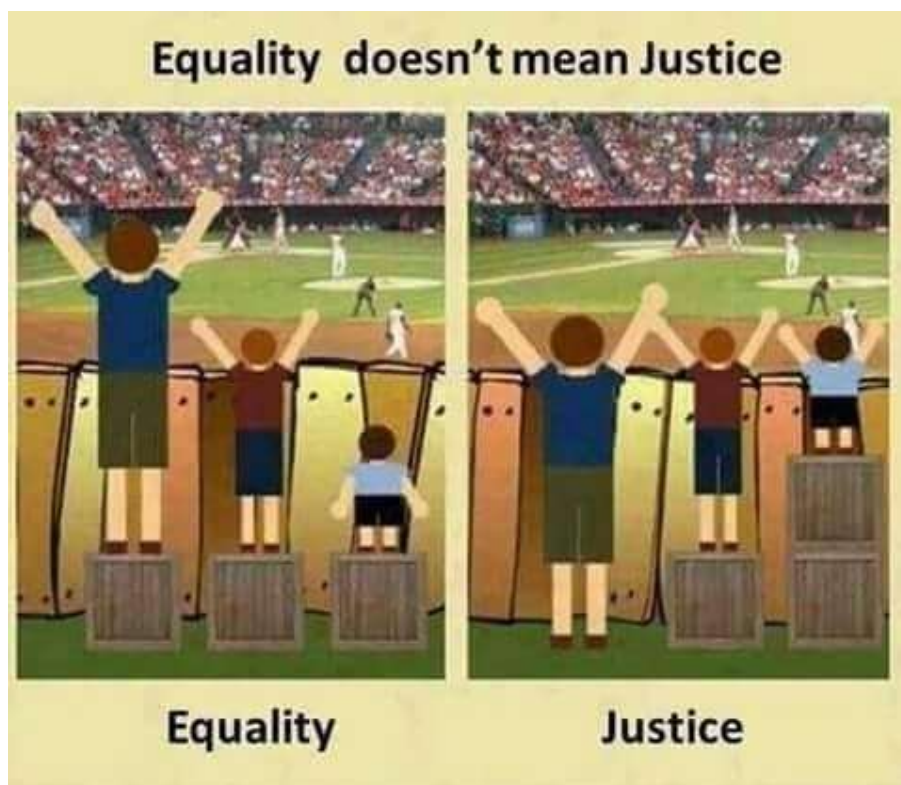
The selection of racial identity as the focal point of the study stems from the recognition that identity encompasses various dimensions, including ethnic, national, religious, sex, gender, and racial identities. The researcher's aim is to examine the deprivation and degradation experienced by Black individuals based on their skin color. Drawing upon the works of relevant thinkers and writers, the study delves into the discussions surrounding this topic. Moreover, the study explores how black identity intersects with other backgrounds and how it perpetuates the enduring presence of the color line in American society.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as the overarching theoretical perspective for this study. CRT is an interpretive mode that examines race and racism within dominant cultural expressions. By adopting this theoretical lens, the study aims to understand how victims of systematic racism are influenced by the cultural perception of race and how they can resist and challenge prevailing prejudices. The three major tenets of CRT, namely the critique of color blindness, intersectionality, and whiteness as property, are employed to analyze the text and uncover deeper insights.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of Critical Race Theory, is renowned for her introduction and development of intersectional theory. This theory explores how intersecting social identities, particularly those of minority groups, relate to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.

Critique of Color Blindness

One aspect of critical examination within this study is the critique of color blindness. Color blindness promotes the idea of judging individuals based on their character rather than their skin color, race, sect, class, or gender. While proponents argue that color blindness is necessary for equal treatment regardless of race, critical race theorists argue that it alone cannot remedy the profound racial discrimination and disparities deeply ingrained within society. Many critics regard color blindness as inherently racist. Monica Williams (2011) discusses this aspect in her article, stating that color blindness fails to foster equality or respect, instead relieving therapists of their obligation to address important racial differences and difficulties.



Source: <https://www.quora.com>

Intersectionality:

Closely intertwined with the concept of differential racialization, which recognizes the distinct origins and evolving histories of each race, is the notion of intersectionality and antiessentialism. This principle holds significant importance within Critical Race Theory (CRT). Delgado and Stefenac (2001) define intersectionality as the examination of how race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation intersect and interact within different contexts. It recognizes that individuals possess multiple and complex identities that cannot be easily reduced to a singular category. For instance, a feminist may be a white Jewish woman from a working-class background, or an African American activist may identify as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, an individual of Indian descent may align themselves with the Democratic or Republican party, or may identify as Black due to their family's Caribbean heritage.

Whiteness as Property:

Another fundamental aspect of CRT is the concept of whiteness as property. This perspective views whiteness as the ultimate form of property, exclusively possessed by white individuals and denied to Black individuals who lack the white or red skin color. Whiteness is deemed highly valuable by those who possess it, despite often being unacknowledged as valuable. It is considered the most privileged form of property, granting certain rights and privileges to white individuals. These "property functions of whiteness" include the rights to access and utilize institutional privileges and facilities, the enjoyment of fame and status, and the absolute right to exclude others. These aspects collectively contribute to making the American dream more attainable and likely for white citizens. From a CRT perspective, possessing white skin is akin to owning a valuable piece of property, conferring privileges and advantages that are not extended to renters (or individuals of color).

Analysis And Discussion

The analysis is a textual study of the novel *Bridge Of Sighs* written by Richard Russo. In this novel, the researcher is particularly concerned with the undervalued and degraded social status of blacks in America. That is the black identity (oppression of blacks) which in this research is taken as an image of the non-whites in the eyes of whites.

Richard Russo is a well-known writer who takes domestic stories into consideration by keeping high ideals for America. Most of the arguments are in favour of the American dream of a developed post-race country. Yet one can see the clues of racism which are still very dominant in the US and the same can be traced in the text of this novel.

The novel starts with the description of the self-introduction by the speaker (white) who is the main character of the novel also. His name is Lou C Lynch. All the events revolve around him, his family, and their friends, and all the major events that took place in an upstate town in New York called Thomaston.

Gabriel Mock Junior is a black man in this novel. He is the son of Gabriel Mock Senior. He lives in Thomaston town among the majority whites like the other blacks in that society, but he has many contacts with the whites as compared to other people of his race as he is the caretaker of an old building, Whitcombe Hall, which reminds the historical institution of slavery in America. He has a son whose name is Gabriel Mock Third who died in Vietnam War. He has a black wife and a daughter (who died of cancer in her youth).

In this novel the first introduction of the black character by a white character Lou Charles Lynch offers the difference of opinions between the white and the black community members. The representation of self or contrary to that the negative representation of others especially of the black minority group is the main task of the narrator here.

Gabriel Mock Junior throws light on the black character from his own perspective and links him and his community to the orthodox culture and historical belongings. In the words of Luo C lynch, Gabriel Mock is shown as having a job to paint the fence of the Whitcombe building. The very symbol of the historical institution of slavery, which seems an irony that Gabriel claims proudly to be protecting the fence, although the vicinity belongs to the county now. The country is mostly consisting of the dominant class. He is described to be sticking to the old slavery era. He lives in a small outbuilding behind the hall. His living place is very small, and that is what he has found for himself to live in. 'Caretaker' and 'fence,' the two words best show his minor job.' claimed proudly' by Gabriel. The contradictory situation is stated here that Gabriel boasts to be a caretaker of the very hall, the owner of which once exercised the practice of slavery. But here again, the irony of the statement is that Gabriel is just to paint the fence around the park rather than to be a caretaker of the building. Gabriel is the man who tries his best to keep the fence of the park from rusting which in other words means that the writer wants to show that old slavery as an institution is still pricking the minds of the blacks and it is still renewed in their consciousness although it is no more in practice now. Even the whites have rejected the very notion of slavery for reasons of the tiny Negro man the adjective 'tiny' is used for the black man and the word 'negro' is even worse and a kind of insult. "forlorn," and. "You the picture of forlornity," are used in association with the segregated nature of blacks or how much the blacks remain aloof or separated from mainstream society. They seem to be very much aware of the meaning of forlornity both individually and in the form of groups. also, in this novel Gabriel Mock being black suffers from a severe form of aloofness. Thus, the word 'forlorn' used by the writer is not out of place. it shows their position in American society.

Lou gives the account of GABRIEL Mock Junior in the words "I'm Gabriel Mock Junior.... A man's name the worst of it, he's doin' fine, I

guess.” (p.67) to think in a single direction and what concept the society has given him he puts it on to others as if it is granted view. Hence, he reveals the existing mindset and the bitter truth of being called after his father’s name who was Gabriel Mock's senior. Although his father is dead, still people call him Junior. It seems unfair to Gabriel that people call him Junior all his life. When Gabriel is asked about whether he has any son and what his name is, he says in a sorrowful manner that he can be called Gabriel Mock the Third. Here he means to say that the dominant white society has so shaped them that they have lost their personal and individual identities. The discourse of the blacks is deprived of power and shows deprivation. According to Gabriel, his son is now being called Three which is a humiliating remark and derogatory reference and he believes that all of them have been treated in the same manner at the hands of the society and in a similar way that name is the worst kind of such remark. These kinds of remarks are examples of demeaning comments at the hands of society on her conscious or unconscious level to show racism. Also, it is evident from the remarks of Gabriel that such a mindset is present throughout history as they are treated in the same way generation after generation. This is in relation to the microaggression of CRT that harms the color relationships.

Another example of how the blacks are treated on the basis of race is when Lucy, a white boy, shares his mental ideas about the negroes that the word negro has ample association with the word gizzard which is used by Gabriel and which means the spare parts of chicken or any such thing. ‘Nigger’, ‘Gizzard’, and Spare parts are the words associated with the blacks. It gives a nasty idea of how blacks are treated and pictured in daily conversations. Gabriel in this piece of conversation shows his feelings as a black man who no more cares about what the people call him. He ignores any name that you give him and that seems that blacks are used to such kinds of negative associations. He tells Lucy that whatever name he wants for Gabriel, he can call him by any bad name because he seems to be untouched by it emotionally. Only he should not be called a negro because

that is something associated with old slavery and the inferiority of their race and links them to a rather different race or creature. It is quite unjust to remind them of their past which have now almost forgotten to find a place in the so-called color-blind society.

When Gabriel tells Lucy that he thinks now that they have become friends, the idea of friendship with Gabriel does not suit Lucy much. It makes Lucy worried and thoughtful for a moment. He doesn't want to be called the friend of a man who is not his age and apart from that he is very odd and different, which means a different race. Gabriel knows from the facial expression of Lucy that probably Lucy doesn't like the idea as he doesn't want to associate with black people. And that thinking of Gabriel that the white boy is avoiding him is true also because according to Lucy it is also one factor. The question here is whether Gabriel is conscious of his color and also knows very well what is his status in society. His black color is the impediment and the image that they have gotten through history. The idea shows racism.

In so liberal a society as America, even Gabriel's father doesn't allow his son to have a look at the girl he likes or to look into her father's house when he tells him "Of course Gabriel Mock Senior... in this man's house." (p105). He is warned to further understand and realize his social position and status and not commit any such act in the future. His father uses the word TRUTH for the gulf between these races which is a social construction and not an eternal Godly word that there occurs any such kind of reality of the blacks and white, however, it seems that this color line has been so strongly rooted in history and their culture that it has almost become a reality and is now accepted by the blacks as has been imposed by the white dominant society. This also shows here the famous tenet of CRT i.e color blindness ideology which has been vastly propagated by the whites over time to show that American society has no discriminatory attitude towards their fellow black subjects but that in reality and practice it

is not possible to root out racism so easily from the minds of the society although a lot of scholars have tried a lot for this color-blind society they are failed so far. And CRT tries to tell that the color-blind ideology harms the status of the blacks because being considered equal to other races they are denied the fruits of special favors or quotas for minorities and are thus neglected and ignored because of the white majority or white dominance in that society or because of the whiteness as a Property which is also one of the basic tenets of CRT.

Blacks are mostly poor people so much so that in some way poverty and blackness are connected and associated terms and it is often remarked that poverty has a black face in other words. It is one of the identities of blacks anywhere in the world that they constitute most of the poor class and thus poverty has become their identity. And that they are the deprived and degraded class. However, there seems also a shred of evidence that affirmative action was taken in favor of the blacks casually. It is done in the form of buying similar kinds of dresses (Brownie) needed at the school by Teresa's parents for Gabriel's sister (Kaylene). This kind of affirmative action may be regarded as one of the tenets of CRT to accommodate the blacks and thus remove some of their financial hurdles.

Russo in the lines "A recent cut cleanly bisected one eyebrow.... but his eyes remained closed, and I wondered for a moment if he might be dead." (p. 161) shows the pathetic situation of blacks for not having any proper treatment. Usually, in America, people with even minor cuts are treated at hospitals or it is possible that the black might not be having money for the hospitalizing and proper treatment of his recent wounds that he has gotten. It is the poverty and carelessness on the part of the blacks by which they ignore important things.

Another difference that the white boy Lucy sees between the blacks and their fellow people of his color; while having come to know Lucy finds that Gabriel's own son denies the very existence of his father and tells people

that he has no father. Lucy at the same time feels that it is how such a situation is faced by a person. This is showing the discontented nature of the black family life and the utter pathetic situation which in a normal family is unimaginable. He thinks that there is lacking a bond of love between the black family because Gabriel's son Mock Third has no affinity for his father, no attraction for his son, and sorrow for Gabriel. Even Gabriel complains about his race women who according to him are disloyal in the sense that they after living for some time with you turn you out of your home and don't let you in and also terms you as a devil and no more need you. This deprivation makes them more pathetic and devastated and gloomy. Actually, here Gabriel refers to the broken family system of the blacks which may be traced back to the historical slavery era when blacks were kept as slaves apart from their families and often they were deprived of living normal family lives. And the same historically broken and disunited black families are present even today in American society for they are culturally and historically so oppressed that they are no more in the position to adopt the lives of their choice according to their own forefather's cultural values. Perhaps it shows that girls or his wife's indifference towards Gabriel made him lose charm in life. Which is a source of depriving him of his family.

Gabriel further in the process of discussion with the white boy tells that "Truth is I'm ashamed of myself... case somebody asks you?" (P.164), actually he thinks himself responsible for all the unwelcome situations that he has fallen prey to. Gabriel takes the blame on his head for the ruined state of his family life and in other words blames the whole of the blacks for their miserable conditions (this is the voice of color). Because if he blames the whites will be of no use to him because the dominants to be blamed for anything will turn against the weaker group and whites as is seen from the traditions do not acknowledge any such idea of partiality in race relations.

On one occasion when LUCY sees the blacks/ Negroes in the cinema is not a matter of great surprise because they usually attend such movies together with the whites. But the surprise that the wide gap presents between the white boys who keep a considerable distance from the negro boy. Also, the blacks were not allowed to possess a place where their whites used to sit from where the screen could be seen perfectly but on the contrary, they were forced to sit in such a place in the cinema where the picture cannot be seen properly. This is micro-aggression or the result of structural racism of CRT that consciously or unconsciously they have been made to sit in the corner where the angle at the screen was bad is the degradation and insult conferred on these negro group. They are intentionally been treated so to deprive them of the fun of watching movies with such acts the gap will further widen instead of being narrowed down. Moreover, the black boys were compelled to be sitting in the form of segregation. This means that the color-blind ideology of the whites does not hold much ground as in theory this might be true up to some extent but in practice, they cannot get rid of the racial phenomena. Perry was clearing the point to Lucy that what means crossing the line that the negroes who often sit separately from the white and some rows were left unattended to look like a gulf between the two sects. The white keeps a distance to be away from them. Here it is all about race and discourse when they saw a black boy with a white girl they became race-conscious.

The idea of the white girl sitting with a black boy is so much a matter of serious concern that even the thought is unacceptable phenomena and it is unimaginable in the white system of white supremacy. And the whites thought it blasphemy.

The remarks by the white that the black “kissed a white girl and gotten punished for” (p.227) is to make it clear that already such action by the blacks have meted with harsh treatment. Still, Lucy is amazed at the Mock boy, Gabriel’s son for committing the same mistake, this is the criticism of

white supremacy and the color-blind theory of CRT. Who believed that all race is treated equally in America and that there is no such idea that the negroes are treated through different parameters existed. But one can see that through the text of this novel, the color-blind ideology does not hold much ground. It means the model of racial issues and crossing the white line has dire consequences.

Mock the Third is beaten by the white boy Perry in front of all the people and in front of the girl he was sitting with “Perry stood over him, fists clenched.” (p.230). The fight began, and the black boy was beaten almost to death. Nobody interfered and all those who watched the beating were just silent spectators as if their will is included in this act of brutality. The powerful were allowed to beat the powerless. Here one thing is also to be regarded thoughtfully if sitting with a girl was a crime, then why the beating came to the black boy only, and why the girl who was equally responsible for accompanying the negro boy to the cinema was spared of such beatings. Why the white girl was not punished? Since she agreed to sit with the black boy. Secondly, if it is a sin to sit with a white girl then why Karen CeeLo and her boyfriend were not treated in the same manner? Thus, this has the seeds of the negation of the color-blind ideology (CRT) that for the same action, the blacks are targeted, and the whites are spared. This also refers to one of the crucial tenets of CRT of whiteness as property. It means the whites were spared on account of their belonging to the white dominant race and thus treated in that perspective i.e. whiteness proved as property for them and it also shows the white supremacy that is responsible for spoiling the whole relationship between these races.

This is a bad example of white dominancy blaming the blacks for any such mishap even if the wrongdoers are just members of the white society. Here one thing is clear from the description of the fight white privileges make the white boy gets the edge over the negro boy by encouraging Perry to beat the opponent for his wrong actions and it is shown from the scene of

the fight that no one comes to the rescue of the black poor boy. And silence is half willingness. This willingness of the white society for any unjust treatment of the blacks by the white dominants is proof that in American society not only racism exists but has deep strong roots historically and culturally and it is this thing which spoils the whole relations between these races. It is also this fact that made Gabriel think that the whole town i.e. the whites especially is responsible for the brutal treatment of his son and which cannot be forgiven.

The *Bridge of Sighs* is a bridge in Venice that connects the Doge's palace to the local prison, where a person who is once sent to the prison loses all hope especially that person who has neither money nor any influence and that Gabriel mock junior has been without these two things. It means that in this society of the white dominant groups, the blacks have no hope of betterment and prosperity. They are living below the standard life and the whole society is like a prison for them.

Conclusion

Richard Russo is well aware of the deeper ideologies of different racial groups in American society. His novel *Bridge of Sighs* has such race stuff which clearly tells how race relations take place and where the maltreatment of the Afro-Americans is rooted in history and culture. The identity of blacks is associated with poverty, inferiority, oppression, and deprivation.

They are thought to be separate and often live in solitude. Solitude is a pathetic condition that blacks suffer. Even if they live together with the whites, still they feel alone. A similar account is given in the analysis where the white Lucy rejects the idea of friendship with a Negro, seems to the readers a wide gap historically and culturally built up in the society and blacks are the victims of such negative ideas. Hence leads to their sorrowful conditions.

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