

Buddhist Precepts and the Diagnosis of Women's suffering in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Received: November 22, 2015 Accepted: January 11, 2016 Online Published: February 23, 2016

doi:10.5539/ass.v12n3p42

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n3p42>

Abstract

In Doris Lessing's fictions, the effects of the world outside on the female self-transcendence are invariably lost, and instead the journey in the world within is notably emphasized. Similarly in *The Golden Notebook* the didactic bend of the female enlightenment is firmly entrenched to the world within where personal harmonies parallel the mystical patterns of self-development. Moreover, the detailed exploration of the novel foregrounds the female characters' hard effort to end their suffering which is the core of Buddhist teachings. Hence, while Lessing is not specifically attempting to portray Buddhist principles in her novel, her vision captures the universal nature of humankind's attempts to overcome suffering which is the most emphasized concept in Buddhism. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to use Buddhist philosophical thoughts, particularly the founding of the pioneer of Mahayana Buddhism, Nagarjuna, in his book *Mulamadhyamakakarika* to look more closely at the root of women's suffering and their prescription to overcome it. The methodology appropriated entails depiction of clinging as the root of female suffering which is overtly discussed in Nagarjuna's philosophy. After diagnosis of clinging disease as the root of suffering, this paper presents Nagarjuna's prescription to end suffering through viewing the "empty" nature of beings and "dependent arising". By examining the root of female suffering and offering the method for its eradication, we depart from other critics who examine Lessing's works under Sufi mystic thoughts. This departure is significant since we reveal, unlike Sufi patterns within which the suffering is only diagnosed, Lessing's mystic aim in shaping her female characters is not only to detect their suffering, but like Buddhism, to suggest a prescription for it.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, female suffering, Buddhist precepts, mundane truth, dependent arising

1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene

Doris Lessing's inspiration for her novels comes from her reading in various mystical schools to the point that she explains "how common many of the tales were to all the religions and cultures" (Perrakis, 2004, p. 76) and in writing her novels, she admits that her sources "all comes out of the sacred books" (Grau, 2004, p. 85). The fact is that many contemporary critics such as Muge Galin (1992), Nancy Shields Hardin (1977) and Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis (2004) and Shahram Kiaei (2011), among others have offered a mystical dimension to Lessing's journey of self-development, and have illuminated the realm of reality in Lessing's works which is beyond all the dialectic ways examined before. However, considering the fact that Lessing was inspired by Sufi thoughts later in her career, many critics look at her works in terms of Sufi philosophical thoughts. For example, Nancy Hardin considers Lessing's later book as Sufistic ones while Kiaei emphasizes Sufi traces in Lessing's fictions from the very beginning. In his essay "Pre-Sufi Novels: Doris Lessing's natural inclination for Sufi thought", Kiaei asserts:

Throughout the novel Lessing explicates the protagonist's self-discovery, draws her on the Sufi Path how to transform and develop herself. She actually wants to transform our perception of reality by giving us an intellectual exercise to stretch our insight (Kiaei, 2011, p. 1112).

Also, Kiaei reveals how "Sufi tradition has offered her a very welcome pathway to explore beyond the limitations of psychology, psychiatry, politics, Communism, Jungianism, or any other -ism to which she had

appealed prior to her study of Sufism” (Kiaei, 2011, p. 1113). Besides Sufi approach to Lessing’s works, Phyllise Perrakis in “The Four Levels of Detachment in Doris Lessing’s *Shikasta*” expresses how Lessing’s works can be connected to the mystic thoughts of Bahá’u’lláh on detachment from ego (Perrakis, 2004, p. 74). The fact is that, rather than confining herself solely to Sufism, Lessing embraces the whole territory of mysticism. In her book *Between East and West: Sufism in the Novels of Doris Lessing*, Galin refers to Lessing’s statement:

People ask, “When did you become interested in Sufism?” I give an exact reply, but feel the question is really a statement: “I am surprised that you are the kind of person to become interested in mysticism”... I had an inclination towards mysticism (not religion) even when being political (Galín, 1997, p. 3).

Similarly, Idries Shah, Lessing’s Sufi master, claims: “Sufi philosophy is universal in nature, its roots predating the rise of Islam and the other modern-day religions, save for perhaps Buddhism and Jainism” (Munn, 1969, P.280). Hence, according to Idries Shah, the two seemingly different schools of thought of Sufism and Buddhism share common grounds. Also, regarding the commonalities between Sufism and Buddhism, Reza Shah Kazemi observes close ties between Islam and Buddhism and declares: “Islamic Sufi mysticism and Buddhism have several areas of convergence, both in terms of metaphysical doctrines, but also practical training” (Shah Kazemi, 2010, p. 146).

1.2 A New Reading

However, it is noticeable that while Sufism relies heavily on the external factor (God) on the way of self-transcendence, the mystic thought of Buddhism shifts from seeing God as responsible for all human actions to making people’s experiences as the sole creator of their existence. Since Lessing’s characters in her novels take the responsibility of their actions themselves, we feel that Buddhism provides a better understanding of Lessing’s character’s ethical demands and is more suitable to the spiritual needs of them. Besides, in Nagarjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakārika* the origin of suffering is portrayed in the “two truth” as ignorance of the empty nature of beings (Garfield, 1995, p. 298) and the way to eradicate such suffering is rendered as practicing “emptiness”. Similarly, in Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, the root of the female protagonist’s suffering is depicted as clinging to men both physically and mentally and the main way out of such pain is letting go of craving which consequently leads to letting go of all the pains and sufferings. In fact, in the first part of the novel, Lessing portrays some barriers- most specifically clinging configurations - to the way of the female protagonist’s self-development; later in the novel, she attempts to reveal how understanding mystical themes and practising the patterns of non-duality can provide a path to liberation from self-suffering even for very fragile beings. Accordingly, this paper scrutinizes the novel using Nagarjuna’s lens to reveal the roots of women’s suffering and also to disclose the path to end women’s distress. Fresh in its trajectory, this paper will be a contribution to the existing literature on Lessing’s mystic analyses which are mostly confined to Sufism whose teachings are mostly based upon suffering in life as a way to enlightenment. As Kiaei states: “In the Sufi context, the choice of concentrating on the hurdles in life, or deliberately engaging in conscious labor and intentional suffering, is essential for real transformation to take place” (Kiaei, 2011, p. 1118). Considering Lessing’s aim to terminate female self-suffering in her novels, the Buddhist approach seems to offer a closer understanding to her transcending insights in her works.

2. The Golden Notebook

Doris Lessing’s female protagonist in *The Golden Notebook* seeks refuge from suffering through disparate ideologies such as feminism, Marxism and psychoanalysis, but none of these schools are able to end her self-suffering completely. Lessing reveals that the source of suffering of her female protagonist in her everyday experience is due to being indulged in multiplicity and duality; that is, assuming an ontological distinction between herself as a subjective identity and the world outside as an objective. She experiences multiple areas and yet separates herself from them and indulges herself in dual practices between self and other which consequently deepens her suffering. Magali Cornier Michael, in the essay “Woolf’s *Between the Acts* and Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook: From Modernism to Postmodern Subjectivity*,” states that in the inner *Golden Notebook*, Anna “occupies a multiplicity of irreconcilable positions or selves (with) no singular, unified, stable subject hood”(Michael, 1994, p. 50). From Nagarjuna’s perspective, Anna’s suffering would be due to her ignorance of the true nature of beings as impermanent and clinging to them. That is, her self-anguishes accord with Nagarjuna’s “mundane truth” mentioned in his book *Mūlamadhyamakārika* (Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way, translated by Jay L.Garfield):

The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. Those who do not understand the distinction drawn between these two truths do not understand the Buddha’s profound truth. Without a foundation in the conventional truth the significance of the ultimate

cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved (Garfield, 1995, p. 296).

The worldly or mundane truth takes the conditioned as unconditioned and clings to such fragmentary as permanent which results in suffering. The ultimate truth, on the other hand, neglects the lower truth which consequently leads to nihilism. The table below depicts the root of suffering caused by either mundane truth or Ultimate truth:

Table 1. Suffering according to Nagarjuna

Mundane Truth	Ultimate Truth
Take the conditioned as unconditioned and Clinging to it.	Take the Ultimate as ordinary, Nihilism

Similar to Nagarjuna's "mundane truth", Lessing depicts how her female protagonist's indulgence in ignorance and craving for momentary pleasures, expands her suffering in life and acts as hindrance on her way of self-development. However, Lessing endeavors to transcend her female protagonist later in the novel by unveiling the dust of ignorance from her eyes and encouraging her to step into the territory of non-duality in which there is no distinction between self and other and consequently no clinging to other. In a 1971 essay now regularly used as a preface to *The Golden Notebook* Lessing contends that:

In the inner Golden Notebook, things have come together, the divisions have broken down, there is formlessness with the end of fragmentation — the triumph of the second theme, which is that of unity. Anna and Saul Green the American 'break down'. They are crazy, lunatic, mad — what you will. They 'break down' into each other, into other people, break through the false patterns they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve. They hear each other's thoughts, recognize each other in themselves. Saul Green, the man who has been envious and destructive of Anna, now supports her, advises her, gives her the theme for her next book, ... And Anna, who has been jealous of Saul to the point of insanity, possessive and demanding, gives Saul the pretty new notebook, *The Golden Notebook* (Lessing, 1962, p. xiii).

Hence, similar to Nagarjuna's claim on suffering as the result of clinging to "mundane truth", Lessing in the novel reveals that the root of female self-suffering is the dual tension between male/female, self/other and subject/object; but later she shows that once such dichotomies are blurred, the female protagonist can free herself from self-sorrow and anguish.

2.1 Diagnosis of Female Self-suffering: Nagarjuna's "Mundane Truth"

2.1.1 "Longing" for Physical Interaction

In Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (henceforth referred to as *GN*), a complex profile is adapted to reveal her aims of showing the obstacles towards achieving female self-transcendence which accords fully with Nagarjuna's "mundane truth" that relates the root of all suffering in the world to "craving" for temporary conditions due to "ignorance" and false conception of the world as permanent.

Similar to Nagarjuna's presentation of self-anguishes, among all the difficulties in the path of self-development in women's lives in *The Golden Notebook*, their sufferings due to "clinging" and "craving" seem more discernible. The novel's female protagonist is Anna Wulf, but the book's depiction of female suffering is not only confined to her, but is also expanded to other female characters. The narration reveals how the female protagonist's craving for men both physically and emotionally acts as an impediment on her way to self-development. The fact is that Lessing's preoccupation with the female physical "body" in *The Golden Notebook* may mislead many to interpret her aims through essentialist-feminist lens which claims the female "body" to be the most crucial tool to women's pleasure. Helene Cixous for example, is a prominent essentialist-feminist whose ideas about female body in her well-known concept "écriture feminine" have gained considerable attention among a large number of feminists as well as critics (Cixous, 1976, p. 3). However, Lessing's treatment of her female protagonist's "body" contradicts the essentialist feminist's emphasis on the female body as a way to women's contentment. Anna Wulf deploys her "body" to express herself in various ways: she records her sexual pleasures, the symptoms of her physical illnesses, even the very details of her monthly menstruation. Nevertheless, rather than being empowered by such "free" and detailed bodily expression, her whole self is about to be effaced. More importantly, Anna's "longing" to have various sexual interactions with men not only do not release her from suffering, but conversely lead to her more confused state of mind and

exhaustion of her body.

Quite similar to Anna, her alter ego Ella in the Yellow notebook segment of the novel expresses her sexual pleasures openly; though, she clearly claims that for the female body the true orgasm is possible only when one is in love because the simple act of sex cannot fulfill the woman's soul:

Paul began to rely on manipulating her externally, on giving Ella clitoral orgasms. Very exciting. Yet there was always a part of her that resented it. Because she felt that the fact he wanted to, was an expression of his instinctive desire not to commit himself to her. She felt that without knowing it or being conscious of it (though perhaps he was conscious of it) he was afraid of the emotion. A vaginal orgasm is emotion and nothing else, felt as emotion and expressed in sensations that are indistinguishable from emotion. The vaginal orgasm is a dissolving in a vague, dark generalized sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool. There are several different sorts of clitoral orgasms, and they are more powerful (that is a male word) than the vaginal orgasm. There can be a thousand thrills, sensations, etc., but there is only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is a substitute and a fake, and the most inexperienced woman feels this instinctively (*GN*, 179).

So what matters most for Ella is not the simple physical act of sex; rather, she needs her partner to have emotional response to her needs, otherwise she could not feel the real orgasm:

and there came a point where Ella realized (and quickly refused to think about it) that she was no longer having real orgasms. That was just before the end, when Paul left her. In short, she knew emotionally what the truth was when her mind would not admit it (*GN*, 179).

Later in the novel, Ella continues:

Then she realizes she is falling into a lie about herself, and about women, and that she must hold on to this knowledge: that when she was with Paul she felt no sex hungers that were not prompted by him; that if he was apart from her for a few days, she was dormant until he returned; that her present raging sexual hunger was not for sex, but was fed by all the emotional hungers of her life. That when she loved a man again, she would return to normal: a woman, that is, whose sexuality would ebb and flow in response to his. A woman's sexuality is, so to speak, contained by a man, if he is a real man; she is, in a sense, put to sleep by him, she does not think about sex (*GN*, 355).

As a result, Lessing's pattern of sexuality runs contrary with the framework of essentialist feminists who consider the female body as totally detached from her soul, experiencing bodily pleasures, disregarding mind's configurations. In fact, Lessing's female characters' "craving" for men physically not only does not offer fulfillment in life but conversely leads to more prolonged suffering. It can be concluded that Lessing's depiction of the root of suffering comes in perfect accordance with Nagarjuna's explanation of the origin of pain as "craving" for impermanent entities.

2.1.2 "Longing" for Emotional Interaction

In the novel, it can clearly be pronounced that more than "longing" for physical interaction with men, the emotional dependence on them is the main barrier to female self-transcendence. While Anna pretends to be totally "free" from the traditional boundaries of sexuality and undertakes various sexual partners, deep down in her soul, there is a desire to attach to one man who can interact with her soul and not only her body. She admits that she cannot imagine her future without any man accompanying her even if she has a lovely child, a good career and a group of successful friends. To depict the female characters' obsessive emotional dependence on men, frequent sex scenes as well as frequent discussions about sexuality and sexual taboos are manifested in the novel. Anna's "free" sexual gestures are quite confusing in the novel. On the one hand, she declares:

every woman believes in her heart that if a man does not satisfy her she has a right to go to another. That is her first and strongest thought, regardless of how she might soften it later out of pity or expediency (*GN*, 124).

Also, sometimes in the novel, Anna reaches to the conclusion that her strong emotion to men is foolish since obeying them leads to denouncing her whole being. She decides that "I ought to be like a man, caring more for my work than for people" (*GN*, 312). On the other hand, Anna herself devotes all her time and energy for men she knows do not belong to her. She says:

I enjoyed buying food and groceries, and enjoyed knowing that I would cook for him later. Yet I was also sad, knowing it would not last long. I thought: He'll be gone soon, and then it will be over, the pleasure of

looking after a man (*GN*, 462).

Margaret Drabble (2012) claims:

Much care is lavished on this memorable set piece describing a breaded veal escalope with mushroom in sour cream, a dish that the defaulting man never turns up to eat. Throughout the novel it is the women who do all the cooking and make all the cups of tea, even for men to whom they owe less than nothing (Diana Athill, 2012).

Anna herself wonders how women have such strong desires to bolster men up. No matter how bitter men treat women, “women have this deep instinctive need to build a man up as a man. Molly for instance. I suppose this is because real men become fewer and fewer, and we are frightened, trying to create men” (*GN*, 376).

The fact of the matter is that deep down in her soul, Anna is aware of the transient nature of her relationship with her partners, but due to her fear of being alone, she prefers to deceive her inner voice and regards her unreliable relationships as trustworthy. She admits that what terrifies her most is her “desire”, her strong willingness to be attached to a man and her attachment is to a degree that when a relationship clicks, no matter how awful it goes, she keeps pursuing it. To emphasize how damaging it is to rely heavily on men, Lessing portrays frequent unhealthy relationships her protagonist establishes with various men. In Anna’s relationship with Nelson for example, after having their first affair, he disappears and forgets about all the emotional languages he had applied to bring her to bed. Like the other men in Anna’s life, he turns to be a deep hysterical man who recoils from her after their sexual affair. That is, his only aim to establish relationship with Anna is to satisfy his sexual thirst, fulfill his need and disappear after pleasure. Even so, when he returns to Anna for the second time; rather than avoiding him, she goes to bed with him and ignores the fact that he has even refused to speak in his highly verbal, sweet language he had used to coax her into bed. Again the pattern of disappearing after the sexual act repeats itself which leaves Anna with nothing but depression and nervousness. The damage is so extensive that she even forgets what it meant to be alive, though when he returns again for another sexual encounter with a mask of a good person, she forgets his non-committal trait and takes their relationship for granted, no matter how fragile, glassy it was, any moment ready to crack:

Well, and then one evening he came over, unannounced, and in his other, his ‘good’ personality. And listening to him then I could not remember what he was like when hysterical and driven. I sat there and looked at him, in the same way as I look at the sane and happy Anna — he’s out of reach, she’s out of reach, moving beyond a glass wall. Oh, yes, I understand that glass wall certain kinds of Americans live behind, I understand it too well (*GN*, 376).

Even if she knows by her intuition that the new man is repeating the same pattern of the other lovers, she does not have the power to overcome her strong desire to be attached to him:

For with my intuition I knew that this man was repeating a pattern over and over again: courting a woman with his intelligence and sympathy, claiming her emotionally; then, when she began to claim in return, running away. And the better a woman was, the sooner he would begin to run. I knew this with my intuition, and yet I sat there in my dark room, looking at the hazed wet brilliance of the purple London night sky, longing with my whole being (*GN*, 449).

Still, Anna admits that they are defined “in terms of relationships with men” (*GN*, 26); hence, it is obvious that such attachment leaves her nothing but feeling of inadequacy, unhappiness, dissatisfaction, confusion and tormented emotions towards the future she has no idea about. The agony as such would never occur if Anna would acknowledge the changing nature of her relationships and the temporary essence of her partners. Hence, what Anna needs is to accept the transient nature of the happenings around her and let go of clinging and craving for them.

Ella, like Anna early in the novel, endeavors to act as an independent free woman who is free from being dependent on men. In her first marriage, she claims that she “would have felt a traitor to her own self had she remained in a compromising marriage” (*GN*, 163). It is evident that she is able to end a dissatisfying relationship, but to continue living alone is much heavier burden on her shoulder. In fact, Ella is a reflection of Anna’s all unconscious beliefs; hence, her relationships with men parallel those of Anna’s. For example, Ella’s affinities with George resemble that of Anna and Michael. They both are exceedingly afraid of solitude no matter how disconsolate they are by their previous partners. They both long for satisfying, romantic relationship, but the more they beg for love and affection from men, the more they are left in the haze of insecurity and dissatisfaction. They both prematurely commit themselves to men who are so far away from what they call a “real man” who is committed, romantic and responsible. For instance, Ella’s effort to preach women about relationships, passion,

love and psychological world is considered as a waste according to her lover, the psychiatrist Paul Tanner:

And you [Ella] tell poor women who are slaves of everyone's stupidity to go out and join a social club or take up a healthful hobby of some kind, to take their minds off the fact that they are unloved (*GN*, 216).

Thus, rather than enjoying her "free" life, Ella does not have even the power to stand for herself and protect herself from the contempt of her partner. Also, early in her relationship with Paul, Ella is shocked to hear that the man she loves does not even care if she is in relationship with other men. He says: "'And so you'll be free tonight, Ella.' 'What do you mean, free?' 'Oh ...for your other boy-friends; you've been neglecting them, haven't you?'" (*GN*, 192). Hence, the frequent application of the word "free" in the novel reminds the reader how being free, un-frees women and turns their identity into ashes. Instead of enjoying their lives, women in the novel require men to strengthen their female identity, give them assurance and strength and complete them which contradictorily leads to more suffering in these women's lives, while if they would trust the impermanent nature of beings, they would not cling to such changing conditions and accordingly would be able to liberate themselves from suffering completely.

2.2 Prescription to End Female Self-Suffering: Nagarjuna's "Emptiness" and "Dependent Arising"

When Michael, her previous partner abandons Anna, she is left with deep anguish and emotional rigidity. Contrary to that, due to her self-transcendence and non-attachment practices, she is not left with desperation when Saul wants to leave her. Conversely, she turns to being an un-envious, a serene, and calm person, "full of resources of happiness inside herself, self-sufficient, yet always ready to give happiness when it is asked for" (*GN*, 212). In fact, Anna, in her relationship with Saul, is transformed to a more compassionate and mature woman, removed from her excessive obsession with men. Hence, unlike her experiences with her other lovers, her inter-subjectivity with Saul Green, leads her to come into contact with the true moments of "illumination" which are strenuous to be described through words.

Similar to Anna, Ella in the yellow notebook comes to understand that any boundaries between men and women lead to more confusion in life. Hence, she defines the relationship between them as totally connected to each other in which there is no superiority of one over the other. Besides, their transcendence would be possible when the two of them would break out from their routine shells to make "a new kind of strength" which is borne "out of the chaos" (*GN*, 411).

Not only Anna adjoins her partner more closely, but she is also motivated to experience the sense of "compassion" to all beings. She comes to understanding that each individual should be receptive to be "invaded by alien personalities" who are just like them (*GN*, 533). Likewise, according to Nagarjuna, beings are empty of inherent nature and their existence depend on each other. Nagarjuna claims:

Something that is not dependently arisen,

Such a thing does not exist

Therefore a non-empty thing

Does not exist (Garfield, 1994, p. 223).

Such "dependent arising" is interconnectedness among all beings, like drops of water in the sea which have the same essence with various shapes, depending on each other. If people unveil their ignorance and see the true nature of entities as empty, dependent on others, that will eliminate their craving and clinging behavior and accordingly will be able to terminate their self-suffering. Hence, Nagarjuna's formulations to end self-suffering can be depicted as follow:

Table 2. Ending suffering according to Nagarjuna

Emptiness	No inherent existence of beings
Dependent arising	Interdependence of all beings

Similarly, Anna reaches to a level of understanding that she does not see any difference between herself and her relationship with her partner and all the "hundred different people living now, in various parts of the world, talking and crying out questions" (*GN*, 533). Such extent of mastery over herself frees her from the torments of her invented sufferings in life where the seeds of dualities existed. She comes to understanding that:

Nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own...your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions –

and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can't be yours alone. ...Growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares (*GN*, 13).

Accordingly, understanding the dependent nature of beings not only blurs the boundaries between male and female in Anna's life, but it also attaches her to every single member of the universe and motivates the sense of cosmic unity. In fact, her knowledge of the reality of beings reaches to a level at the end of the novel that she is in harmony with all beings. She says:

I am so happy, so happy. I find myself sitting in my room, watching the sunlight on the floor, and I'm in the state that I reach after hours of concentration with the "game" a calm and delightful ecstasy, a oneness with everything, so that a flower in a vase is oneself (*GN*, 543).

Hence, Nagarjuna's insights of realizing the empty nature of beings adjoined with implementations of "dependent arising" can offer a new way of approaching female self-suffering in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.

3. Concluding Remarks

Lessing diagnoses women's suffering in the first part *The Golden Notebook* as a result of "longing" for men, whether physically or emotionally. This can be understood from the perspective of Nagarjuna's presentation of suffering as a consequence of ignorance regarding the impermanent nature of entities, causing subsequent craving for and clinging to the men. To heal this dependence which can lead to female suffering, Lessing suggests practising non-duality between self and other and establishing compassionate bonds among all beings. Again, the traces of such insights can easily be found in Nagarjuna's teachings on "emptiness" and "dependent arising" which refute inherent existence of beings and instead suggest compassionate interconnectedness which ultimately leads to total liberation from suffering.

Acknowledgments

This research is supported by UKM Research Grant DPP-2015-070.

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