

**Reading the Postcolonial in a Post-critical Age: Ethics of Reading
the Narrative Complexity and Political Dialogism in Chinua
Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

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Abstract

Literary studies is increasingly abandoning the methods of 'theory' and ideology-critique in favour of a disposition broadly identified as "post-critique". While the problems identified with literary studies in this disposition is valuable, the paper argues, some of its assumptions prove to be problematic in reading of a postcolonial text. Joining issue with Rita Felski's 2017 book, *Critique and Postcritique*, this paper seeks to identify the problematic of the post-critical turn in the reading of Postcolonial novels. Using theories of Postcolonialism and those of the novel form, this paper revisits Chinua Achebe's now-classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to shed light on the inadequacy of postcritique in a justifiable reading which the novel demands. The narrative complexity of the novel form and the inherent political dialogic of a postcolonial text, the paper argues, demand a critical reading practice which is different from the propositions of both ideology-critique as well as postcritique.

Keywords:

Postcolonialism; post-critique; dialogism; ideology; affect

Introduction: On Humanities and Borrowing of Methods

Owing to its relatively late introduction into curricular teaching, literary studies finds itself in a situation where it has to justify its existence in the larger domain of university teaching. Unlike disciplines like the sciences and the social sciences, literary studies do not have an empirically straight-forward relation to social utility—a justification that the industry-driven modern education system demands. In the history of literary studies, scholars have constantly found themselves defining and redefining the *raison d'être* of their own discipline in the larger education system. In the past century, literary studies have borrowed their methods from the social sciences in order to prove a social utility of their work. Ideology critique became the major practice of literary analysis, and “hermeneutics of suspicion” came to dominate literary analysis. The idea of ‘critical’ reading practices came to mark reading of literature. Influenced by the developments in the field of Marxism and Psychoanalysis, the texts were now seen as “symptoms” of larger social processes and were read and defined in terms of the same. The text in the late twentieth century became a patient to be diagnosed for its real, hidden meaning which was only to be found beneath the surface of the text, and could only be diagnosed by an expert, who was the critic. Elaborating upon the qualities of such a practice of reading, Rita Felski, notes:

From the 1970s onward, critics trained themselves to read as Freudian analysts...Treating the text as a patient, the critic sought to identify buried symptoms that would undercut explicit meaning and conscious intent. For the Freudian reader, what defines the symptom is its unintended or involuntary status: the text unwittingly reveals an often shameful or scandalous truth that it would prefer to deny. (Anker and Felski 4).

The preoccupation of the work of a literary scholar became the task of a suspicious critic who had to unearth meanings repressed beneath the surface. Texts were looked at to find how they interpellated the reader into ideologies that it propagated through its surface narrative. The task of the critic was to unearth the texts’ problematic stances on race, class, and gender, which the critic wrote about as their

findings. The text was seen as belonging to the order of a false ideological consciousness, against which finding the true consciousness was the critic's task.

The post-critical turn in the Humanities, as Anker and Felski point out, have departed from the practices of ideology-critique on the basis of three aspects, namely "affect, politics, and method" (2). Although taking different roads into critiquing critique (and devising alternative practices), all three post-critical angles take the same basic point of departure from critique, namely, the problem of seeing the text as a symptom of something other than itself. This, however, is only one of the types of critique that undoubtedly is a popular practice. In order to propose a post-critical practice, I would like to argue, all the different kinds of critical practices have to be taken into account. Often clubbed into a single type of practice which need to be overcome, critique has been unfairly criticised by the scholars proposing affective turn by a non-inclusion of its multiplicity and nuance. There are at least, I would like to argue, two kinds of critical reading practice within literary studies, and one of the two have developed within the field of literary studies itself. We need to distinguish between a critical reading practice which attempts to look for meaning beneath the surface of the text and a critical reading practice which assesses truth at the surface itself. While the former reduces a text to a mere symptom, the latter, although still operating with ideology, justifies the text by assessing its surface construction. A distinction has to be made between critical practices that seek to penetrate through the false consciousness of the text to diagnose it - such as Psychoanalysis - and certain theories emerging under the banner of Postcolonialism, which trusts the surface of the text itself even in its analysis of discourses. While the former is suspicious of the texts, the latter makes a 'discourse analysis' of what is readily available. Here, we are talking about a particular trend in Postcolonial studies which have moved beyond the Manichean binaries of colonialism, and understand that the process of truth-production is a dialogic, and not an isolated, act. Recognition of a dialogue within a text produces a certain kind of critical practice, where the text itself comes to demand criticality.

In order to assess the existing practices of reading literature, the foremost requirement would be to assess the history of the production of the same. The practice of critique, I would like to argue, has its basis in the inherent dialogic structure of the novel form (or all art forms coming after modernity). This form, again, develops a particular complexity in the post-colonial context, where the novel, which has a colonial legacy, is used for expressing native perspective against the same. The paper shall look at the novel form and how it transforms in the post-colonial world to generate a newer critical reading practice. We shall look at Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to understand a type of critical inquiry which the text itself demands, and how a certain form of critical reading practice is necessitated by it.

The Novel and Its Shifting Dialogic Mode: From Bakhtin to Bhabha

The history of the emergence of the novel marks its departure from the world of the epic literary form. The changes brought about by modernity brought forth a type of narrative which was suited to the shifting perspectives on sociality and temporality in eighteenth century Britain. As Georg Lukács points out in his seminal work on the novel, "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (Lukács 56). The loss of totality in the modern world translated into expressions which are on the lookout for the same. The loss of a unified sense of the world manifested itself into an artistic genre which, although not fragmentary in its expression, was devoid of the erstwhile unity. With the onset of modernity, therefore, what came up in artistic expression was a multiplicity of discourses. This multiplicity of discourses, rather than being fragments of a single idea of the whole, signified a quest for multiple ideas of what it meant to be complete. Loss of a unified world gave rise to a plurality which came to constitute the artistic expression in the form of the novel. Elaborating on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel, David Patterson quotes Todorov to argue how the novel "begins with a plurality of languages, discourses, voices" (Patterson 132). A plurality of discourses emerging from a breakup of a unified world - or in Lukacs' term "a world abandoned by God" -

marked the beginning of the novel, which sought to create its own meaning (Lukacs 88).

Mikhail Bakhtin expresses this plurality - brought about by modernity - as the condition of possibility for the novel form. In his essay, "The Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" Bakhtin cites 'polyglossia' (which refers to a plurality of languages or discourses) and laughter (used in the artistic expression for contesting the singularity of a hegemonic truth) as the grounds upon which the novel form's emergence can be placed. As Bakhtin writes, "Polyglossia and the *interanimation of languages* associated with it elevated these forms to a new artistic and ideological level, which made possible the genre of the novel" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 50-51). The discursive aspect of the novel is central to the structure of the novel as much as it is part of its form. The novel therefore complicates the neat distinction between form and content. Though this might not be unique to the novel form, yet the inherently polyphonic aspect of the novel justifies the Bakhtinian notion of utterances always being responses. The open ended-ness of the world of the novel frees itself from the burden of justifying a closed word with the help of language—which always ends up proving excessive and responsive. Therefore, unlike the epic form which uses language to tell the tale of a closed world, the novel justifies the inherent responsive quality of language itself. The novel bridges the gap between form and content, or rather makes their indivisibility more apparent. Bakhtin supports the idea by arguing how a study of verbal art "can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract "formal" approach and an equally abstract "ideological" approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 259). The open endedness of the novel and its responsive quality has a bearing on the technique of its meaning-making. The polyphonic character of the novel makes dialogue as the essential mode of its meaning-making process. The meaning of the utterances in the novel, therefore, is not centred on the words or expressions in its abstract singularity. Elaborating on Bakhtin's dialogic theory of the novel, Patterson points out, "The novel does not consist of words and statements but is rather made of a combination of discourses and of the responses to those discourses" (Patterson 131). The enunciation of

the novelistic expression, thus, is not based on dictionary meaning of its words and sentences in their singularity, but on the dialogue it produces at the level of the utterances, in terms of their meaning within and outside the script. The generation of the truth in a novel is propelled by its dialogic engagement—both formal and ideological.

David Patterson uses the concept of “Otherness” and “Thirdness” from the works of Jacques Lacan to make sense of Bakhtin’s understanding of the dialogic meaning-making that operates in the novel. Lacan’s idea of the Other “The Other with a big O...(which) is the scene of the Word insofar as the scene of the Word is always in third position between two subjects. This is only in order to introduce the dimension of Truth” (Patterson 135). The truth-production, in Lacanian sense, takes place outside of the individual discourses of the constitutive subjects but within their interaction. This is essentially the structure of the novel form, where meaning of the novel is its truth-producing ability outside of the singularity of an individual utterance at any given point in the text. As a dialogue produces truth through the presence of a Third, so does the novel make its meaning. Bakhtin points out further in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

At the base of the genre [of the novel] lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110)

The novel’s truth, in Bakhtinian sense therefore, lies in a third position outside of the individual discourses that come to constitute the text. Even as the novel is constituted by multiplicity of discourses, the truth of the novel lies outside any of these elements.

Both Bakhtin’s and Lukacs’ positions about the emergence of the novel form traces the condition of its possibility in the historical context of modernity, and rightly so. However, to devise a general theory of the novel form in all contexts would mistakenly assume an equal distribution of modernity and its artistic consequence across the globe. Postcolonial studies have increasingly shown greater interest towards syncretism that colonial subjects, willingly or unwillingly, came to be a part of, as a result of hegemonic expansionism of colonial discourse among the colonised. This

“third position” of truth-production has been a matter of recent articulation in the cultural studies of the Postcolonial world. Theories that point at cultural hybridity as a consequence of colonialism acknowledge the meaning-making process to be a dialogic production in these contexts. However, the nature of this dialogue needs to be assessed for a contextual understanding of the artistic forms that emerged from this interaction. Homi K. Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture*, points out the location of enunciation within the colonial context in a third space outside of the positions of the coloniser and the colonised.

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 55)

This third space of enunciation operates most strongly where the discourses of the coloniser and the colonised are present with equal strength. The novel form which is a polyphonic mode of expression comes to include the discourses of the coloniser and the colonised in the literature produced in the colonial world. The third-position of the novelistic genre and the third-space of enunciation of colonial subjectivity, the paper shall argue, comes together in the works of postcolonial writers who make use of the novelistic form in the English language to tell tales of the colonial experience.

The Novel as “National Allegory” and Beyond

In his essay, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” Frederic Jameson provides a framework for looking at literature produced in the previously colonised parts of the world. Jameson differentiates between texts produced in the first-world “capitalist” countries and in the third-world countries “which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism” in terms of their engagement with the private and the public; the poetic and the political (Jameson 67). Third-world literature, according to him, problematises such abstract binaries which informs the

production of art in the capitalist Western world. Jameson uses Stendhal's remark to explain the manner in which politics is dealt with in first-world literature as an occurrence alien to the general mood of the work of art. The politics of first world novels is a "pistol shot in the middle of a concert" (Jameson 69). In contrast, literature of the third-world, "even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension" (69). Although Jameson stretches the argument to the point of claiming all third-world texts as "national allegories", his problematisation of private-public, poetic-political binaries is important for our investment in the discursive formation of the postcolonial texts. Problematising the logic of a sharp division of the world into three essentialist classes, Aijaz Ahmad argues against Jameson's rhetoric of all third-world literature being national allegories. With the problematisation of the Three World Theory, Ahmad rejects the category of "third world literature" as a "positivist reductionism" (Ahmad 4). This is owing to the fact that fundamental issues of "periodisation, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production" cannot simply be "resolved at this level of generality" which is attempted by a category like Third World Literature (Ahmad 4). Ahmad goes on to take ample examples from Urdu literature from the colonial period which did not deal with issues concerning the nation in order to challenge Jameson's attempt at finding "national allegory" in all third-world texts. With particular historical examples, Ahmad rightly problematises the simplistic categorisation of texts into Three Worlds. Moreover, his critique of Jameson's suggestion about third-world literature only always being allegorical as well as nationalistic is fairly proven through the history of literary production in India. However, what Ahmad does agree with is Jameson's idea that the literature produced in India during the colonial period was inherently political in nature and held a collective, rather than individualistic, value and worth. His departure from Jameson is in terms of looking at the collectivity as essentially nationalistic. Ahmad also points out the uneven valorisation of authors writing in the English language, such as Salman Rushdie, whose works come to be seen as representative of the nation's literature. This latter argument, in fact, can open up possibilities for reading Jameson's essay itself differently. While Jameson argues about third-world literature being national

allegories, he is admitting to taking into account only a certain type of literature, even as the essay over-stretches its own claim at many points.

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson 69)

The points about “nation” and “allegory” aside, the blurring of the boundaries between poetic and the political, private and the public, which is central to Jameson’s claim, is argued to take place when an author from the third-world uses “western machineries of representation, such as the novel”. The evocation of “western machineries of representation” aptly stands for novels written by authors from the post-colonial countries in the English language. The novel is representative of the collective rather than abstract poetic individuality. Even as the novel is always an arena of discursive multiplicity as Bakhtin points out, it takes a particular form in the context of its post-colonial production. Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, represents the colonial dialogic - between the coloniser and the colonised - by presenting its expression as loyal to the Nigerian collectivity. This collective expression is made without falling into a nationalistic temperament of discourse, thereby presenting the complexity the novel takes in the postcolonial context. The next section deals with this in detail.

When the Novel Reaches the Colonised World: Things Fall Apart

The sophisticated ethnographic details about the Ibo tribe of Southeastern Nigeria that Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart* provides would be virtually inaccessible from a work of fiction, if written by an author not having his roots in the particular tribe. Much of the discussion concerning Achebe’s novel revolves around the authenticity in its depiction of the tribe’s culture and practices. Writing for Macmillan, David Carroll

maintains: “Nothing similar had been done before in the novel in English...With great skill Achebe in his novels of traditional life combines the role of novelist and anthropologist, synthesising them in a new kind of fiction. This is where his essential genius lies” (Carroll 191). The use of native terminologies with neither their English translation nor appropriation makes a case for the novel being an indigenous perspective on the colonial experience. Critics like Carroll and others, who have focused primarily on the native imageries in the novel, have gone to extent in their conclusions, suggesting Achebe’s writing to be the go-to place for hearing the most authentic indigenous voices. An anthropology-driven reading of *Things Fall Apart* appears to be the prime lens through which the novel necessarily needs to be read, and seems to be the one that brings forth the most valid conclusions about it. Such a reading not only overlooks Achebe’s own personal background and political opinions but also thoroughly compromises with the artistic and aesthetic capabilities of his writing. The unapologetic implantation of native terms such as “egwugwu” and “chi” in the text written primarily in the English language creates an impression that the novel is speaking for the colonised, and against the coloniser.

However true to reality the descriptions may be – and indeed they are – the voice of the narrative deserves an analysis with Homi Bhabha’s idea of the Third Space of enunciation, in order to invalidate the “false assumption that ethnographic texts themselves are transparent” (Snyder 179). The novel is laden with instances where the narrative position can be seen striving towards objectivity while still providing intricate details of the tribe’s interiority, and in the process, fluctuating in its stance.

No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess...It was said that when such a spirit appeared, the man saw it vaguely in the darkness, but never heard its voice. Some people even said that they had heard the spirits flying and flapping their wings against the roof of the cave.
(Achebe 13)

Aforementioned is one of the earliest instances in the novel where the Ibo’s belief in the occult has been talked about. The vocabulary used here does not proclaim an outright disbelief in the occult, nor does it use condescension to demean the faith. However, in its quest for objectivity, the narrative does maintain a distance which is consequential. Though the oracle’s cultural importance has been presented with much

authenticity and sophistication, yet the reader is told that the Agbala had only been seen by the villagers in dubious circumstances. The fact that men could see it “only in darkness” and “some people” said “they had heard the spirits flying” load the narrative with subtle skepticism about the sacred perception of the oracle. Another instance of narrative skepticism can be seen in the description of the trial carried out by nine masked ancestral spirits or “egwugwu” led by the mightiest one, named Evil Forest, in the tenth chapter.

He (Evil Forest) took the first of the empty stools and the eight other egwugwu began to sit in order of seniority after him.

Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. (Achebe 66)

In this instance, the absent narrator overtly lays bare the secrets of the supposed occult practice. Showing Okonkwo's wives in a position where they have identified one of the masked ancestral spirits as Okonkwo himself is a more-than-subtle revelation of the narrative's complex position. What is of significance here is not only the fact that “the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo” and “Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind” but the description of the wives who “might have noticed” this guise. This is so because the aforementioned instance is followed by a description of the position of these women within the Umuofia society. It says, “But if they (the women who had noticed the disguise) thought these things they kept them within themselves” (Achebe 66). Such a statement tells more about the narrator's own position than of the mentioned women. The narrative not only holds the same skeptical position as the women characters but also speaks from an additional distance from the tribe's immediate etiquettes. This is where the Third Space of enunciation and meaning-making becomes relevant to the discussion about the absent narrator's voice. In a Bakhtinian sense, here, the truth of the text is produced for the reader through a dialogue between a native discourse

(presented in the form of a native cultural practice) and a modern skeptical discourse (shown by the women characters and the third-person narrator).

Asserting that the skeptical characters could not voice out their skepticism implies that a skeptical statement could come only from a position which is outside the immediate Ibo society. The narrative of *Things Fall Apart*, even though highly anthropological, is not nationalist, and this anthropological voice mediates between native and foreign perspectives. This lack of nationalistic expression, however, does not make the text depart from its loyalty to the Ibo collectivity whose story it is telling. Jameson's argument about literature of the previously colonised world not operating with the binaries of private and the public, personal and the political stands affirmed, whereas his rhetoric of this "allegory" being "nationalistic" falters. The story indeed is that of a collectivity, however not without the polyphony introduced into it by colonial modernity (the novel itself being its expression).

However, ethnographic detailing – and skepticism towards the Ibo beliefs – is not the only tool which Achebe uses to distance his narrative from the native vantage point. The plotline itself is complicit in this task too. Achebe uses the masculinity of the primary character, Okonkwo, to place the cultural norms of the Ibo against the white man's. This is done through the relatively effeminate characteristics of his son, Nwoye. Okonkwo's declaration "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands..." is only one among the series of insults that he burdens Nwoye with (Achebe 25). Nwoye's curiosity with the practices of the white men and his subsequent affinity and conversion to Christianity is anything but accidental to the plotline of the novel. The all-embracing characteristics of Christianity – or at least, of the white missionaries who established their church in Umuofia – is placed strategically to be seen against the patriarchal norms of the native African tribe.

Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith. (Achebe 112)

The character of Nwoye becomes particularly important for the novel, since a conversion can only take place in a space of free interaction and reason. Nwoye represents the hybridity which comes into being as a result of the colonial experience.

The narrative harbouring this conversion – while still saving the larger part of the novel to empathise with the colonised subjects – reveals that it is operating in a discursive space outside the binary of the coloniser and the colonised. As James Snead points out:

Achebe's ability to shift points of view and narrative centering between white and black characters (there is no longer any question of simply peering into the machinations of a putative 'African mind') increases the ironic distance from both perspectives. (Snead 241-242)

The ability to criticise certain native practices while still maintaining a largely anti-colonial stance makes Achebe's narrative assume a somewhat objective position— which itself marks a rebellion against the Western monopoly over objectivity. On the discursive level, the novel is justifying a Bakhtinian dialogic - which is between the colonial and the native discourses - and producing its truth in a third-space. Moreover, the dialogue in *Things Fall Apart* being essentially between colonial and native discourses is of particular importance. It defines the nature of expression which postcolonial novels came to produce, as a result of its dual association with colonial linguistic legacy and native loyalty.

Conclusions

Although a flag-bearer for a post-critical turn, Rita Felski recognises the availability of texts which are themselves critical. In her book, *The Limits of Critique*, she points out a certain kind of text which brought the author and the critic together by questioning the constructed-ness of available meaning.

Literature could now be lauded for its power to defamiliarize and demystify, to lay bare the banality of the commonplace, to highlight the sheer contingency and constructedness of meaning. We did not need to be suspicious of the text, in short, because it was already doing the work of suspicion for us. Critic and work were bound together in an alliance of

mutual mistrust vis-à-vis everyday forms of language and thought.
(Felski 16)

Although showing awareness towards the possibility of the author and the critic coming together, Felski moves towards finding this point of commonality in the constructed-ness of meaning through post-modernist abstract narrative techniques. What is amiss is the recognition of a cultural difference that could produce such questioning of meaning. A work like *Things Fall Apart* represents the dialogic nature of truth itself in a post-colonial society. In order to find the “third-space” of enunciation in Achebe’s work, a critic neither has to go beneath the surface of the text, nor does he have to give up the political theoretical approach which he operates with. The text, here, is a representation of the larger social process as can be understood from Jameson’s rhetoric about third-world literature and Ahmad’s input into the same. The text itself evokes criticality for the colonial as well as the native discourses. The truth of the text is produced only through a critical reading of the discourses in the text. This type of criticality also upholds affective reading - against which critique is increasingly being defined - rather than subduing it.

Although post-critical turn correctly analyses the problems in the Humanities emerging from suspicious practices of reading, it ignores a certain type of critical practice which dialogic art forms, such as the novel, demand. In the novel form, discursive multiplicity is central. In a post-colonial context, the truth-production of a novel takes place in a cultural space outside of both the coloniser and the colonised, making the text a politically dialogic form (unlike, to use Jameson’s term, a “first-world” novel whose dialogism itself would be relatively personal expression).

The inherent political nature of a text like Achebe’s is not hidden and therefore it does not require an analysis of its symptoms. Being affected by Okonkwo’s or Ikemefuna’s condition in the novel overtly demands the reader to take a political stand. Only then could they claim to make a justified reading of this text. A post-colonial novel, therefore, complicates the nature of the novel itself by making it overtly political, thereby demanding a politically critical practice which is tied to the effect it produces. What is required for literary studies, therefore, is a complication of critical theories rather than their complete rejection. Christopher Castiglia argues that the problem is not with critique as such but with the disposition with which it is practiced.

What is required is a shift of disposition rather than an abandonment of critique itself. Against a critical practice of nay-saying and delivering of bad news, what is required is “hope, as a reinvigorated critical practice” (Castiglia 212). Rather than a paranoid reading of texts, a critical practice of hope can be derived from a text like Achebe’s whose politics itself is arrived at through an affective reading. A turn towards Affect in literary studies, therefore, needs to be careful with an overtly political text lest it overlook the text’s very essence. In the Introduction to *The Limits of Critique*, Felski raises the question: “Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?” (Felski 13). The answer is found in Achebe’s novel, which complicates the notions of love and adversary by tying the truth of love with the truth of adversary. An expression of one, in this context, is inherently an expression of the other.

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