

# Hegemonic Masculinity and Oppression of Women in *Cavedweller*

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**Abstract-** Dorothy Allison is an accomplished American writer whose works have fueled feminist discussions. Main themes of her works are class struggle, gender inequality, violence, and sexual orientation. Her grand scale novel, *Cavedweller*, is about women's issues and problems and their attempt for survival. This novel which is the subject of the present study portrays the excruciating struggle of Delia Byrd, the mother of three daughters, to remake her relationship with her daughters and also reunite the family in a male dominated society. R.W. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity surveys the operation of patriarchal ideologies through masculinities and femininities for the maintenance of the domination of men over women. It is the purpose of this study to show that how hegemonic masculinity through the masculine discourse of institutions tries to subjugate the women's of *Cavedweller*.

**Index Terms-** Hegemonic Masculinity, Masculine Discourse, Motherhood, Patriarchy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Allison's mentality has always been haunted by women issues and in her works she challenges the essentialist view of femininity as a universal female identity and seeks reform in the social and cultural ideas of womanhood. *Cavedweller* (1998), Allison's second novel, became a national best seller, NY Times Notable book of the year, finalist for the Lillian Smith prize, and an ALA prize winner. It deals with domestic violence, friendship among women, motherhood, mother-daughter relationship and poverty in the small-town south. In the novel, Allison delves into the analysis of the causes behind a mother's failure, causes which mostly root in both the background family and society and criticizes a culture that decenters women and lower class.

*Cavedweller* is the story of Delia, who landed in Los Angeles after abandoning her alcoholic and brutal husband, Clint Windsor, and left behind her two little daughters in her hometown of Cayro, Georgia. It has been 10 years since Delia ran off with Randall Pritchard, the leader of a rock and roll band. Delia, as the singer of the band, embarks on a wandering life with Randall, though throughout these ten years her departure from her daughters tormented her deeply, going from place to place, and giving birth to a girl called Cissy. After Randall's death in an accident, Delia sees no reason for staying any longer in Los Angeles and sets off to Cayro with Cissy to reclaim her daughters, Amanda 15 and Dede 12, who are living with her evangelical mother in low. The narrative portrays the next few years, during which Delia struggles against poverty, exhaustion,

unfair judgments of the people of the town, the urge to drink, and the difficulty of dealing with her daughters.

In *Cavedweller* Allison explores the patriarchal society of the novel and excavates gender stereotypes to reveal hegemonic ideological intricacies. Conceptually, Hegemonic masculinity attempts to analyze the reasons of ascendancy of men over women and is responsible for gender inequality, legitimizes patriarchy by planting their ideologies and naturalizing women's oppression. To reveal the ways masculine discourse produce hegemonic ideologies and the way gender hegemony and patriarchy marginalize *Cavedweller's* female character's voice I apply Connell's hegemonic masculinity which provides a better understanding of how male dominance tries to naturalize its ideology and sustains its ascendancy.

## II. CONNELL'S HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The concept of hegemony, which originates with Gramsci, has had a permanent impact on the field of gender studies and, also, provides the basis for the concept of hegemonic masculinity. R. W. Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity popularizes the concept which is useful for understanding gender relations and specifically feminist theories of patriarchy. In fact based on Connell's definition hegemonic masculinity, as a feature of a dominative masculine hegemony, is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (1995, p.77).

Hegemonic masculinity presents a pattern of masculinity as an *ideal* which includes whiteness, heterosexuality, aggressiveness, middle-classness, mental and physical toughness, and independence. Heterosexuality and close affinity with the institution of marriage are also the essential characteristics of contemporary hegemonic masculinity. What cultural values label as ideal versions of masculinity, do not necessarily correspond with actual personalities of the majority of men. In fact, hegemony creates images of masculinity which are more imaginary rather than real, such as actors and male models, yet they are so common in society that most men support and appreciate, even if they don't have, them.

It must be noted that based on the definition of hegemony which means persuading subordinated classes to accept cultural, political, and moral values of dominant group through consent rather than coercion, the control of women is not achieved through force or threat. Hegemony fulfills its mission through ideologies implanted in religion, media, educational system, and so forth. The concept of hegemony in general denotes consent for

the mass, yet force is an inseparable factor for ascendancy of hegemony.

Despite the use of force in hegemony, it cannot dominate itself totally in society. It doesn't eliminate alternatives; it gains ascendancy "within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play" (Connell, 1987, p.184). However, it doesn't mean that men or women accept and interact with hegemonic masculinity's defining principles easily. If it had not been like this, no struggle and change would have happened in social life. There have been historical changes in gender definition and gender order. In spite of these difficulties, hegemonic masculinity, through insidious practices, attempts to legitimize itself and sustains the power structures in a way that is advantageous to men.

Unlike masculinity which has a central hegemonic form, there is no version of dominant femininity which is hegemonic among women. In her much quoted essay, *This Sex which is not One*, Luce Irigaray has insisted on "the absence of any clear cut definition for women's eroticism and imagination in a patriarchal society" (ibid, p. 183). However, broadly speaking, forms of femininity are explicated clearly enough. The worldwide subjection of women to men is the essential base for distinction. The form of femininity which is determined by the conformity of women to this subjection and is consistent with the requirements and interests of men is called 'emphasized femininity' by Connell.

Emphasized femininity is particularly associated with the private domain of home and bedroom and is thoroughly public similar to hegemonic masculinity. Through media, marketing, women's magazines, workplace policies, and advertisements emphasized femininity is promoted in a broad scale which far exceeds the attention given to any other form of femininity or masculinity. It must be mentioned that these promotions are managed, financed, and supported by men. A complete compliance and accommodation of the hegemonic principles is central to emphasized femininity which receives highest support culturally and ideologically.

In order to naturalize certain sexual practices, gender hegemony embeds them in social institutions. Motherhood, religion, and family are three main patriarchal institutions which play major role in oppressing *Cavedweller's* women and prevent the flourishing of feminine voice. On this basis, I try to make the hidden ideological power relations visible and the analysis moves on to focus on the connections between the masculine discourse of these institutions which are saturated with instances of emphasized femininities and wider social processes, especially those related to feminist theories.

### III. MOTHERHOOD AS A PATRIARCHAL INSTITUTION

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born; motherhood as experience and institution* (1986), is the first and the best book on mothering and motherhood with an enduring impact on feminist thought. She delves into the details of the meaning and experience of motherhood. Rich makes a distinction between 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. "Mothering is the 'potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children' and motherhood is a patriarchal institution 'which aims at ensuring that that potential- and all women- shall remain under male control'" (Rich, 1986, p.13). These two theoretical insights

help understand the meaning and experience of motherhood in a considerable way.

Rich scrutinizes motherhood in feminist terms as embedded in a patriarchal institution. While the term *motherhood* points to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is defined and controlled by men and is extremely suppressive to women, *mothering* is female centered and is a site of potential empowerment for them. Patriarchal institution of motherhood thoroughly controls women's mothering and is designed in a way that the choices are either predetermined or blocked.

Adrienne Rich foregrounds two detrimental characteristics of the dominant discourse of motherhood; first is that women are *naturally* mothers and that providing unlimited and intensive care for their children is their single responsibility. Sharon Hayes, a feminist writer, calls this kind of motherhood "intensive mothering". Second is that this patriarchal institution of motherhood leaves no role for mothers in making decisions about the range of their responsibilities. "Mothers do not make the rules, as Rich reminds us, they simply enforce them. Motherhood, in Rich's words, is an experience of 'powerless responsibility' (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 6). These two properties of motherhood are deeply oppressive to women. On one hand, intensive mothering requires the mother to extinguish her selfhood; on the other hand, powerless responsibility deprives the mother of the agency to demarcate her status under which she is being a mother.

Intensive mothering has three main features; first, the mother is the central caregiver; second, such mothering requires devoting considerable time and energy for the child; and the third is the priority of motherhood over her paid work. Based on these maternal ideologies, mothers are classified into *bad mothers* and *good mothers*. Good mothers should be a full-time, stay-at-home and family-oriented mother, totally dependent on her husband financially. In addition to these properties, the ideology of moral motherhood consider mothers as naturally pure, pious, and chaste, emerged as the dominant discourse of motherhood.

Allison's main character, Delia Byrd is a good example for the excavation of the notion of patriarchal motherhood. She is forced to escape with Randall and leave her girls in order to save her own life from her abusive husband. Abandoning her children leaves a lifelong detrimental effect upon her; only song and liquor relieve the constant ache for her abandoned daughters. She attempts to repress the urge "to sip whiskey until the world turned golden and quiet and safe, until Dede and Amanda Louise, the daughters she had left behind, ceased whispering and whimpering behind her left ear" (*Cavedweller*, p. 2). She has a destructive sense of guilt because of abandoning her children. Maternal guilt is related to social expectations of good mothering.

She feels guilty because she considers herself as a bad mother who is irresponsible for her daughters. Sense of guilt was so intense that whenever she "went back to the bottle, Delia sang the same song. She called it the hatred song, the I-deserve-to-die song.... The song inside her was meaner than anything anyone ever heard onstage; it was almost meaner than she could stand" (ibid, p.4). "The impossible standards that women face in our culture are a primary source of guilt for women" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.473). Unconditional love and attention under any circumstances is one of the fundamental responsibilities each

mother is supposed to have. Delia had to fulfill all parenting responsibilities by herself, which was clearly demanding, due to having a cruel and reckless husband. When a mother fails to provide the protection and support she is supposed to, she is overshadowed by a backbreaking sense of guilt.

Back home in Cayro, working as a cleaning crew and reproached by people, Delia got depressed. The period which Cissy called crying season was a time during which Delia, after coming home from work, "put her head on the table and cry for an hour or so before she went to bed to sleep late afternoon" (*Cavedweller*, p.66). The small southern community could not forget Delia's sin. To the minds of Cayro's people, Delia's deplorable situation and her suffering is the compensation for her failure in being a *good mother*. They consider her as an irresponsible woman, indeed a bitch, and express hatred towards her. Their hatred stems from intensely misogynistic cultural mentality towards those women that do not fulfill the expectations of patriarchal society.

Full time mothering requires sacrificing career, favorites, hobbies and even the individual herself. "Women are expected to be tender mothers, dedicated to the home, and attentive to others' needs... motherhood is linked with suffering, self-sacrifice and self-denial" (Lassen and Majstorovic, 2011, p.23). Delia rejects everything that stood between her daughters and her. It is easy for her to prefer the girls over men; She left Randall after he nearly blinded Cissy in an accident and she stopped going out with Emmet Tyler, the sheriff, who arrested Dede twice "once for speeding and once for possession of a tiny quantity of marijuana"; I can't date a man put handcuffs on my child," Delia told M.T. (*Cavedweller*, p. 264).

The price women pay for being a good mother is high; they have to disregard and forsake their favorites in order to provide children's needs. It is the essential prerequisite for intensive mothering and it is, doubtlessly, totally oppressive to mothers. Despite all the difficulties Delia tried to remain sober and resisted her urge to drink. For Delia, the hardest choice is between her children and herself. When she left her first two daughters, it was to save her own life and it was then that she discovered her musical passion; after she returns to them, we're not sure she'll ever get it back:

Delia thought the only pure thing she had ever known was how she felt in the middle of that roar of sound... That music was sex. Or sex was so much less than it was. For Delia, it was the only spiritual rush she had ever felt... When she sang, Delia forgot what she had done, the baby girl she had abandoned. She stopped hearing the song of their breathing, endlessly reverberating in the back of her brain. The one life was cut off from the other. She could not have both. She had chosen, God knew, the only life she could stand. But she never forgot the other, not Randall and the business, but the music. She never ceased to mourn it. (*Cavedweller*, p.320)

In *Of Woman Born* Rich writes "this circle, this magnetic field of selfless mothers and needy children in which she lived, was not a natural phenomenon" (1986, p.23). Patriarchal institution of motherhood controls women potentialities through normalizing intensive mothering and marginalizing other practices of mothering and regards those women who do not or cannot practice intensive mothering as psychologically abnormal or unhealthy.

A woman has to pay a heavy cost in order to fulfill responsibilities associated with being a good mother. "There was a cost, a cost to everything. Delia had paid all her life. When she looked at her girls, all she wanted was having them but not at such a high cost" (*Cavedweller*, p.344). Suffering is the inseparable part of the institution of motherhood; "only in the institution of motherhood does such suffering and violence become natural *and inevitable*" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.9). It seems that Delia's grief won't stop. "What stops grief? What heals the heart? Delia did not know. She had tried to cure herself of hurting, but she thought all she had managed was to put it off. How long can you put of hurting? A lifetime, Delia told herself hopefully" (*Cavedweller*, p.323). "Delia became a scapegoat, the one around whom the darkness of maternity is allowed to swirl, the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt" (Rich, 1986, p. 277).

#### IV. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE HEART OF MATERNAL DARKNESS

Violence against women is a widespread and destructive social problem which includes physical abuse, street harassment, sexual violence, psychological or emotional abuse, and domestic violence. Domestic violence is the main cause of Delia's escape. Domestic violence, according to oxford dictionary, is defined as "Violent or [aggressive behavior](#) within the home, typically involving the violent [abuse](#) of a [spouse](#) or [partner](#)". Family as a social institution in which gender inequality clearly works, is a context whereby violence against women and also children is prevalent.

The sustenance of family as the foundation of the society must be guaranteed at every possible cost, a cost which is most often paid by women. Family is "the crucial site of women's oppression, the space where, unheeded by the world outside, women at the mercy of fathers or husbands; where the law of 'patriarchy' hold its most primitive form" (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004, p. 44). Family is structured in such a way that man is breadwinner and the head of the household and woman is caregiver and source of emotion. Moreover, domestic labor which is conducted by women is not financially rewarded; thus, men as the sole providers of the family gain power and make women dependent on them economically. The higher position of men in family gives them the power to impose violence and force.

In *Cavedweller* Allison seamlessly weaves a particularly Southern tradition of masculinity and violence into the story of Delia who has left her daughters under the pressure of domestic violence. Clint beats her so severely which made her flee for saving her life; the novel is full of description of such acts of violence. Cruelty against her did not stop even when she ran off. He didn't give Delia the custody of daughters. "He doesn't want them," Delia told Randall after the judge in Atlanta gave Clint full custody. She clutched her few pictures and ranted like a mad woman. "What he wants is to hurt me, bleed me from every pore. That is the sin God will judge him for; that is the crime" (*Cavedweller*, p.73). Rosemary, Delia's friend, told Cissy about Clint's harassment toward Delia: "he wouldn't even let her sends

presents to them, but she did anyway. Wouldn't let her have pictures or tell her anything about how they were doing. His idea was that she should crawl back here and beg his forgiveness, let him knock her around and use them girls against her all over again" (ibid, p.166).

Delia escapes from the ceaseless violence and seeks love and safety from the arms of another man who also disappointed her. Randall is always drunk and has unrestrained relationship with women and has no sense of responsibility for her and Cissy. "when she decided to leave Randall, Delia told him to his face...she tracked them at the studio annex, where he had one of his girls with him, a child not even twenty and stoned out of her mind" (ibid, p.12). "She shouldn't have trusted him, shouldn't have been willing to let him touch her with the mark of Clint's rage steadily along the line for her face and neck" (ibid, p.14).

It is worth analyzing why a woman keeps complying with violence. The ideological construct of family in which, on the one hand, woman as a wife has no authority and is dependent on her husband economically and, on the other hand, as a mother is much more involved in parenting duties compared to the father, functions in producing and sustaining domestic violence. "The father's power in the Southern patriarchal family is produced within and itself reproduces a cultural space that has historically emphasized property ownership and built up an institutionalized system of the containment and usage of women's bodies to that end" (Carter, 2014, p.893).

Allison in *Cavedweller* traces the patriarchal power of father in a family and how such a male constructed family entrapped her characters. The existing hegemonic masculinity of Delia's society links masculinity to authority, abuse to love, and suffering to femininity. It causes powerlessness for women and "prohibition on escape is also reminiscent of the 'factors preventing women leaving violent relationships in domestic violence'" (Connell, 1987, p.123). The lack of social, familial, and legal support is the main cause of making women stay in or return to a violent marriage. Despite Delia's hatred of Clint, she had to accept stay with him in a home as he had legally the custody of the daughters.

"Domestic captivity of women and children is often unseen. A man's home is his castle; rarely is it understood that the same home may be a prison for women and children. In domestic captivity, physical barriers to escape are rare...and are generally invisible...The prolonged cycle of abuse distinguishes captivity from other traumatic circumstances because it creates a distinct dynamic between the victim and her captor, one in which the victim is rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and/or legal subordination" (Carter, 2014, p.894). Clint abuses and mistreats Delia in every possible way; in fact, he enthralls her; "there aren't no slaves in the South more, she said. You been trying to make a slave of me" (*Cavedweller*, p.147). Clint's emotional and physical abuse of Delia made prolonged and severe traumatic experiences for her.

Allison's fiction scrutinizes male characters as well as female characters she focuses on. She anatomizes the causes behind men's violence. A power-hungry and emotionally blunted masculinity is the reality of Delia's community. Clint admits his violence in Cissy's presence. Clint's terminal illness made him think of what he had done before. He was shocked by his intense violence and he kept looking for the cause behind

it. "why? Clint nodded; exactly. That's the whole point. Why? Why would a man go crazy like that? I loved her. Always had"(ibid, p.180). The answer to his question is that hegemonic masculinity tries to define masculinity in terms of power, dominance, violence, and refusing emotions and sensitivity; "I was afraid Delia would see the soft spot in me, see how I turned for her" (ibid). Being a real man requires suppressing one's own feeling; his love could not overcome violence.

Violence is detrimental for men, as well; it alienates them from their family. Although apparently men seem hard and tough, they are vulnerable just as women. Tears in his eyes, Clint said to Cissy: "Damn truth is I ruined myself trying to break the woman I loved. Just broke myself, and Delia never understood at all" (ibid, p.181). He mourns lack of love in his life, "my daddy, my brothers, my girls, everyone in my life always looking at me sacred or angry. There wasn't a look of love in my life, and I'd made it that way" (ibid, p.186).

Women have put up with the violence of the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The expectations of male dominated society according to Rich are 'insane expectations'. These expectations make them powerless and result in violence towards, even, their own mothers. "Instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological" (Rich, 1986, p. 263). For Delia there was nothing more precious than her daughters but the cruelty of patriarchal community made her abandon them at the age of urgent necessity against her will.

## V. GENDER INEQUALITY AND RELIGION

Throughout history religion has been one of the most powerful tools used by hegemonic masculinity to oppress women. All religions, generally, try to legitimize male domination and deny rights of equality for women. There are numerous examples of subjugation of women in religious texts which result in women being held in an inferior position in comparison to men; husbands are heads of their wives and women must be submissive to their husband, and wife is a part of men's property are some instances. Hegemonic masculinity, through integrating such suppressive ideologies, creates false consciousness for women; "creating a way of understanding and conceiving the world that traps women within the system of exploitation" (Kunin, 2003, p.142).

Allison, in *Cavedweller*, dramatizes dominant role of religion in oppressing women in the Southern small-town of Cayro, and, in particular, how women themselves accept their position as inferior. Amanda, Delia's eldest daughter, is a religious zealot and is the best example for a distorted consciousness. She pursues moral rectitude with evangelical fervor; "good Christian girls in Amanda's tiny universe went barefaced until they were married" (*Cavedweller*, p.160). She considers Rosemary as a prostitute as she smokes cigarette and wears sexy clothes; "what was she? Amanda wondered. Some kind of prostitute? In her mind, that was the only way Rosemary made sense. If not, where did it come from-the arrogance, the jewelry and clothes, the glossy look of that skin? Sin, it had to come from sin" (ibid, p.163).

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Marriage for Amanda is not for love; rather it is for God's consent. She says to Cissy that her marriage "is about joining our souls before God, committing ourselves to the Lord's service" (ibid, p.226). She even considers her sex as a prayer which is more for bearing child than pleasure. That's why she organized a Christian Girl's Coalition against abortion and loose living when she was in high school. "She had in mind putting together a militant antiabortion group that would link arms in front of the Marietta women's clinic on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, the days the clinic made referrals to planned parenthood in Atlanta" (ibid, p.134).

Abortion is the most controversial moral issue. Religion labels abortion as immoral and a type of murder and rejects its being legally accepted as it defies the word of God. It is an unforgivable sin; Amanda penned a composition "written in the voice of an aborted fetus, it was titled "I forgive you but the Lord Does Mind" (ibid, p.368). On the other hand, feminists view abortion as a fundamental right for women to have control over their own bodies. Rich explains:

The absence of respect for women's lives is written into the heart of male theological doctrine, into the structure of the patriarchal family, and into the very language of patriarchal ethics. This is the underlying hypocrisy of the Orthodox Catholic or "Right-to-Life" argument against abortion. It is a fiction -not just an "unexamined assumption"- that respect for human life has been an ideal, or, as John Noonan phrase it, "an almost absolute value in history." Women, upon whom most of the burden of respect for life has been placed, know that it is not. (1986, p.270)

There are other instances of women's false consciousness in *Cavedweller*. They are misled by the patriarchal religion that makes reality invisible for them. When women of Cayro found out that Delia was going to work in a beauty salon they stated that nobody would go there and that Delia is a mark of disgrace for Bonnet salon. Marcia, the owner of the beauty salon, in response to them said that good Christian women would go to salon as they know "what is to sin and ask forgiveness, I think they will come. There is no scandal in repentance, no scandal in working hard" (*Cavedweller*, p.79). From the perspectives of Cayro's women, the hardships Delia went through is the compensation of her sin. Delia knew that why Marcia, a religious woman, despite considering her as sinful, asked her to work in her salon:

I also know what Marcia Pearlman intends. For a Baptist lady, that woman is almost catholic. She expects expiation, public and prices. This is where Marcia Pearlman thinks I should

be. This is the price she thinks I should pay for all my sins, doing hair till I die and cursing her name with every water bill. I even think she means it kindly. In her own way I think she's ensuring my chance at salvation. I don't imagine she cares if I like what I'm doing. Happiness don't matter that much in the Baptist scheme of things. (ibid, p.85)

Religion stipulates higher code of morality for women. It emphasizes meekness, purity, and obedience, through which, it gives them the illusion of holiness. As a result, they comply with these masculine hegemonies and power of men and subordination of women is sustained.

Despite emphasizing the major role of religion in the suppression of women, Allison's approach to religion is not a thoroughly negative tendency. Delia asked help for visiting her girls from John Hillman, a minister of a church. He treated her with respect and was the only person in Cayro that helped Delia to regain her daughters. He went to Grandma Windsor's house, Delia's mther in low, to convince her let Delia visit her girls. Even though Grandma rejected him each time, he did not give up trying.

Allison differentiates between institutional and personal; Cissy, in contrast with Amanda, is resistant to religion. She always criticizes Amanda's lifestyle and believes, but when caving she thinks about God; Allison writes: "Amanda's God was not Cissy's God. Amanda's God counted sins and dealt out penance. Cissy's God breathed righteousness and fire. Amanda's God awarded fat babies and back porches. Cissy's God was the pure risk of some impossible expiation-Jesus on the Cross or the body in extremis, the chance of redemption in the awful dark. Her god was a grin in darkness" (*Cavedweller*, p.277).

According to Allison although religion has suppressive elements, it can be emancipatory at the same time. she is not church-obsessed, but definitely God-focused. In an interview Allison said:

churches reflect the community, and they reflect the values of the community, and in many ways, pastors and deacons and Sunday school teachers pick and choose what Bible verses they are going to select, and you can, from the Bible and from that community, derive a very conservative and fearful stance. You can, at the same time, derive a truly marvelous, egalitarian sense of love and fellowship. Both of those are inherently possible. God gives you the choice. You've got to stake your position, you've got to take a risk. And your route to salvation" (Lemahieu, 2010,p.676).

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