

National Conference on Gender Equality & Women Empowerment



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Women in Indian English Novels: An Overview

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National
Conference

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PROCEEDING

6th March, 2018



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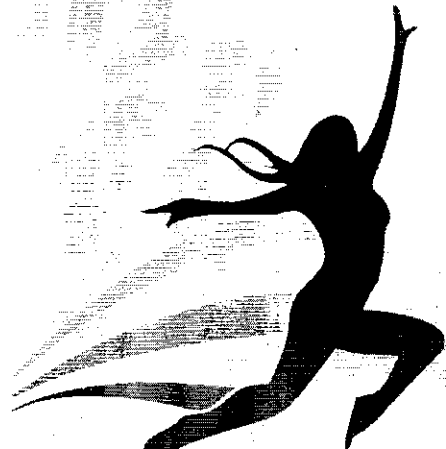
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CONTENTS

| Sr. No. | Title | Author/s | Page No. |
|---------|--|--|----------|
| 1 | Technology Used For Protection of Women | Achal K. Chavan | 1-4 |
| 2 | A Research Study on Gender Inequality in India | Adheer Goyal | 5-9 |
| 3 | The Protection of Children from Sexual Offence Act, 2012 (POCSO) | Asst. Prof. Akanksha Borkar | 10-13 |
| 4 | 73 rd and 74 th constitution amendment and Empowerment of women in | Arati Deorao Jawale | 14-18 |
| 5 | Laws Related to gender equality | Dr. Ashwini Thakre | 19-21 |
| 6 | Martial Arts: Protecting Women From Physical Violence | Dr. Bhavana Khapecar | 22-26 |
| 7 | Life Skills and Emotional Intelligence – Key To Excellency of Women | Dr. C. P. Sonkamble | 27-28 |
| 8 | Scheduled Tribe Women in Gadchiroli District of Maharashtra | Deepali Bhowate | 29-34 |
| 9 | Challenges in Women Empowerment | Diksha D. Gabhane Akash G. Khandaskar | 35-38 |
| 10 | The Study of Women Empowerment and Achieving Gender Equality in Swarup's Novel : The Accidental Apprentice. | Mr. Ganesh M. Dhote Prof. Dr. Hitendra B. Dhote | 39-42 |
| 11 | Science and Women Empowerment | Mr. Himanshu M. Mahajan | 43-45 |
| 12 | Gender Equality : Why do we need gender equality? | Asst. Prof. Dinesh Dhande Asst. Prof. Amol Manekar Asst. Prof. Kushi Dongre Asst. Prof. Jeevan Thorat | 46-47 |
| 13 | Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Challenges in Women Empowerment | Dr. Jyoti M. Pande (Rai) | 48-50 |
| 14 | Violence Against Women | Prof. Kanchan Ingole | 51-54 |
| 15 | A Study on Prevention of Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace: Seeking Gender Equality at Work in India | Karishma Rajurkar | 55-59 |
| 16 | Challenges in Women Empowerment | Dr. Manisha P. Ingalkar | 60-66 |
| 17 | Women Empowerment : A Challenge of 21 st Century | Prof Manjiri S. Raut | 67-71 |
| 18 | Gender Equality Wings Sustainable Development | Ms. Meenal R. Kale | 72-73 |
| 19 | “Women Empower Through Skill Training & Employment” | Ms. Monika Anupkumar Bhargava | 74-78 |
| 20 | Women Empowerment In India – Milestones & Challenges; | Mr. Nagorao Sambhaji Waghmare Dr. D. R. Bhagwat | 79-89 |
| 21 | Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Women's Health : An Unspeakable Suffering | Dr. Mrs. Nandita N Gaikwad | 90-92 |
| 22 | Gender Equality in India | Dr. Neelam Tikkha | 93-96 |



| | | | |
|----|---|---|---------|
| 23 | Challenges in Women Empowerment in India | Ms. Neha Premlal Hatwar | 97-101 |
| 24 | A Study of Women Empowerment with reference to Nagpur District | Dr. P. L. Neulkar | 102-106 |
| 25 | Legal Introspection of Protection of Women Workers in Unorganized Sectors in India | Dr. Payal Thaorey | 107-112 |
| 26 | Protection of children from sexual offence (POCSO) | Pooja .S. Sankade Namrata .D. Shende | 113-115 |
| 27 | Women Empowerment : The Present Scenario | Dr. Poorva Bhonde | 116-121 |
| 28 | A Study on Gender Discrimination with Female Employees at Workplace : A Major Hurdle | Pournima Diwate | 122-126 |
| 29 | Women Empowerment Through Education For Rural Development | Dr. Prachi Rode | 127-129 |
| 30 | 'Am I safe out?' Rethinking Design for Women safety in Public Spaces | Dr. Prachi Sharma | 130-133 |
| 31 | Women Empowerment | Prajakta A. Rangari | 134-137 |
| 32 | Women's Empowerment in India: Issues, Challenges | Asst. Prof. Prakash H. Sahare | 138-142 |
| 33 | Domestic Violence and Women | Dr. Pravina N. Khobragade | 143-146 |
| 34 | To Understand the Difference Between Sexual Harassment and Gender | Prof Pritee Hirdesh Shrivastava | 147-149 |
| 35 | Educate Emancipate Empower | Mrs. Priti Singh | 150-155 |
| 36 | A Study on Different Tools to Empower Women | Priyanka S. Patil | 156-158 |
| 37 | Nutritional Status of Women In India Belonging to 15-45 years of Lower Socio-Economic Status: Role of Government Policies for The Improvement of Nutritional Status of Women and Children | Smt. R. V. Sontakke | 159-166 |
| 38 | Some Inclination on Women Empowerment in India | Miss. Rakhi Satpute | 167-169 |
| 39 | Gender Diversity & Inclusion in Manufacturing Sector | Raveesh Jaiswal | 170-173 |
| 40 | Women Empowerment For Welfare of Society | Dr. Sadhana Thakare | 174-176 |
| 41 | Paper Presentation on Sexual Equality | Sayali A. Rangari | 177-180 |
| 42 | Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls : An Indian Perspective | Shilpa Jibhenkar | 181-184 |
| 43 | An Overview of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 | Dr. Shilpa Puranik | 185-188 |
| 44 | Different Tools to Empower Women | Shital P. Mendhe | 189-192 |
| 45 | Impact of Nutrition Education on Adolescent Girls in Terms of their Attitude Adoption Behavior | Shital Deshmukh Manisha Kale | 193-197 |



| | | | |
|----|---|---|---------|
| 46 | An Analysis on Gender Discrimination in Present Era at Home | Ms. Shraddha Rakhade | 198-206 |
| 47 | Protection of Children from Child Abuse and Neglect | Dr. Shreeja Kurup | 207-212 |
| 48 | "An Analytical Study on Violence Against Women" | Shrutika. V. Jamdar | 213-217 |
| 49 | Violence Against Women | Sneha G Khobragade | 218-221 |
| 50 | Health Status of Women - An Overview | Dr. Sonali Sirbhate-Suryawanshi | 222-223 |
| 51 | Self Help Group as an instrument for Women Empowerment | Dr. Sunirmal S. Kabiraj | 224-228 |
| 52 | Empowerment of Rural Women through Self Help Groups (SHGs) | Sushama J. Bahekar | 229-232 |
| 53 | Technology Used For Protection of Women | Prof. Swati Gajarlewar Prof. Diksha Gabhane Prof. Dinesh Dhande | 233-237 |
| 54 | Violence Against Woman (VAW) | Shwetarani J. Sharma | 238-241 |
| 55 | Women Empowerment Through Technology Adoption | Mrs. Tehseen R. Choudhary | 242-245 |
| 56 | A Study on Gender Issues in Mental Health of Youth in India | Ujwal Sangawar | 246-250 |
| 57 | Overcoming the Hindrances and Challenges faced in Women Empowerment | Prof. Urmi Chakravorty | 251-255 |
| 58 | Depiction of Women in Indian English Novels: An Overview | Dr. Vaishali Meshram | 256-259 |
| 59 | UUC and Gender equality : A Step ahead for Women Empowerment | Vaishali Shiwankar | 260-264 |
| 60 | "Ab Vakt Hai Badlane Ka": Marching towards Empowerment and Breaking Moulds (Depiction of Women in Advertisements in India) | Dr. Vandana Pathak | 265-268 |
| 61 | Issues of Migrant Women Labour in Sugar Cane Industry: Experience from the field of Beed and Parbhani district of Maharashtra | Ms. Vanita Tumsare | 269-273 |
| 62 | "Is She Safe?", Technological Devices Are The Answer | Vinita P. Khotele Jayshri M. Sonule | 274-277 |
| 63 | Gender Discrimination at Workplace Against Women | Mrs. Vishakha Mankar | 278-283 |
| 64 | महिला सबलीकरणातील आव्हाने एक चिंतन | आकाश शेषराव बांगर | 284-287 |
| 65 | लिंग असमानतेचा स्त्रियांच्या आरोग्यावरील परिणाम - स्त्री सक्षमीकरणातील आव्हान | डॉ. दीपक कृष्णराव पवार | 288-291 |
| 66 | महिला सक्षमीकरणातील आव्हाने | प्रा. देवमन श्रीकृष्ण उंबरकर | 292-296 |
| 67 | महिलांवरील अत्याचार | प्रो. दिनेश डी. पेटकर | 297-300 |



| | | | |
|----|--|---|---------|
| 68 | सामाजिक बहिष्कृतता आणि ग्रामीण दलित स्त्रीयांचा स्त्रीवाद | गणेश लक्ष्मण माने | 301-304 |
| 69 | स्त्री सक्षमीकरण आणि स्वयंरोजगार संदर्भात इतर क्षेत्रात वाढता सहभाग | प्रा. हितेश मा. दडमल | 305-309 |
| 70 | नारी सशक्तिकरण के मार्ग में आनेवाली समस्याओं का विश्लेषण एवं समाधान | डॉ. सौ. ज्योती वसंत खडसे | 310-313 |
| 71 | स्त्रीयांच्या विरोधातील सायबर गुन्हेगारी चे अध्यन - भंडारा जिल्हा यांच्या संदर्भात | करिश्मा किसन रेहपाडे | 314-317 |
| 72 | लिंग समानता | प्रा. करुणा इंगळे | 318-320 |
| 73 | ग्रामिण महिलाओं का सामाजिक सबलीकरण : जनसंवाद माध्यमों के परिणाम पर एक सर्वेक्षण | प्रा. क्रिष्णा पासवान | 321-324 |
| 74 | स्त्रीयांविरुद्ध हिंसाचार | प्रा. क्षमा चव्हाण | 325-329 |
| 75 | स्त्रीच्या आरोग्यावर परिणाम करणारे घटक | प्रा. मनिषा दे. क्षीरसागर | 330-334 |
| 76 | कामाच्या ठिकाणी होणारा लिंग भेदभाव: एक ज्वलंत समस्या | प्रा. डॉ. मंजिरी पाठक | 335-338 |
| 77 | आरोग्य आणि लिंगभाव | मंजुषा माळवतकर | 339-341 |
| 78 | स्त्री सबलीकरणाचे विभिन्न साधने | मयुरी म. सावरकर (स.प्राध्यापक) | 342-345 |
| 79 | महिलांचे कायदेविषयक अधिकार | डॉ. नलिनी बोरकर | 346-350 |
| 80 | लिंग आधारित महिलाओं के विरुद्ध हिंसा | कु. पौर्णिमा ह. रहांगडाले | 351-355 |
| 81 | महाराष्ट्र की राजनितिक निर्णय प्रक्रिया में महिलाओं का सहभाग | प्रा.डॉ. प्रभाकर ग. जाधव | 356-363 |
| 82 | स्त्रीयांविरुद्धचे अत्याचार | प्रा. प्रतिभा उ. गडवे (दातीर) | 364-367 |
| 83 | स्त्री - पुरुष समानता | प्रा. प्रविण एफ. कांबळे | 368-370 |
| 84 | महिला सक्षमीकरणासमोरील आव्हाने | डॉ. प्रिती किशोर उमाठे | 371-373 |
| 85 | 'महिला सक्षमीकरणाकरीता विविध साधने' | प्रियंका केवलदास अंबादे अमिता महातळे, अश्विनी धारकर | 374-378 |
| 86 | लातूर जिल्हा परिषदेतील महिला नेतृत्वाची स्थिती : एक चिकित्सक अध्ययन, 1992-2012 | राहुल बावगे | 379-382 |
| 87 | ग्रामीण स्त्रियांचे सक्षमीकरण | डॉ. राहुल भगत | 383-387 |
| 88 | स्त्री सक्षमीकरणाचे विविध आयाम | प्रा. आर. बी. बुरीले | 388-391 |
| 89 | 21व्या शतकातील भारतीय स्त्रीयांपुढे आव्हान | प्रा. डॉ. रत्नपाल एम. डोहणे | 392-394 |
| 90 | स्त्री शिक्षण - महिला सशक्तिकरणाचा प्रमुख आधार | रोशन तुळशिराम गजबे | 395-397 |
| 91 | महिलांचे आरोग्य व आहार | प्रा. कु. रूपाली एस. कणसे | 398-400 |
| 92 | आरोग्य आणि लिंगभाव : गलिच्छ वस्तीतील परिप्रेक्ष | डॉ. साधना विजय लांजेवार | 401-403 |



| | | | |
|-----|--|----------------------------|---------|
| 93 | स्त्री-पुरुष समानता व महिला सबलीकरण; (Gender Equality and Women Empowerment) | प्रा. डॉ.साधना डी. वाघाडे | 404-407 |
| 94 | महिला सशक्तीकरणाचे एक सक्षम माध्यम : महिला आरक्षण | डॉ. प्रा. संतोष मेंडेकर | 408-410 |
| 95 | स्त्रियांचे लोकशाहीतील योगदान | प्रा. सरला वसंतराव मेश्राम | 411-414 |
| 96 | भारतीय स्त्रियांचा कामाच्या ठिकाणचा भेद : एक दृष्टीक्षेप | शिल्पा एन. आंबोलकर | 415-418 |
| 97 | स्त्रीवाद आणि महिला सबलीकरण | डॉ. शिरीन अघोर | 419-423 |
| 98 | महिला शेतमजुरांशी लिंगभावात्मक भेदभाव – एक अध्ययन | शुभम विश्वनाथ वनवे | 424-426 |
| 99 | भारतीय महिलाओंकी सामाजिक और आर्थिक स्थिती मे समयनुसार परिवर्तन | प्रा. स्मिता गजभिये | 427-430 |
| 100 | प्राथमिक शालेय शिक्षणात शैक्षणिक स्तरावरिल मुलामुलींचे भेद | सुधा डोनुसाव कडव | 431-433 |
| 101 | स्वयंसहाय्यता बचत गट आणि ग्रामीण महिला सक्षमीकरण | प्रा. सुलभा स. वागदे | 434-436 |
| 102 | स्त्रियांचे हक्क व आंतरराष्ट्रीय संघटना | डॉ. उज्ज्वला गोंडाणे | 437-439 |
| 103 | आर्थिक आणि सामाजिक क्षेत्रातील महिलांची स्थिती | डॉ. वर्षा गंगणे | 440-443 |
| 104 | महिला सबलीकरणात विविध योजनांची भूमिका | प्रा. विनोद बी. खेडकर | 444-447 |
| 105 | स्त्रियांचे सक्षमीकरण | प्रा. कु. वैशाली मेश्राम | 448-451 |



Depiction of Women in Indian English Novels: An Overview

58

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Abstract

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages. The status of the Indian women in society has always inspired the Indian writers but until recent times most of the writers were male and hence their depiction of women was undoubtedly biased because of the compartmentalism and unfavourable conditions of women. It is ironic that on one hand she is worshipped as a goddess traditionally but on the other hand she is degraded to the slave and considered as a mere object of satisfying the carnal lust of their male counterparts. Many great writers have effectively described the sufferings of women through their novels. Women novelists have added a new dimension to the Indian English literature as they penned down women subjugation and raised their voices against it. The present paper is the humble attempt to study and discuss how the great writers have portrayed the women characters. Each writer has a different and unique style of presentation and in this research paper I tried to explore how there is a vast difference between the portrayal of images of women and the real conditions in which women are forced to live.

Introduction:

Feminist approach is predominant in modern and post-modern literature. Women's liberation movement aims at an upliftment of women in society. Mary Wollstonecraft raised her voice to favour the women's right in her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) where in she demanded equal rights and opportunities for women in the field of education, economics and politics. Feminism is a global and revolutionary ideology and also a socio-cultural movement that aims at the freedom of women from male domination in the patriarchal society. This movement fights for the issues pertaining to women like male domination, oppressive culture, domestic violence, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, property rights, liberation and empowerment of women. It has

tremendously changed the status of women across the world.

One of the most remarkable characteristic features of Indian Writing in English is the rise of the large number of women novelists who have immensely contributed to the body of Indo-Anglian literature. Among the more productive women novelist, the names of Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and Shobha De deserve to be mentioned. These novelists belong to the post-colonial period of post-Independence and have portrayed women's psychological and physical issues. They not only broke the literary and social norms of the past but also studied the psyche of their characters deeply and projected various images of women and their status in society.

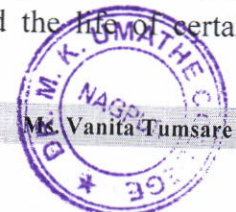


Anita Desai is one of the greatest Indian writers writing in English who has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers. She represents a unique blending of the Indian and the Western. In her novels "Cry, The Peacock" (1963) and "Voices in the City" (1965) she explored women sensibility. Throughout her novels, Desai focuses on the personal struggles of the middle-class women in contemporary India who try to overcome the societal bindings imposed by a tradition bound patriarchal culture. Desai, throughout her novel has depicted the complexities of modern Indian culture far from feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining a self-identity as an individual. Cry, the Peacock is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. It deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonists and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The female character Maya, in the novel, envelopes the reader as she unfolds the growth, development and climax of her neurosis. Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya's father without thinking much married her off to his own lawyer friend -Gautam a middle-aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband. The climax of the story lies when Maya's attachment with her father further develops into and 'Electra Complex' which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated Maya then looks back to the class

of her childhood spent with her father. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impressiveness and indifferences weaves the story Cry, The Peacock. The very concept that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation, is aptly illustrated in this novel. The hyper sensitive mind of the women is illustrated by Anita Desai in the most tender way where the atmosphere of tension is set ideally against the backdrop.

Kamala Markandeya's first novel "Nectar in a Sieve" (1954) is set in a South Indian village where life seems to be unchanged as it used to be in colonial period but which is now invaded by modern technology and industry. The novel depicts the poverty, misery and the squalor in which the villagers have been living. Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel and the victim narrates the story. In her second novel "Some Inner Fury" (1957), the heroine Mira who is leading a sad and tragic life represents the trials, misfortunes and sufferings of the Indian woman in a typical Indian village. In her third (1961) and fourth novel "Possession" (1963) the setting changes from India to England and America and then back to India showing the influence of Europe and the West and the futility of the average human desire of possession.

Nayantara Sehgal has also a special place in the list of Indian women writers writing in English in post-colonial period. Her female characters are true to life as they existed in feudal setup of pre-Independence days. Her novels "A Time to be Happy", "This Time of Morning" and "Storm in Chandigarh" portrayed the life of certain



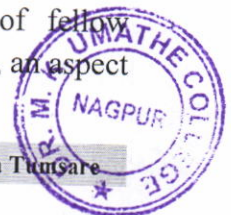
North-Indian families that took part in freedom struggle and also the dominance of beaurocracy inherited from British rulers in the early post-Independence days.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the post-Independence Indian women fiction writers who has been awarded with Sahitya Academy Award for her novel "That Long Silence" (1989). She is known for her sincerity and ability in voicing the concerns of the urban educate middle class women. "The Dark Holds No Terror" (1980) Shashi Deshpande's first published novel presents Saritha's quest for identity and her assertion for equality to her brother and later to her husband. It is the story of Saru who feels like a trapped animal, trapped by her need to succeed at any cost. She needs to find somebody who would care for her. The novel also transcends feminine constraints and raises issues which the human beings in general encounter in their life. The novelist aim is to show one should take refuge in the self. It means that woman should assert and ascertain herself, so she can overcome the suppressing forces. She makes Sarita's consciousness to be touched by her experience as a doctor. Sarita realizes that one has to be sufficient within oneself because there is no other refuge elsewhere, puts an end to her problems. She realizes that we come into this world alone and go out of alone. "That Long Silence" is the masterpiece of feminist writing in Indo-Anglican fiction raises the status of Shashi Deshpande among the writers of the present day. The novel highlights the image of middle class women sandwiched between tradition and modernity. The novel is about gender discrimination and inequality prevalent in society. Here the protagonists raised voice against the role models of the age old patriarchal set up. Her romantic

appearance is the feminist mark of the new woman. But she concludes that a husband is a sheltering tree and she plays again the role of an orthodox Hindu Wife.

Bharti Mukharjee has her own place in the list of Indian writing in English. She migrated to Canada where she found herself discriminated there and went through the difficult time of her life. In her novel "Jasmine" (1989), the protagonist Jasmine who is 20 years old pregnant widow living in Iowa with her crippled lover. Her next novel "The Holder of the World" (1993) presents individuality and self-confidence. Her "Leave It to Me" (1997) depicts the story of a young woman sociopath, Debbi Di Martino who seeks revenge on her parents who abandoned her.

In the Post-colonial India Shobha De also has a special space as she contributed 12 novels all with a difference. Among all these novels "Selective Memory" is the most important as it gives the total picture of the writer. In this novel she has projected herself as a daring daughter, a homemaker, a wife and a worried mother. Shobha De projects feminism through her character of Anjali in her "Selective Memory" and suggests that a human mind likes to retain everything that is valuable, poignant and painful. Shobha De's bold description of her women protagonists has been noticeable. De's women range from traditional, subjugated and disregarded to the extremely modern and liberated women. De's novels take a leaf the urban life and represent realistically an intimate side of urban woman's life, also revealing her plight in the present-day society. She highlights a woman's role in the oppression and suffering of fellow women in a very interesting way, an aspect



showcased in De's novel 'Starry Nights'. The women in De's novels revive their lost fortunes, look glamorous, act different, break the norms, are sexually liberated and free thinkers.

Conclusion:

These great Indian women novelists have handled various themes and aspects pertaining to women's life and status in male-dominated society. For example, gender equality, her alienation, anxiety, insecurity, fear her marital familiar and social relation, sufferings and exploitation, struggle for new identity, psychological disturbance in her mind, mother-daughter relationship, disharmony between husband and wife's relationship etc. Through these themes these women novelists have tried to project various images of women. For instance, the image of traditional, modern and new, liberated, immigrant, middle class, sensitive, sterile, emotional and self-sacrificing woman. These Indian women novelists have portrayed women's issues realistically both psychologically and physically in their novels. They broke the literary and social norms of the past. They studied deep into psyche of their characters and projected various images of women and their status in society. They have written about women in a varied cultural perspective. In fiction, some women characters have attitude of rejection and negation of life while others have an affirmation and acceptance of life with a compromising attitude leading to deep sense of fulfilment. In this sense, the postmodern Indian women writers create a pattern of new study because they have dared to shatter the myth of a male dominated social system. They laid a firm

foundation in the realm of female study in Indian Literature in English.

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