

Matrilineal Discontent and Disrupted Childhood: The Dissolution of Matriliny and Its Impact on Children in Malabar

Dr. Mayadevi M.^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Matriliny has been a forgotten social organization except of the academic discourses. The colonial modernity was ambiguously conceived by the colonized population. When it was approached as an optimistic opening, the same turned out to be a challenge that undermined the traditional customs and values. Worldwide, 'modernisation' was an undoing of 'medievalism'. Malabar in nineteenth century witnessed the dwindling of matrilineal tarawads, which in turn led to the redefining of familial bonds. Reform that went along with modernity, was in an urge to induce a new conjugal family with in the community. However, the period of change created an ambiguous life condition for the children, as they found it strange to cope with.

Keywords: *Childhood, Matriliny, Colonial Modernity, Tarawad, Father*

Post-modern historians used unconventional sources such as anthropological data, cemetery studies, oral histories, picture editing software, textile science, and more in an effort to uncover non-conventional historical arenas. As a result, a body of new historical information was produced, which enhanced scholarly knowledge on a variety of topics, including women's history, cultural history, migration studies, LGBTQ history, and children. Studies on families, gender roles, and inheritance laws emerged during this time. The same period witnessed the development of studies on family, gender patterns and inheritance laws. Even though children are an integral part of all these perspectives, on coming to childhood histories there is a 'death' of a discipline. Children (like women) were seen as peripheral to the global system or simply taken as future replacements for their adult members. (Alanen 53) This can be due to the conviction that 'history' is 'created' by adults. However, the second half of twentieth century saw a flourishing interest in childhood history. The novel widespread curiosity on childhood history was on account of several contemporary developments. The large-scale use of Freudian psychoanalysis in childhood studies was one among them. Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood*, inaugurated academic discourse on the childhood histories, rather than the modern focus on child rearing practices.

Studies on childhood histories were taken up by the medievalists, who argued on existence or non-existence of the concept of childhood. Aries argued that the 'concept of childhood did not exist in Medieval European Society'. (Aries 125) Aries observed that, 'medieval art until

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, The Zamorin's, Guruvayurappan College, Kozhikode, Kerala

*Corresponding Author

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about the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it. It is hard to believe that this neglect was due to incompetence or incapacity; it seems more probable that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world.' This negation of the existence of the concept of childhood in the medieval period, led to a more comprehensive analysis of the problem. It inspired the historians to reexamine the sources they already knew like, art, sermon literature, poetry and pushed them to analyse other sources on children, child rearing and parent child relations. (Hanawalt 441) James A Schultz in his, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350*, challenging the findings of Aries, argued that a concept of childhood existed in Germany and that was quite different from those which existed in other parts of Europe. He further argued that in the German Middle Ages, the society did not find any correlation between the raising of the children and their growth into adulthood. (Schultz) These studies provided a frame work for undertaking research on childhood history and like any other concept 'childhood' was also shaped by the socio-cultural paraphernalia, that makes every, 'childhood' unique.

Historians usually blame the paucity of the sources for the lack of serious study of childhood in the past. Scholars of childhood history are compelled to go for non-conventional sources as the existing popular evidences fails to reveal the past. Historians have sought to surpass these limitations by incorporating "material culture" - apparel, furniture, toys, utensils, jewellery, photos - into the reconstruction of childhood histories. These studies of past childhood material culture offer insight into both the conceptualization of childhood and the realities of a child's life experience. (Cunningham 1198) These sources along with autobiographies, memoirs, life histories, novels and stories provide an insight into the life of children. Moreover, whatever the available sources, the children won't speak for themselves and leave discernible records. This has led to creation of gaps in the understanding of 'childhood history'.

Childhood studies, in India, traditionally took the perspectives of education, sociology, health, and psychology. The disintegration of joint families in post-independent industrialization prompted researchers to investigate the issues impacting Indian childhood. Consequently, numerous studies on Indian children were conducted, yielding a substantial amount of data. But, the history of childhood was still out of the purview of these analyses and it continued to be an unblemished arena of historical knowledge. Childhood, within India, is typically envisioned as a time where no obligations and social norms exist; the family, caste, and joint family all have their own significant part in the socialization of children. The history of Indian childhood must not be viewed as a unified concept, but rather as an entity with multiple manifestations. Similarly, to gender, conceptions of childhood inevitably differ depending on time and place. As such, the varying contexts within India have given rise to multiple "concepts of childhood."

The present study is an attempt to trace the trajectories of change experienced by the children of matrilineal families of Malabar during the early twentieth century. This analysis would be focusing the Nair community of the erstwhile British province, Malabar. The colonial modernity and the transformations induced turned out to be death knell for *marumakkathayam*. Matriliney as a form of inheritance was prevalent in Malabar until the passing of the Madras Marumakkathayam Act in 1933. The colonial reading of traditions and customs led to the dissolution of joint families and the subsequent rise of single-unit households. This had a far-reaching impact on various Hindu caste groups and Muslims alike, who then followed matriliney. This paper strives to explore the history of childhood within

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matrilineal families in Malabar, primarily focusing on Nairs - one of the dominant castes during mediaeval and colonial periods. Due to the presence of varied customs across Kerala, this study is confined specifically to Malabar. This study uses the New Sociology of Childhood to understand how children were affected by the shift from matriliney to patriliney in Nair families in twentieth-century Kerala. This perspective, developed by Allison James and Alan Prout, challenges the idea that childhood is simply a natural, biological stage. Instead, it sees childhood as shaped by society—changing over time and closely linked to larger systems of power and meaning. (James and Prout)

NAIR FAMILY – STRUCTURAL ORGANISATION

Nair community followed matrilineal pattern of kinship. In a matrilineal descent group the inheritance of titles, property and territorial rights, were through the children of its female members. The intra familial relationships, responsibilities of parents and pattern of inheritance would be distinct in matrilineal and patrilineal kinship organizations. In a matrilineal family organisation, members would be emotionally more attached to matrikin, since they are together in the same residence throughout their lifetime. The matrilineal households of Nairs were popularly known as *tarawads*. Etymologically, "*tarawad*" derives from "*tara*," meaning a village or part of it, and "*wad*," a corrupted form of "*pad*," meaning rank or authority. Nair *tarawads* typically consisted of multiple members across various generations, all tracing their lineage to a common ancestress. A *tarawad* didn't necessarily refer to one large building, but could include several individual houses within a designated area or separate dwellings in close proximity, reflecting the territorial nature associated with *tarawad* authority and rights. Some *tarawads* contained several "*tavazhis*," or branches, which possessed their own property while retaining rights over the main *tarawad*'s assets.

The matrilineal system of Kerala was known as *marumakkathayam*, the term came from *marumakkal*- nephews or nieces. The word has been coined due to the unusual relationship between uncle and his nephews and nieces. Woman held the property and it was handed down to her children, ie. children of the male members of the family were denied succession to their father's property. Simultaneously, property management was handled by members of the family; as a result, a strong bond was developed between uncles and nephews and nieces while they lived together in the same home throughout their lives.

The institution of marriage within the matrilineal organization followed a distinct pattern from the pan Indian structure. The customs and practices of marriage within matrilineal family organizations were vastly different from those prescribed by Hindu religious texts. While marriage was considered to be a sacrament in other parts of the country, which leads to an eternal binding, here it was seen as a loose relationship. Among the Nairs of Malabar, various names were given to denote marriage such as *pudamuri*, *vidaram kayaral* and *sambandham*. It was customary for Nair women to have hypergamous relationships with Namboothiris, members of royal families and high caste Nairs. Women had the rights to end these *sambandhams* without any formality and any a time it may be due to misunderstandings or quarrels. Even though, Nair *sambandhams* lacked the sanctity of Hindu marriages, paternity of the child born from this relation was to be legitimated by a person of the appropriate caste. (Gough 237-256) If the *tarawad* failed in establishing the paternity of the child, the entire female family would be excommunicated from the caste.

Matrilineal families had matrilineal pattern of residence, which facilitated women to continue in their own *tarawad* even after marriage. Hence children are born and nurtured in their

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maternal home, which in fact are their own *tarawad*. Married women seldom visited husband's house and in turn he would very rarely turn up in women's *tarawad*. Due to this unusual arrangement, conjugal relations never developed among the couples. During pregnancy, the *tarawad* provided maintenance and care for the woman. In the absence of institutional delivery, childbirth would be carried out by midwives in the *tarawad*. Following birth, several women acted as surrogate mothers, creating a pattern that continued throughout childhood. Apart from baby's grandmother, the mother's sisters, the grandmother's sisters and the older sister of the baby all would be attending the newborn. The *tarawad* was to organize all of the newborn baby's rites. A celebration known as *Noolukettu* or *Irupathiyettu* is held on the 28th day following a child's birth, which was to be followed by *choroonu* at six months and *vidhyarambham* – initiation to learning- at the third year or fifth year.

Due to the distinctiveness of matriliney, husband was not legally required to provide for his wife's children, it was the *tarawad*, particularly the mother, who was in charge of their upbringing. For a child, the family was made up of his or her maternal relatives and did not include the father. Children in matrilineal families visited their father's home less frequently. Children were not even allowed to touch their fathers if they were upper caste members like Namboothiri or *Ambalavasi*. Children were never raised to think of their father as their parent or guardian since they were not used to such acquaintances.

A unique pattern of 'childhood' existed within the matrilineal families, as the children were nurtured in the absence of father. Matrilineal *tarawads* housed members of several generations and hence had numerous children of discrete age groups. They all were raised together – they had food, played, studied and slept together. Every woman member in the *tarawad* and *karanavan* were equally responsible for the wellbeing of the children. Every community had a traditional method of delivering education prior to the development of the contemporary educational system. Children were introduced to learning through a ritual called *vidyarambham* when they were three or four years old. Later, children were sent to traditional schools called *ezhutpalli* where they were taught a variety of disciplines. Children would be delivered to a local *asan's* home, where he or she would instruct them reading, writing, and mathematics. There was little opposition to educating the girls, and rich families hired tutors to come and reside in *tarawads* to instruct the kids. However, in the pre modern period, before the emergence of the colonial education system, traditionally most of the time children were in the *tarawad* itself.

COLONIALISM AND THE REDEFINING OF NAIR *TARAWADS*

Colonialism with its inherent tendency of undermining and condemning the indigenous existence, unleashed transformations in the socio-economic fabric of the region. According to Sanjay Joshi, the modernity which the middle classes constructed in colonial India looked ahead as well as back. 'Modernity' in India was built on the traditional and coexisted with it, belying neat dichotomies between the modern and the traditional, the religious and the secular. (Joshi 2010, 202)

According to K.N.Panikkar, Kerala's Middle class is not middle class per se; it has only donned the middle-class exterior by adopting modern lifestyle. Hence it has to be accepted that the middle class that was formed in Malabar was not a homogeneous one but was a combination of several class formations. Another significant aspect of the middle class was that its members largely came from the already privileged classes of the pre-modern period and those from other sections could form only a negligible number within it. In short

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colonialism in Malabar helped to perpetuate (or further to strengthen) the caste divides and caste consciousness among people.

The transformation of Nair *tarawads* due to colonial modernity should be considered from two key perspectives: the redefinition of customs and traditions by the British judicial system, and the introduction of new ideas by the emergent middle class. For many English-educated people, strongly attached to their culture, it was a challenge to decide between modernity and tradition, when radical changes in various customs were mandated by the new system. The middle class steadily took hold as representatives of their community, garnering the respect of those around them as agents of change. They had close ties to the administrators of the region and many held influential roles in government, thus having an advantage when advocating for social change. Despite this, they were still subject to religious and caste-related constraints, so they were careful not to offend these rules in their efforts. They used a special public sphere to discuss various topics which at times led them into opposition against traditional beliefs while endeavoring to make changes. The Western education and the new found professions took the Nair youth to other parts of colonial India and were introduced to a new independent existence out of the controls of the *tarawad*. Moreover, they were influenced by the socio familial patterns that prevailed elsewhere and it instilled an urge for reforms in their own community.

Even though the modern education system made the youth confident of job prospects, in the nineteenth century it was an expensive affair to gain Western education, hence it led to conflicts in *tarawads*. The junior members of the *tarawad* began calling for English education, leaving it to the *karanavan* to decide who should receive such an education. Given that most *tarawads* have multiple *anantharavans*, it was impracticable for *karanavans* to get everyone educated. As the manager of the *tarawad*, the responsibility of providing necessary upkeep to all members fell upon the *karanavan*. When the *karanavan* or *tarawad* declined to fund English education, many Nair youth sought assistance from their fathers. If the father was educated, employed, or from an affluent *tarawad* - or indeed was the *karanavan* of his *tarawad* - he would support his son in furthering his studies. This help from the father was critical because it spawned a whole set of new practices and norms within the *tarawads*; both for the father and for any sons who were given an education. Typically, if a Nair male strived to educate a son it would be met with disapproval by other members of his *tarawad* due to either using their property or money he had personally acquired for that purpose. As aiding in such a capacity went against the long-standing *marumakkathayam* traditions, this created a newfound bond between parent and child which imposed obligations on both sides. This created a profound influence in the framing of a new concept of childhood in the matrilineal families.

IDEOLOGICAL CHANGES AND RESTRUCTURED RELATIONSHIPS

By the 1930s, internal tensions within *tarawads* had become increasingly pronounced. Growing numbers of family members, especially the younger generation grappling with economic struggles, began seeking legal avenues to claim their rights to property and maintenance. Meanwhile, *karanavans*, the senior male figures, grew resentful of what they perceived as the defiance or entitlement of their nephews. The reality of cohabiting under a single roof amid such rising discord fractured family unity. This period marked a wave of uncertainty, particularly within the Nair community's middle and lower-middle strata. As economic pressures mounted, many *karanavans* failed to provide even for essential needs (P. Kesavdev, *Ethirppu*, p. 25). This neglect had tangible effects—children were often pulled out

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of school due to lack of funds, and cultural rites like the *thalikettukalyanam*, a significant pre-puberty ceremony for girls, were either delayed or skipped altogether, largely due to the indifference of the *karanavan* (as also portrayed in *Indulekha*). Legal battles became a frequent and a miserable condition in *tarawads*. Women who had support from their spouses increasingly chose to leave, accelerating the decline of the joint family model.

Once Nair men began taking up salaried jobs, the question of how to distribute their income within the *tarawad* became contentious. Naturally, their immediate kin - their *tavazhi*, including their mother, sisters, and brothers- were prioritized over more distant relatives. In this shifting context, the lives of female *tarawad* members were increasingly shaped by the professional and economic status of their husbands. A woman's standing within the household could rise or fall based on her husband's occupation. It wasn't uncommon for one household to include women married to men from vastly different backgrounds - royalty, high-ranking officials, upper-caste Namboothiris, or ordinary farmers. With the growth of non-agricultural employment, many Nair couples gained some economic independence. A working husband and a supportive wife could together secure their children's education and future. However, not all women had such support. Those married to struggling farmers often lacked resources, leading to inequalities even within the same *tarawad*. While wealth became a drive for change, poverty and resource scarcity also contributed to the gradual disintegration of the joint family system. Individuals with independent incomes often sought to establish nuclear families, wanting to live with their spouse and children -something that conflicted with the interests of their natal family. At the same time, Nair men who couldn't find work or faced marginalization within the *tarawad* - particularly from the *karanavan* - also considered leaving. But for them, doing so was harder without either the *karanavan*'s support or a formal division of property. These pressures called into question the very foundation of joint family property and signalled a growing strain on the traditional *tarawad* system in Malabar. Though the transition from the matrilineal structure met with initial resistance, over time, the shift became irreversible. Nuclear households began to take shape, and with them came the disintegration of traditional *tarawad* life and the scattering of children into separate family units.

REDESIGNED FATHERHOOD

Western literature sparked a new idea of fatherhood among educated Nairs, who had previously maintained an absentee relationship with their children. With exposure to outside influences, many Nairs began to realize that they should take care of and support their families financially; the proliferation of salaried employment enabled them to do so. Cultural efforts were made to assign paternal duties and responsibilities to the father figure in Nair households, such as reframing *tarawads* by having fathers replace *karanavan* as heads of these family units. This new head was obligated morally to provide for his wife and children.

In Malabar, the transition to a new family structure proved to be difficult due to the presence of *marumakkathayam* and its associated land rights. To gain acceptance from the people for these reforms, propagandizing was necessary in order to set the standard for new ideas regarding family. The middle class of Malabar sought to reconstruct their social customs as a way of evading derision from other middle-class circles. As part of this process, a shared middle-class culture came into existence through market forces and urbanization that diminished caste cultures. Educated Nair men aspired to join in on the common mid-level class culture throughout South India.

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Attempts of the Nair youth to initiate reform within the community, led to the enactment of Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933. Consequently, the Act instituted patriarchal relations into a matrilineal society, investing husbands and fathers with parental authority over wives and children. He was made the guardian of her person, children and property. Furthermore, women were made to live with their husbands unless they were denied maintenance. The colonial apprehension of children growing without a father was averted through the enactment. However many fathers were not ready to assume this new responsibility, due to pressure from their own maternal *tarawads*. This attitude of the fathers resulted in an insecure condition for the children as they witnessed property disputes and isolation in their own *tarawads*.

CHILDREN IN THE 'NEWLY CONSTITUTED FAMILIES'

The changes envisaged by the Act did not take place all of a sudden, it took years but, on the whole, it was accepted that the matrilineal families could not continue. The post enactment period was not so peaceful in many of the Nair *tarawads*, as most of them were going through litigations. Members of the *tarawads* were separated on the lines of *tavazhi* and many had separate kitchen in the same house. Each and every member longed for partition and *karanavans* resisted the demand. This embittered the relations and enmity was mounting up in family relations. The period of transition was challenging for all the members, especially for children. The matri local residence pattern gave way to patri local or neo local houses, which was the road to emergence of conjugal families in matrilineal communities. From 1890s onwards Nair women were taken with them by the employed husbands, this was evident from the then contemporary autobiographies like that of K P Kesava Menon. Many Nair women were not welcomed in their husband's house, largely due to the fact that, such an acquaintance was a novelty; so were the condition of the children. This dislocation was totally uncomfortable for children as they were taken out of their 'natural' familial setting.

The New Sociology of Childhood developed by Allison James and Alan Prout helps to understand the how children experienced the historical shift from matriliney to patriliney within Nair society during the twentieth century. The advent of patriliney - hastened by legislative measures such as the Madras Marumakkathayam Act and the Hindu Succession Act - recast the frameworks of authority, inheritance, and familial roles, thereby reshaping children's positions within both domestic and kinship contexts. This transition can be understood not merely as a reconfiguration of adult-centric kinship norms, but as a moment that fundamentally altered the social construction of childhood itself.

The movement towards a paternal authority and nuclear family deeply influenced the shaping of children's identities, their experiences of power, and the terms of their belonging. The gradual transfer from matrilineal to patrilineal families created utter confusion and was of profuse impact over children. The transition led to an identity crisis for the entire members especially for children regarding their belongingness. Usually within matriliney, as the name suggests, children would be a part of their mother's lineage, but with the transition they are expected to be of the father's family. In matrilineal families, childhood was embedded within the wide network of care and relationality. But, the shift to patriliney narrowed these landscapes, increasingly subjecting children to hierarchies shaped by paternal control and property regimes. Moreover, recognizing children as active agents prompts a rethinking of their role during this period of transformation. Rather than viewing them solely as passive recipients of adult-driven decisions, this perspective opens space to consider how children might have engaged with these shifts—through forms of adaptation, negotiation, or even

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subtle resistance. By positioning the child as a socially situated actor and conceptualizing childhood as historically contingent, their approach reveals the often-overlooked emotional and cultural ramifications of structural transformation. We have to realize that such changes are expressed not only through institutions and adult relations, but also through the everyday lives of children.

Moreover, the partition of the large households resulted in the separation and dislocation of the age-old bondage. Shift from the extended maternal *tarawad* to patrilineal nuclear or extended households resulted in a dilemma for women and children. Sudden displacement from a secure environment aggravated the issues. The conventional familial organization of maternal relatives and the support system of *tarawads* were dismantled and the warmth it provided was totally non-existent in strained domestic arrangements.

The governmental intervention in the system of *maumakkathayam* led to enactment of ambiguous laws that redefined the traditional inheritance patterns within the families. Children had natural rights in their maternal property and with the introduction of new laws, those intend the formation of patrilineal families, these rights were delineated. Property disputes became common among maternal relatives and paternal relatives and children were lost in these embittered relations. Being taken out from a warmth of a *tarawad*, a kind of insecurity was swept over children and women. Here we can see that children became active subjects rather than passive recipients of change. They directly experienced the kinship shifts and legal interventions and became a part of their daily life. The partition of *tarawad* and resultant dislocation created a lasting impact on children as they lost the nurture of *tarawad*. An unfamiliar familial organisation was on the way ie. collective existence eroded and a typical closely knit conjugal family was not suddenly framed. It took time, and children and women in many families were left without male support. Childhood itself was being renegotiated, with new forms of discipline, obligation, and identity emerging within these altered households.

The dissolution of matriliny not only created a new familial organisation but also unsettled the entire childhood. These changing social settings and emotional turnabouts are depicted by writers like M T Vasudevan Nair, Thakazhi and Kesavdev. M T has portrayed the dislocation of children in the wake of partition in his *Nalukettu* and *Asuravithu*. The protagonists grow up in households where the warmth of *tarawad* and maternal kinship has declined and replaced by newly or partially structured conjugal arrangements. Children, once surrounded by the security of maternal relatives, are left amidst disputes over inheritance and the assertion of paternal authority. Their childhoods are disrupted by alienation and new expectations in households which cannot replace the emotional attachments to the *tarawad*. Devoid of the care of the *karnavar* and maternal relatives many children are forced to take up the responsibility at an early age. As explicitly shown by M T these new families were caught up in severe financial crisis where livelihood became a constant struggle. The same uncertainty was depicted by Kesavdev in *Ayalkar* where the conflicts arising from the breakdown of *tarawad* solidarity manifest in children's lives as instability and insecurity. Likewise, Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai also portrays children during this period of crisis, where they appear as quite silent and depressed in familial eruption and property disputes.

CONCLUSION

The transformation from matrilineal to patrilineal structures created a complex and often traumatic landscape for children. The dissolution of matriliny brought a deep change in the

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lives of Nair children. A secure childhood in *tarawad* was replaced by partially structured new conjugal families. Children were disturbed the disputes and faced loneliness and uncertainty. Theories such as the new sociology of childhood help us to understand these changes more clearly. It shows that childhood is not fixed and subjective to all transformations in the society. Children are always active agents in these transitions, they try to adapt, negotiate and imbibe new developments around them.

Children in this period of transition their lives and experiences have not been well analysed as the studies mostly focus the property rights, inheritance and change in the role of women. Theoretical insights from the new sociology of childhood, and empirical analysis drawn from literature, autobiographies, and oral histories, are needed to understand how childhood itself was reshaped in this era. Children are to be at the central of the analysis and it reveals their perspective of change. This uncertainty might have lasted for quite a long period and would have definitely influenced a generation and they would have developed their own strategies for existence.

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Notes:

1. The Act successfully instituted patriarchal relations into a matrilineal community, by investing the guardianship of wife and children on husband and father respectively. He was made the guardian of her person, children and property. Chapter III clause 13(1) of The Madras Marumakkathayam Act stated that, "Provided that the wife shall not be entitled to maintenance from the husband if she refuses to live with him without just cause."
2. Kurupath, a tarawad of Palakkad had five kitchens at a time, till it was partitioned in 1962.

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3. Travancore Nair Act of 1925 and the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933.

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Conflict of Interest

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