

Forging Truths Out Of Lies: A Post-Truth Analysis Of Dark Tetrad Personality In The Malayalam Movie Mukundan Unni Associates

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ABSTRACT

The art of fabricating false-truths and disrupting reality to achieve personal success and prosperity has led to the exploitation and threatening of the survival of humankind in this post-truth era. Such a hunt to reach the epitome of self-esteem and self-promotion can knowingly or unknowingly expose the darker shade of the personality in a human. Considering this demoralized condition of our society, the present research article engages in close-reading and analysis of the central character Mukundan Unni in the Malayalam movie Mukundan Unni Associates (2022), directed by Abhinav Sundar Nayak, with an aim to track down how Mukundan Unni's character depicts the extreme level of the characteristics of the 'dark tetrad personality' and its impact over a post-truth epoch. This study on the horrendous impact of the dark tetrad personality portrayed in the life of the protagonist, Adv. Mukundan Unni, explores the extent of vulnerability to which deceiving others has turned out to be a very natural human instinct. The article explains how the character becomes relevant in today's post-truth era by proving its intentional role in warning its readers against the dystopian representations of a post-truth world. Analysing Mukundan Unni Associates through the theoretical framework of dark tetrad personality and the post-truth condition serves as a realm to break the existing normalized norms of morality and alerts the reader of the deceiving nature of the society.

Keywords: *Dark tetrad personality, Malayalam Cinema, Mukundan Unni Associates, post-truth.*

INTRODUCTION

The apocalyptic diagnoses regarding the credibility of truth have become the heart of discussions in the present era. These discussions that arise out of our inability to distinguish between truth and lies further reinforce the realm of post-truth, wherein the concept underlines the stress on the yearning for Truth by blurring the distinction between truth and lies. This current trend has established its universality over all domains of society such as media, politics, literature, psychology, popular culture, and communication studies. Representations of the post-truth have even found its finest tuning in terms of films. The makers of the cinema industry have broken the shells of the conceptions of normalcy and are seen to be ready to accept the risk and challenges of deviating from the prescribed paths of morality. This humongous experimental leap has also occupied its space in Malayalam cinema and has surprisingly gained acceptance and popularity. The deviating shift and its acceptance in terms of the wavelength of the genre of movies in the Malayalam film industry over the past few years have encouraged a more realistic portrayal of the societal and psychological conditions of human beings.

Such an archetypal depiction of today's post-truth environment involves the rendering of the widespread dissemination of false information and deceptive content that has obscured our existence. The art of fabricating false truths and disrupting reality to achieve personal success and prosperity has led to the exploitation and threatening of the survival of humankind in this post-truth era. Such a hunt to reach the epitome of self-esteem

and self-promotion can knowingly or unknowingly expose the Dark-tetrad personality¹ of the human psyche. Considering this demoralized condition of our society, the present research article tries to analyze the Malayalam movie *Mukundan Unni Associates* (2022) by Abhinav Sundar Nayak in order to explore the extent of vulnerability to which deceiving others has turned out to be a very natural human instinct. *Mukundan Unni Associates*, 'a dark comedy crime film' (Wikipedia, n.d.) holds a remarkable position of its own by displaying the life of the titular character in the darkest black shade. The character Mukundan Unni², who aspires to obtain a position of fame, wealth, and glory because he believes that these are the only requirements for a successful and glorious life in society, brazenly displays the deadliest forms of manipulation and deceit in the Malayalam film.

This paper engages with the study over the horrendous impact of the Dark tetrad personality portrayed through the life of the protagonist, Adv. Mukundan Unni, with an aim to not only reveal but also to warn its readers of the false representations in a post-truth world. The movie under analysis has been interpreted using post-truth and dark tetrad personality theories and perspectives. The first section of the paper explains the representations of dark tetrad personality in the movie, taking the titular character as a case for study. The second section discusses the post-truth implications of the Dark tetrad personality traits and their reflections in the movie through the character of Mukundan Unni, thereby investigating the morals and warnings attained through the reflection whereby the don'ts of living in a post-truth society are focused upon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A noteworthy debut in Malayalam cinema, *Mukundan Unni Associates* offers a darkly humorous examination of ambition and moral ambiguity. Many critics have lauded the film for its unique portrayal of its dark comedic effect, whereas some boldly critiqued the unconventional storytelling style and narrative representation. Rangan (2022) described the film as "a delicious, deadpan, dark comedy with a superbly cast Vineeth Sreenivasan." Another critic, Sajin Shrijith studies the visual, technical, and narrative aspects of the movie and tries to draw a comparison between the protagonist of the movie and that of a James Bond villain (Shrijith, 2022). Not only in cinemas, but the human psyche has also been closely examined through novels (Abhinav, Arun, & Chandana Nair, 2020). The delightfulness of the evil protagonist that has been achieved through the voiceovers and animation techniques has been compared to the villain representations in the movies *Megamind* (2010) and *Despicable Me* (2010) (Menon, 2023). In an article by Jose K. George (2023), the ruthlessness of the central character has also been paralleled to anti-heroes of several other movies. The psychological transformations of the protagonists in movies have also been of interest for study in recent times (Heera & Indu, 2021). Sunny (2023) attempts an analysis of the psychological and character profile of the anti-hero Mukundan Unni. "From a clinical point of view, Advocate Mukundan Unni has a personality cluster called the "Dark Triad Personality." ... People with such a combination of traits have inflated self-esteem and are extremely dangerous, remorseless, and manipulative" (Sunny, 2023).

While this recent study has attempted to address the psychological implications of the central character, less attention has been paid to analyze the sadistic character traits (which makes the character a whole of a dark tetrad personality) in *Mukundan Unni* and the social undertones of such a personality in the current post-truth era.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objective

The study analyzes the Dark tetrad personality of the titular character in the film *Mukundan Unni Associates* through a post-truth lens. The goal of such an observation is to illustrate the severity of the fragility and monstrosity that a post-truth reality might bring to society.

¹ "The Dark Tetrad, also known as the Dark Quad, is a set of interrelated negative personality features: narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism (Psychology Today, n.d.)."

² often referred to as 'M.Unni' in the paper.

Methods

This article intends to assess and interpret the movie, *Mukundan Unni Associates* through the psychological concept of dark tetrad personality and the literary theory of post-truth. The research employs the methodology of both descriptive (close-reading method) and analytical methods of research (literary research).

Background of the Movie *Mukundan Unni Associates*

The movie *Mukundan Unni Associates* revolves around the titular character Mukundan Unni, an advocate in his late thirties from Kalpetta [a city located in the Wayanad district of Kerala]. Mukundan Unni possesses a dangerous obsession with being successful in life, which neither allows anyone to grow beyond him nor does he consider the feelings of the people around him on his way to attaining his goals in life. The domineering and selfish nature of the protagonist is made evident from the outset by altering the standard disclaimers that appear at the very beginning of the film. The first-person narrative technique employed throughout the movie and to even proclaim the absurd disclaimers like *aarodum nanni pareyan ella*³ (meaning- 'There is none to express gratitude to'.); [no] Animals were harmed, with a background voice telling *poo pooche* (a colloquial way of stirring away a cat in Malayalam). And just before the movie begins, the screen colour changes from gray to black, saying, 'Human beings are mostly gray, except in some cases. In some cases, they are just, black'; which can be understood as a hint into the depiction of the black characterization in the movie.

The movie gets underway with a self-introduction of the anti-hero Mukundan Unni through his own voiceover, where the opening scenes sketch his character in a clearer and louder manner by placing the context that even though he wished to be successful before his thirties, he has not attained anything in life, even in his late thirties. The aggressive desire of Mukundan Unni to be successful and be placed above all makes him cold towards acknowledging the feelings and emotions of the people around him. His apathetic nature, involved in every word and action in all the events that unfold throughout the movie, expresses the destructive extent of pushing one to the deadliest end of vulnerability. All the other characters in the movie that are associated with him, either professionally or personally, thus fall prey to his victimization. Adv. Venu O.V (Unni's co-worker), Meenakshi Jayaraj (Unni's wife), Advocate Robin Thazaththu (Mukundan Unni's assistant), Adv. Jyothi Lakshmi (Mukundan Unni's girlfriend), Dr. Vincent (Hospital owner), and Meenakshi Jayaraj (Hospital receptionist who later becomes Unni's wife) are all important characters in the movie whose lives have been subjected to Unni's ruthless strive towards achieving success.

Dark-Tetrad Personality

Dark-Tetrad personality is a constellation of four correlated negative personality traits, such as:- Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and Sadism (Buckles et al., 2013). The later was added to the former three personality traits that formed the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Even though all these character attributes are claimed to be interrelated, they are all proven to be conceptually distinct as well (Chabrol et.al.,2009); (Forsyth et.al., 2021). The attributes that define narcissism include grandiosity, vanity, egoism, dominance, self-centeredness (Raskin & Hall, 1979); (Carpenter, 2012); (Jonason& Krause, 2013). Machiavellianism is defined by strategic manipulation, exploitation of others, emotional coldness, selfishness (Christie & Geis, 1970); (Abell & Brewer, 2014); (Jonason et.al.,2009). Characteristics that constitute psychopathy include impulsivity, low empathy, callous nature (Miller & Lynam, 2015); (Venables et.al.,2015); (Hare, 1985). Sadism, on the other hand, takes pleasure in causing psychological or physical suffering to other people (Chabrol et.al.,2009); (Forsyth et.al., 2021). The extreme dark shades of these four personality traits can be observed and understood well through a thorough analysis of the character Mukundan Unni, who is both the hero and the villain of the movie, who desires and desires to be successful at any cost because he thinks that he deserves a good life with lot of happiness.

Past studies have also proved that variables such as machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism have a great inclination towards low-stakes and high-stakes lying and deception (Azizli et.al,2016); (Gozna et.al., 2001); (Kashy& DePaulo, 1996); (Baughman et.al.,2014); (Vemon,2014); (Hare,1982). A study conducted by in 2021

³ A disclaimer from the movie in its original language 'Malayalam'.

has also proved that the propensity towards lying and deception are high in people that possess Dark Tetrad character traits (Forsyth et.al.,2021).

The extent of the complexities of these dark personality traits is at the heart of the film Mukundan Unni Associates. The plot of the movie portrays Mukundan Unni's desperate struggles to achieve success above everyone around him through vicious levels of lying and manipulation. Throughout the movie, there are instances of Mukundan Unni's dangerous personality, which comes into play by forging truth out of lies. From the start, Adv. Mukundan Unni cleverly manipulates everything and makes all falsities into a reality, a frame where Unni likes to fit in the best. Thus, Unni's life corresponds to the phenomenon of post-truth, which defines the norms of the present era at its best.

Post-truth

The declaration of the word 'post-truth' as Word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016 asserts and deciphers the fact that the phenomenon of post-truth is quickly emerging as one of the distinctive features of current discussions about truth, reality and memory in every arena of literature. The constant war between ignorance and manipulation, fact and fiction has become an undeniable problem or fact of the given century. In such a scenario, post-truth has turned out to be the juncture where our convenient beliefs and collective memories combine together to create a truth(s) that have no alliance with the actual reality. Through his book Post-truth, Lee McIntyre talks about the phenomenon of post-truth as "a form of, ideological supremacy whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not". These definitions of post-truth give a more explicit understanding that personal feelings and emotions sometimes matter more than objective facts, evidences and truths.

When referring post-truth as 'general condition of detachment of truth-claims from verifiable facts and the primacy of criteria other than verifiability in the audiences' decision to affiliate themselves with a particular truth-claim, such claims being pitched to audiences as narrative fictions that constitute their own lived realities and explain the world'(Kalpokas, 2018) ; McIntyre substantiates few features that can be associated with these manufacturing of commodious truths. Amongst many, cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), motivated reasoning (Mcintyre, 2018), and confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) emerge as the relevant and most sound characteristics of post-truth. Fester explains cognitive dissonance as a strive to seek harmony amongst our thoughts and beliefs to that of reality. He claims that one experiences a psychic discomfort when things go out of our balance and plan. 'Motivated reasoning is a state of mind in which we find ourselves willing (perhaps at an unconscious level) to shade our beliefs in light of our opinions; confirmation bias is the mechanism by which we may try to accomplish this, by interpreting information so that it confirms our preexisting beliefs' (Mcintyre, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Dark-tetrad Personality in Mukundan Unni Associates: A Case Study

The hideous yearning towards attaining an established, successful position in society is readily apparent right from the starting scene of the movie, where the central character, Advocate Mukundan Unni, introduces himself as an unrivalled man who is capable of being successful beyond comparison. But since his fantasies have not turned into a reality even when he was aged thirty-six, he has been manipulating his age on his Aadhaar card⁴ for the past seven years. Thirty-six is an age that he believes is too old to have attained the status of a happy and rich life yet. Dyussenbayev (2017) in his article titled Age Periods of Human Life categorizes the age group of twenty-five to thirty-seven to be known as the beginning period of maturity where a human is most productive in his life. "This is exactly the age when gifted people most often experience the rise of unbridled intellectual abilities

⁴ Aadhaar card is an identification card issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which comprises of a twelve-digit unique identification number to Indian residents, as a means of authenticating their identity and address.

(Dyussenbayev, 2017, p. 260). Mukundan Unni's realization of this scientific fact that he is crossing the fecund stage of his life and that he has not attained anything in life urges Mukundan Unni to be a man who needs to be successful at any cost because he thinks "he deserves a good life with lots of happiness, lots!" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:02:35).

MLA Reshma George, another character in the film, has been trapped in a boiling hot political case, a case that is handled by Advocate Gangatharan, a senior advocate who also runs a firm where Mukundan Unni and his girlfriend, Advocate Jyothi, work. But Mukundan Unni thinks that the MLA requires a much better advocate who is (like) him: "someone who is extremely good-looking and intelligent" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:04:49). When the film uses the protagonist's voice to narrate, a tactical technique that allows the spectators to either observe the events through the character's eyes or hear the character comment on them as they are portrayed, Mukundan Unni's narcissistic nature is depicted so loudly that he believes there is no better advocate that can appear for the MLA in court to win the case for her. The opening sequences of the movie are dense enough to convey the grandiosity with which Mukundan Unni feels that he is an unmatched rival to others and that his invincible ego and self-conceit are one of the major underlying motivations for accomplishing his professional and personal objectives at all costs, which further encourages him to develop Machiavellian behavioural characteristics.

The characterisation of Mukundan Unni, the anti-hero, grows tense due to his odd psychological insensitivity towards the happenings of his day-to-day life. In a scene where Mukundan Unni's mother falls from a ladder when seeing a snake, Unni coldly and strangely reacts by admiring the attributes of the venomous snake. "A magnificent serpent capable of killing twenty people with a single bite! The classic cobra. Charismatic, elegant, and dangerous!" he exclaims (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:11:40). He takes enough care of the snake by keeping it in an empty room; feeds the snake with eggs, and makes sure that the snake lives. His eccentric approach towards the snake goes beyond the inconceivable when the movie progresses, and we understand M. Unni's character as someone who removes everything from his life that he believes is unimportant or irrelevant. This insidious act reaches the epitome of heinousness when he uses this snake to craft death for Advocate Venu, a character in the movie whom M.Unni suspects to be a barrier to achieve his life goals. M. Unni lets this snake into Venu's car without his knowing, follows Adv.Venu's car at a distance, and ensures that the events unfold into a car crash that kills Adv. Venu. Mukundan Unni watches his foxy act and remarks, "Wow! Like a poem. Marvellous than I thought" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:58:03). A melancholic background score that reads, "My soul is falling, drowning; never crying though" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:57:57) imparts the toxicity of M. Unni's thoughts and acts. He himself can be understood as the most venomous snake, capable of taking different forms opportunistically.

The high-rated propensity of Mukundan Unni's character towards selfishness, manipulation, cunningness and emotional disconnectedness make him an absolute Machiavellian anti-hero. The movie reveals that the murder of Adv. Venu was not the first attempt of killing by M.Unni. When M.Unni experiences hallucination about Adv.Venu after his death, M.Unni recollects from his memory that his first experience of hallucination was in 1992 which was followed by the death of his grandfather. This Machiavellian hero threw a firecracker at his grandfather while he was out for a walk, which eventually led to the old man's death. Even after recollecting the memory of a ruthless killing, he says, "But I don't give a shit" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 01:03:23).

Also, even when M. Unni gets introduced to unknown and new situations in life, his initial approach towards people to seek help first and then exploit them to later become a threat to the same people is his most observed treacherous strategy. In the movie, M. Unni comments, "There are two types of people in this world, those who exploit and those who are exploited. I have decided to be the former" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:19:01). So, M. Unni intentionally decides to be the exploiter in the lives of people around him, who seem to be of benefit either to his personal or professional life. At a point in his life where he felt his girlfriend, Adv. Jyothi, was too straight forward for him, he plotted to get rid of her from his life. "If I ditch her, society will find me guilty. That cannot do. She should be the one to ditch me. I should push her to the limits" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022,

00:26:48). Similar was the case with Adv. Robin Thazhatthu, an advocate who works as Unni's assistant in the movie. Even though Adv. Robin was with M. Unni right from the start of his career to the glorious days of his career, when M. Unni learns that Adv. Robin has gained knowledge and experience in his career, he victimizes Adv. Robin without any guilt. "He who used to follow me has now started thinking independently. This is dangerous. This is also unacceptable." So, he plots the death of Adv. Robin in an accident that he himself causes when he asks for a share of money for his job.

The titular character is also evidently cruel and insensitive towards the feelings of others, which proves to possess a psychopathic character attribute as well. Advocate Mukundan Unni reaches a stage in life where he is near to achieving a rich life (built through lies, cheating, and manipulation). When he steps up the standard of his living by buying a car, he buys a car with an airbag only for the driver; a simple instance of the intensity of M'Unni's least regard for others. In addition to that, when he must choose a partner for life, he marries a woman named Meenakshi Jayaraj, the receptionist from the hospital he has a secret agreement with, in order to get all the accident cases to his side. Rather than the love for Meenakshi, he considered his marriage as revenge towards the hospital owner, Dr. Vincent, who had an interest in Meenakshi. So, M. Unni considered marriage as an investment where he could advance his professional life and prove that he could take something to his side that somebody else couldn't. In addition to that, the inner joy he finds in the death of Adv. Venu & Adv. Robin, the mental peace he finds in plotting against and calling off Adv. Jyothi's marriage (just because M. Unni saw pictures of her engagement with an IAS officer; M. Unni was anxious and frustrated about the fact that Jyothi found someone better than him) are all instances that reflect the central character's sadistic behaviour.

A Post-truth Analysis of the movie *Mukundan Unni Associates*

The reflection of the post-truth phenomenon can be best observed throughout the movie as the central character crafts a fabricated reality of his own. The whole life of the protagonist, Advocate Mukundan Unni, is made of lies, deception, and manipulation. In order to artfully construct a world of his own realities, where he is the supreme head and deciding authority, he relentlessly begins manipulating his own age in a government-authorized identity card because he wants him to be placed in a space seven years before. When his mother gets hospitalized after falling from the ladder at home, M. Unni observes the secret deals involving hospitals, doctors, police officers, and lawyers. He tactically and silently observes and learns to make money from hospital cases that a lawyer handles. In his strive to achieve his personal goal of becoming 'successful,' he forgets about everyone and everything around and as a result, many of his acquaintances are exploited or have been turned into scapegoats. M. Unni perceives every life he sacrifices as a steppingstone towards his mental state of happiness and satisfaction. The life he lives as an advocate for accident cases or claims is the ultimate result of looting away the life of his co-worker named Adv. Venu. M. Unni (un)knowingly looks over the career operations of Adv. Venu as a lawyer who makes money out of the hospital cases by turning them into an accident case and later claiming the insurance. After several attempts and failures, Adv. Unni flagged off his career as an accident case lawyer by taking the fingerprint of an accident victim who was in an unconscious state of mind from the ambulance itself. "No conscious person has ever hired me, even after wandering around for years. Getting hired by an unconscious person is an absolute pleasure. It feels like I am in control" (Gopalakrishnan & Nayak, 2022, 00:50:48). The movie makes it evident that M. Unni built his career and life through deceiving others.

Similarly, the rest of the characters who are connected to Mukundan Unni in one way or another have been manipulated in many ways. Different scenarios from the life of Adv. Jyothi are an example that serves as proof to the manipulative tendency of the anti-hero of the movie. Adv. Jyothi could be the reason M. Unni works at Adv. Gangadharan's law firm at the start of the movie when he was hired by no one. When Adv. Unni learned of other ways to make money as a lawyer, he ditched Adv. Jyothi by giving her a role in the drama he wrote and made things happen his way. Later, when he finds that Adv. Jyothi is engaged to a man M. Unni understood to be better than him, M. Unni viciously plans against her, and the wedding gets called off.

Towards the end of the movie, when Mukundan Unni realizes that his dreams are falling apart as he is caught red-handed by the judge in the court for having manipulated a wound certificate for the case of an accident

victim, he finds suicide as the only way of escaping; a scene that happens a day before his marriage. But rather than punishing himself for the consequences of his heinous act, he mixes sleeping pills in the juice bottle for the driver of the bus, in which Meenakshi and M. Unni set off for their honeymoon trip. Unfortunately, they all escape, and the accident occurs between a school tour-bus and a truck. M. Unni opportunistically behaves and does everything to get the accident claim for all thirty students in the bus. Even when a hospital lacks facilities, he does not allow any cases to be shifted to another hospital other than the one he has a secret tie-up with. Also, he pours water into all the ambulances so that no other ambulance can move out of the hospital in search of another. Thereby, he manipulates every situation around in his favour to cater to a reality of his own. Mukundan Unni is heartless and emotionless towards everyone around. All he works for is to find reasons to appeal to his own feelings and to make others believe in what he likes to be true or real. His earnest attempts to seek parallelism between his ideas and that of reality make him an absolute post-truth protagonist.

The attempt to disturbingly normalise the fatal actions and thoughts of the protagonist can also be understood as a showing of one of the signature features of a flourishing post-truth environment. The motivated reasoning of the character, which leads the plot line of the movie, makes the receptors trapped under a perspective that is harmful and misleading. When M. Unni's character graph shows a steady progression from that of a jobless lawyer to that of a powerful dominator, a growth established through exploitation and manipulation; the foundations of ethics, morality, and honesty become contested. This equation of the now society can be juxtaposed with that of the rise of the post-truth condition, where public perceptions are manipulated. When Adv. Mukundan Unni takes into hand the legal systems to serve his needs and interests, the film exposes how a post-truth society thrives on misinformation and deception. The fraudulence of the media depicted through the movie also acts as an opaque black mirror of the contemporary society, demonstrating how truth becomes a subjective instrument of control rather than an objective fact in a world dominated by ambition and power.

CONCLUSION

An in-depth analysis of the character representation of Mukundan Unni in the movie *Mukundan Unni Associates* has expressed the extent of vulnerabilities in the lives around the titular character. By expressing the dangerous traits of the titular character to deceive and exploit others to achieve his success, the paper tries to shed light on the sufferings of the associated characters. This in turn helps us understand the horrendous impact of allowing perceived realities to exist on their own. The movie *Mukundan Unni Associates* stands as a reflection of the troubling reality of the environment we belong to. The character sketch of Mukundan Unni and his personality traits inform and warn the audiences of what not to be in an era where truth, facts, and realities have been contested. Our strife for existence does not deny the right of other living creatures to survive in the world. The paper hails the importance of adhering to truth and highlights the ill effects of creating a fictional world of one's own. Even when a darker shade of the post-truth era exists; the paper reminds us of the relevance of sustainable coexistence, giving us hope of a beam of light that can eradicate the darkness. This study has attempted to contribute to the realms of sociopolitical discourse and film studies by mirroring contemporary corporeality. By reading the movie through a post-truth framework, the reader is informed about the consequences of the unknown consumption of manufactured truths in the contemporary era.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude for the constructive feedback and invaluable insights from the anonymous reviewers who have helped refine this work.

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