The Construction and Deconstruction of the Other--On Unreliable Narratives in Othello

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Abstract. Starting from the relationship between East and West, based on the theory of "Other" and the theory of unreliable narrative of narratology, this paper compares the texts of the story and the play and analyses Shakespeare's reconstruction of Othello's image and the three axes of unreliable narratives in the play. It comes to the conclusion that there is an interactive relationship between the construction of the "Other" and unreliable narratives and that the latter not only contribute to the construction of the "Other" but also deconstruct the "Other". The significance of this paper lies in the reflection on the colonial discourse, the deconstruction and critique of the ideology of the "Other", which is of great relevance in the post-colonial era. It also points out the theoretical gaps of narratology with regard to genres other than fictions and expects to see comparisons of the different narrative styles and effects of different narrative genres.

Keywords: Othello; Other; Unreliable Narration; Post-Colonialism.

1. Introduction

One of William Shakespeare's Four Great Tragedies, Othello, is adapted from The Moors of Venice from the Italian novelist G. Cinthio's collection of short stories, Hecatommithi (1565). In the original, the Moors, provoked by the flag officer, exposed his "nature" of irritability, vindictiveness, and evading responsibility, giving the Venetians the legitimacy to unite against the foreigners and the sense of honour to defend the national community. The play, Othello, uses it as a base, completes the narrative through dialogue, and reconstructs the image of an Oriental "Other". There is a subversive change in the image of Othello between the short story and the play, that is to say, from a murderer indulged in emotions, brutal and cruel and dragged out an ignoble existence to a noble hero with flaws such as gullibility and impulsiveness, but with integrity and frankness, who dares to adjudicate for himself, which arouses the audience's sympathy and compassion and challenges the racial stereotype in the Western world to a certain extent.

In the last five years of research on Othello, studies on the East-West issue have mainly used the theory of the "Other" created by Jacques Lacan, Orientalism created by Edward Said, and the Dialectic of the Master and the Slave created by Georg Hegel to make post-colonial criticisms, such as Waruni Tennakoon "Not now, sweet Desdemona"- Re-reading Othello as a double edged tragedy of both the colonizer and the colonized and M Ki Othello and the Master-Servant Dialectic, while studies on linguistic rhetoric have explored the characters' linguistic behaviours in terms of silences, metaphors, verbal defences, and the use of euphemisms, and more, such as Rizky Setyaningrum Othello’s Verbal Defence: Distorting Reality in Shakespeare’s Othello. The research on adaptation has mainly examined rewritings based on the play in other countries or periods and has also examined the role played in different regions, such as M Golemi Othello in the Balkans: Performing Race Rhetoric on the Albanian Stage. Overall, the studies are mainly based on the above directions. Since the author believes that novels are narrated by the narrator, while plays construct narratives through characters' dialogues, based on the adaptation from the narrative to the play, this paper analyses the unreliable narration in the dialogue of plays from the perspective of Narratology and deconstructs the "Other" constructed by the characters' words, thus making analysis and criticism of the colonial discourse.
2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Other

"Other" is a common term in Western literary theory, which construction derives from Lacan's analysis of the mirror mentality. According to Lacan, the infant from the 6th to the 18th month of life is in the "mirror stage", when it first sees its own image in the mirror and creates an illusion of completeness, thus mistaking its own image in the mirror for its real self [1]. This is precisely what the Theory of Mirror Stage reveals about the illusory nature of human awareness of self. "Other" in the mirror is not seen as another self-consciousness but as a projection of the subject's self-consciousness, i.e., the subject sees itself in "Other". According to the theory, the "I" and the "Other" have a dialectical and unifying relationship; the self is actually the pseudo-self, and the Other is the absence of the self.

In cultural and political criticism, the theory of "Other" has been applied to post-colonial criticism and feminism. The Orient/female is in a subordinate position to the Occident/male. Between the East and the West, the West establishes its self-identity by establishing the image of "Other", while between the two sexes, the male establishes the subjective position of the self by treating the female as "Other"; the underlying logic of both is the idea of dichotomy, which puts the "Other" in a subordinate and disadvantaged position. In this paper, we will apply the theory of "Other" to post-colonial criticism, analysing the reconstruction of the Oriental "Other" in the adaptation of the play related to the original novel and the two Oriental "Others" in the eyes of the Western world of the play. It also touches upon the commonality between the colonial "Other" and the female "Other", who are both constructed from a similar set of logic.

2.2. Unreliable Narration

Unreliable narration is a central concept in contemporary narrative theory, about which there are currently two main types; rhetorical approach and cognitive or constructivist approach. This paper picked up the rhetorical approach proposed by Wayne Booth-James Phelan, which was first found by Wayne Booth in his theoretical work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). In the book, the concept of "unreliable narrator" and the standard to evaluate "unreliable narration" were first introduced. The original definition of unreliable narrator is: "For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" [2]. As can be seen, the rhetorical narrative method pioneered by Booth is regulated by the implied author. According to Booth, the implied author is the author's "second self" when he is composing a work, is an implied version of "himself". The real author creates the implied author, and it is the implied author who is the official author of the text. [2] Booth focuses on two narrative types of unreliability, one relating to the events and one relating to values, referring respectively to the narrator's inconsistencies or factual incorrectness and errors relative to the implied author in making value judgements. James Phelan took over Booth's two axes of unreliability (events and values) and developed a new axis: knowledge and perception. Based on the above three, he illustrates six subtypes in detail, i.e., misreporting, misreading, misevaluating (misregarding); underreporting; under reading; under-regarding [3]. These three axes: unreliable reporting; unreliable interpreting (or reading); unreliable evaluating (or regarding), are all represented in *Othello*. In the following, the paper will rely on them to argue for the unreliability of Iago and Othello as narrators.

3. Analysis

3.1. The Reconstruction of the Other

In the story, the Moor is portrayed as a vile villain with an end of the fall, whose brutality of his wife's murder is imbued with deep racial significance, cementing the image of the "Other" in Western
racial ideology. Shakespeare's reconstruction of Othello's image has a disruptive change; becoming an honest and straightforward hero who kills his wife and commits suicide due to the outbreak of a destructive force in his body, which challenges racial discrimination in the Western world to a certain extent.

Coleridge commented on Shakespeare that he believed that Shakespeare's characters were almost always understood from different perspectives by different people and that one could be deceived whether one believed his friends or his enemies, and that one could not even know the character himself through his self-descriptions [4]. Othello's image is paradoxically reconstructed in the superimposition of different descriptions: he is described as "an old black ram" and "a Barbary horse" (Iago) when accused of bewitching Desdemona, in racially rhetorical terms, while praised as "the valiant Moor" (First Senator) when he is dispatched to Cyprus [5]. However, his self-narrative presents himself as an oriental romantic hero who has undergone stirring and mysterious adventures and repeatedly turned them to his advantage. Actually, the multiple perspectives of the narratives expose the one-sidedness and flaws of each discourse while giving fullness to the image. Othello, the oriental hero in Desdemona's imagination, represents the mysterious and romantic image of the Orient, as opposed to the dangerous, savage Orientals Brabantio spoke of as capable of compelling young girls. Both are metaphors for the two discourses of Orientalism - solitary, fervent and romantic Byronic heroes and the stereotype criticised by Said's post-colonialism. Although the former developed in the later Romantic period, it is related to early Orientalism, in which long centuries of trade and expeditions built up a "large data bank", and generations of scholars continued to reinforce various impressions of the Orient through their own cultural language. Mysterious and irrational, the Orient was always used as a metaphor for dangerous barbarism; but it was also sometimes used as a resource for romantic imagination. The constructed Orient did not actually exist but was a closed, self-contained region, and the origins of what Brabantio described as evil arts were merely read from books, and he accused him of performing arts inhibited, which was criticised by the duke as superficial speculation and unwarranted judgements and thus dismissed as evidence. For another, the romantic Orient is also a figment of the imagination. Desdemona's hero is constructed from Othello's verbal narrative, with Othello justifying himself by saying, "when I did speak of some distressful stroke that my youth suffer'd. My story being done, she gave me for my pains a world of sighs" [5]. The retrospection of his own experience, in addition to memory bias, suggests that the process of cutting the story into episodes is in itself a kind of reconstruction and that signifiers have the fascination of infinite imaginative derivation for the listener. Those with experience will not equate this with the narrator's real life, as the duke says after hearing his account, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" [5]. The dual distortion of narration and imagination leads to the deformation of the image, so the foundation of the love between the Oriental heroes and the maiden constructed in this way is fragile and unable to resist provocation. With Othello killing his wife, the "romantic orient" breaks down, and the discourse of the "dangerous orient" triumphs.

The two images of the Orient in the Shakespearean theatre involve two functions of the cultural imaginary "Other" - ideology and utopia - which always alternate according to the needs of the times [6]. In the early 1880s, Byron was the first to use the term "Orientalism" to refer to the fascination or writing of Oriental customs and practices in literary creation. This "Orient" is the "Other", outside Europe, with a romantic, exotic flavour. However, Edward Said's book Orientalism, published in 1978, focuses on the "ideological" side of criticism. The main argument is Orientalism as a discourse and ideology that empowers Westerners to possess, dominate, and transform the Orient [7]. Roughly speaking, both of the above for the "image of the other" correspond to two functions of the cultural "Other": the former is utopia, and the latter is ideology.

In this theatre, the two Oriental discourses are in competition with each other, suggesting the doubtfulness of each. The construction of the images of the "Other" has its particular function, which may play a decisive role in the contest between the two. There are two main reasons why Shakespeare chose to make the discourse of the "dangerous Orient" triumph over that of the "romantic Orient". Firstly, with the advent of the age of geographical discovery, European capitalism carried out a large
number of overseas colonialism, and under the political demand of British colonial expansion at the end of the 16th century, the barbaric and backward “Other” empowered the Western colonialism to transform the East. Although Shakespeare's Othello is endowed with more humanity, the result of killing his wife ultimately proves that the black man who takes off the disguise of nobility will be revealed, and it also meets the current ideological need of the "dangerous Orient".

Moreover, the “Other” not only justified colonial expansion but also constructed the self to temporarily unite a community of nations: after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the resolution of the external crisis, internal tensions began to accumulate, which erupted after the death of Elizabeth I. Shakespeare, an advocate of unity and opposition to division, may also have intended to create anxiety through the Other in order to achieve temporary peace. However, in the end, he relieved the Western world of the danger of the "Other" by the accidental storm surge of the Turks. However, it was a triumph of fantasy. According to Fang Ping's research, modern scholars are basically unanimous in assuming that Othello was written in 1604 [8], but as early as 1573, eight years after the publication of the original work, The Moor of Venice, Venice ceded Cyprus to the Ottomans, that is to say, the "dangerous Orient" had not been defeated, so that the defeat of the imagined "Other" was merely a compensation and consolation for the realities of the situation.

3.2. The narrated narrator——Three Axes of Unreliable Narration

3.2.1 Unreliable Narrator of Unreliable Reporting and Unreliable Interpreting (or Reading) —— Iago

The Rhetoric of Fiction, and indeed narratological studies to date, have focused on the fiction as a genre, but Booth also nods to the fact that theatre also has narrative content; he says, "As dramatists have always known, even the purest of dramas is not purely dramatic in the sense of being entirely presented, entirely shown as taking place in the moment."[2].Fictional narratives are guided through the narrator, while dramatic narratives are generated primarily in dialogue. According to Booth, some plots must be narrated, so some characters also function as narrators, such as Iago. He is both the actant driving the plot and the narrator of the narrative layer; as a character, he is within the implied author's narrative control, and as a narrator, he represents some absent characters/events. Iago is far from being a simple villain, and the development of events throughout the play relies heavily on his unreliable narration. Booth suggests two types of unreliable narration, one dealing with the reality of the reporting, and the other with value judgements, which both embody through Iago's unreliable narration.

Firstly, he establishes a good image in front of everyone with a lie to establish discursive truth: he disguises himself as a well-wisher who informs about his daughter's defilement by a black man in front of Brabantio, as a loyal and trustworthy man who is willing to go through fire and water for his friends in front of Othello, as a friend who gives advice in front of Cassio, and he exposes part of his true thoughts in front of Roderigo, but the purpose is to exploit his money. At several points throughout the play, he makes a monologue to the audience in the absence of other characters, revealing his own inner self, which is the only time he can be seen in his true colours. This type of unreliable narration is mainly reflected in the fact that he deliberately distorts the truth, which is in accordance with his duplicitous image.

However, on closer examination, Iago's unreliable narration is not a complete lie. He knows that he has falsely accused innocent Desdemona, but he does see women's lechery as nature, saying that "Her honour is an essence that's not seen; they have it very oft that have it not"[5]. So his slander of Desdemona stems not only from a distortion of the truth but also from the influence of his own fallacy of values. Shen Dan adds to the parallelism of the three major axes proposed by Phelan, arguing that the three axes constitute a causal link under certain circumstances [9]. Iago begins with the intention of slandering Cassio and Desdemona and therefore sees the rituals between them as suggestive of lust; when he hears of Othello's fornication with his wife, he cannot be sure of the truth of the matter but treats a mere suspicion of it as if it were true. Iago's ethical and moral bias as a narrator matches with
his catching of the facts, whose unreliable reporting and unreliable interpreting constitute a kind of complicity.

After that, Iago influences Othello with an unreliable interpreting in order to establish the female "Other" in his mind, classifying all Venetian women as unashamed sluts. Moreover, Othello, tormented by suspicion after repeated provocations, simply demands that Iago produce tangible evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. In fact, at this point, he has already believed in the settled fact of Desdemona's adultery with Cassio, i.e., the construction of the "Other" has been established, the logic behind which is an a priori proof, i.e., to establish a stereotype in mind first, and then verify the "truth" by means of lies, thus can only rely on a lie that is not very rigorous (unreliable reporting). It is the paradoxical process that illustrates the absurdity of the Other's image construction.

Following this logic, not only can a female "Other" be created but also a racial "Other" as well. Iago's success is due in part to his ability to see into the frayed nerves of each individual: Othello has a racial inferiority complex, so Iago reminds Othello that his wife could have chosen many men of the same race and colour but unexpectedly chose to marry him, which reinforced Othello's inferiority complex effectively; Brabantio's racial discrimination is profound, and so Iago repeatedly intensifies his hatred of the "Other" by using racial rhetorical language of an animalistic nature. Othello attempts to construct his identity through racial marriage, and therefore his wife's chastity is a badge of honour for him. However, when he tries to dissolve his racial otherness with the female "Other", the success of this endeavour just confirms that the female "Other" is unreliable to the male. Brabantio admonishes him that "She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee "[5], which has already sowed doubt in his mind. Iago's renewed reference to Desdemona's betrayal of her father plays an important role in provoking Othello's anger. From the above analysis, it can be concluded that it is not the unreliable narration that becomes the root of the "Other", but rather the genes of prejudice in the listener's own field of vision, as Brabantio is prejudiced against blacks and Othello's racial inferiority complex makes it impossible for him to be convinced that a white woman would be faithful to a black man.

Here, the "Other" and the "unreliable narration" constitute a relationship of interaction and complicity, and it is the preoccupation with the image of the "Other" that allows the "unreliable narration" to escape the scrutiny and suspicion of the listener, while the "unreliable narration" further consolidates and establishes the image of the "Other".

Booth's view of continuity between narrator and character is challenged by Phelan, who argues that personality traits do not necessarily affect the objectivity of the narrative, pointing out that in first-person narratives, the "I" can function independently of the "I" as a character and as a narrator, i.e., the limitations of the character do not necessarily act on his or her discourse [9]. Here we take Phelan's view, as will be confirmed by the following analysis of Othello's unreliable narration.

From the previous analysis, it is clear that there is an interactive relationship between Iago as the narrator and as the character. As an unreliable narrator, his unreliable reporting is ultimately overturned by the facts, and his unreliable interpretation deviates from the implied author. As a negative character, Iago's subjective narration can be a reflection of his own devious character and prejudice-discriminatory a priori mindset, which in turn just explains why he is unreliable as a narrative agent is unreliable and is consistent with the continuum of narrator and character. However, although Iago is an unreliable narrator, he is a reliable prophet who predicts that Othello and Desdemona's marriage will not last, which involves both subjective disgust and cynicism, but also a degree of insight into their weaknesses. He sees the pair as passionately in love at first and the breakdown of their relationship as necessarily sudden, and predicts that the Moor is prone to change his heart, whose shrewdness of insight is only revealed by the ending in retrospect here. By contrast, Othello and Desdemona, who had made firm promises during their marital struggles, end up as "unreliable narrator".

3.2.2 Unreliable Narrator of Unreliable Evaluating (or Regarding)——Othello

Scholar Dan Shen points out that The Rhetoric of Fiction actually deals with unreliable evaluating (or regarding), as in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, where the narrator, Huck, claims to be evil, while the implied author implicitly denies it. This is a misinterpretation of the
narrator's own character due to the limitations of his own knowledge and was later generalised by Phelan as unreliable evaluating (or regarding). [9] Othello and Desdemona's "unreliable narration" is mainly reflected in the classification into this category. If Booth's theory of continuity between narrator and character is followed, then Othello, as the main positive quality highlighted, should be a reliable narrator. However, as the events unfold, Othello seems to be sincere and does not intend to deceive, but there are hidden flaws in his character and misunderstanding in his perception of himself: Othello is not a poor speaker, as he claims, but rather a master storyteller; Othello has pledged his life to his wife's faithfulness and ends up in endless doubt; the hero was with a strong belief in his own heart and not be consumed by jealousy convinced by Desdemona, ends up being the evil who strangles her to death in her bed. The greatest paradox of the play is how Othello goes from being a frank and decent hero to a jealous, insane wife-killer, creating an unreliable narrative tension between his final act and his initial vow.

Phelan's study focuses on the dynamic process of narrative, arguing that the movement of narrative in the temporal dimension has a crucial impact on the reader's interpretive experience and therefore captures the degree of unreliability of the narrator over the course of the narrative [9]. Othello's discursive construction of an ideal "Other" in Desdemona's mind comes from his biased perception of the self, which, together with Desdemona's subjective glorification, obscure the complexity of real human nature. The frame of reference of his real image is constantly revealed during the course of the narrative, and the crazy side of his character, which is not easy to be discovered, is gradually exposed. Desdemona eventually realises that "we must think men are not gods, nor of them look for such observancy as fit the bridal" [5]. Understanding an unreliable narration such as this depends on the narrative process, and dissecting the narrator's unintentional lies requires the reader to look beyond the narrator's immediate perception and analyse the meaning of the work as a whole, that is to say, to look at the fantasy of the climax of happiness in the context of the overall tragedy in order to fully appreciate the unreliability of the narrative here. However, it has to be admitted that the unreliable narration of the positive characters can easily confuse the audience, and this is what makes the illusory nature of the "Other" so difficult to detect. He sees in Desdemona a white woman's admiration and recognition of a black hero and promotes a racially motivated marriage as a noble love; Desdemona who lives in the closed house, with a short-sighted perception, who is fascinated by the mythological story rather than the noble spirit of the narrator himself. They are each other's "Other", one using love as a disguise for racial identity, the other projecting fantastical imaginings onto a man she does not actually know. When their unreliable narratives are revealed in the face of harsh reality, the image of the "Other" is deconstructed.

3.3. The Deconstruction of the Other

The demonstration of discursive power is inextricably linked to the choice of genre. The moral fable of G. Cinthio adopt an omniscient narrative perspective, at the end of which it is shown that the wife of the flag officer knew the whole story as a witness and told it after her husband's death, in accordance with what the narrator says[10], which consolidates moral indoctrination with the unquestionable authority of the narrative. In contrast, drama is dominated by dialogue and action, where discursive power is constantly transferred in a continuous dialogue, and the absence of the speaker in the alternating scenes gives the speaker the power to construct the "Other", as in the case of Iago, who constructs the "Other" with unreliable narration.

However, Shakespeare not only reconstructs the "Other" through unreliable narration but also dissolves the "Other" through the unreliability of the narration. Iago's duplicity estranges the audience from his discourse and negates his constructed "Other" in terms of unreliable reporting and unreliable interpreting. In the play, Iago's nature is finally revealed by Emilia, who, as a rising "Other", moves from aphasia and docility to accusation and rebuttal, and then to the revelation of the truth, proving Desdemona's innocence and chooses to betray insidious husband and resent the wife-killer, who wants to make men know that their wives have the same qualities as them. However, by stealing the handkerchief for her husband without knowing his purpose of slandering her women fellow, Emilia
unconsciously becomes an accomplice to the male construction of the "Other", which is implicitly similar to Othello's deathly obsession with the construction of a racial identity. He says that "that in Aleppo once, where a malignant and a turban'd Turk beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog, and smote him, thus" [5]. He does his best to confirm that he is noble rather than brutal, but he constructs his racial identity by degrading his compatriots, which in fact reinforces the legitimacy of racial discrimination. This is a complex of subordination under the influence of the discourse of the "Other" and a profound warning: do not become an accomplice in the construction of the power of the discourse of the "Other".

Emilia once said: "Why, the wrong is but a wrong i' the world; and having the world for your labour, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right" [5]. This quote suggests that she, versed in the ways of the world, still has a rebellious spirit and an antagonistic power in her deep mind, while the fact that she is killed by Iago after telling the truth seems to imply the impossibility of subverting and dissolving the power of discourse in the face of absolute power. Her death is a tragedy in the philosophical sense as well as in the real sense because what is more important than the truth of the narrative is the power to narrate. Although we can see the effort of the "Other" to express himself/herself in Emilia and Othello, the subordinate position of women in the male discourse world will not be changed by proving a single woman's chastity, nor will the Western world subvert and dissolve the racial discrimination by the proving a single black man's bravery and nobility. The real world will continue to construct countless "Others" according to the needs of the times and ideologies with unreliable discourse narratives. After all, the hierarchical order of civilisations and races is relatively rigid.

4. Discussion

Othello not only shows the fabricability and versatility of the "Other" through reconstruction but also shows the whole process of constructing the "Other" in front of the readers through unreliable narration during dialogues, which guides them to doubt the authenticity of the narrated discourse and then to deconstruct the "Other", and leads them from philosophical significance to the reflection on the reality. Post-colonial and feminist scholars have applied the theory of otherness to cultural and political criticism, deconstructing the idea of dualism, emphasising equality and difference, opposing racial/gender discrimination, paying attention to disadvantaged groups in terms of race/class/gender, and more, and preventing hegemonic discourses from attempting to discipline the "servile other", which has realised the significance of the theory. Especially in the post-colonial era, although the colonies were free from economic and political sanctions, they are still culturally penetrated by the original sovereign. According to Foucault, power is not characterised as unidirectional domination of binary oppositions but exists in the form of a complex web, where the individual becomes the carry of power rather than the object of that and where each subject may be both the ruler and the ruled of power at the same time [10,11]. It is not uncommon for colonies to be internally colonised after independence, and the formerly colonised subjects often become subjects with an "Other" bias after gaining independence. Therefore, deconstructing the colonial discourse and reflecting on the process of image construction is important for counter-hegemony at the cultural level.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare's Othello criticises the racial discrimination against the mainstream ideology in the Elizabethan era to a certain extent, conveying an ambiguous scepticism while considering the audience's acceptance, and demonstrates a strong dramatic tension through the interaction between the narrative discourse and the characterisation and the continuous disclosure of the idea of the implied author during the narrative process. It also demonstrates a process of literary discourse construction that points to philosophical reflection and is an important source of inspiration for post-colonial criticism. This paper argues that the play not only constructs the "Other" through unreliable
narration but also deconstructs the "Other" through the unreliability of the narrative. The interaction between "unreliable narration" and the "Other" causes readers to think about the underlying logic behind the image of the "Other", which is of great inspiration and practical significance.

It is worth noting, however, that some of Othello's discourses are not really narrations in the sense of the unreliable evaluating (or regarding) part, such as the words to pledge his life to his wife's fidelity, when he is talking about rather than stating what has already happened. A play is a presentational scene, shown as an event that is happening at that moment, but the view taken by this paper is to look back from the ending to the process and, therefore, to see it as a kind of representation, i.e., a narration of an event that has already taken place. Moreover, most of the current narrative studies are based on the novel as a narrative genre, and there are many gaps in the narrative theories of other genres and few comparisons of narratives from different genres, so there are deficiencies in the theories. It is believed that in the future, these theoretical areas will be complemented and developed.

References