

Tamar Jalis' Bercakap Dengan Jin or Discourse with the Jinn: A Modern-Day Malay Odyssey

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ABSTRACT

In April, 1981 Variasari, a Malay vernacular magazine that deals in the occult and the paranormal, published its first series of supernatural horror thriller written by a writer who went by the pseudonym Tamar Jalis titled *Bercakap Dengan Jin or Discourse with the Jinn*. The stories were apportioned into 284 series which saw the final instalment published in January, 2005. It was an unprecedented event in the history of Malay vernacular magazines' success story. The story is about a teenager named Tamar who accompanied his grandfather, a faith healer and ghost buster of extraordinary prowess, on his journey to several places in Malaysia and Indonesia in the late sixties to help those who were in dire needs of assistance in fighting demonic-related cases. This paper attempts to discuss the collection of stories as a modern-day Malay odyssey. It will discuss four important elements in the story: the narratives of wandering; the ritualistic strands in the story; the theme of endurance as a mode of heroism; and the feminist role in the narratives. These are some of the elements that make the series of stories appeal to its die-hard fans. The series of stories simply had an uncanny effect on the Malay psyche. In its own unique way, the series of stories is akin to a modern-day Malay odyssey.

INTRODUCTION

The Odyssey is an epic poem written by Homer, one of ancient Greek greatest poets whose life to this day remains a mystery despite several scholars' attempts to trace his origins and life history. Lefkowitz (2013) in her book describes Homer as "a voice without identity" and tries to trace the origins of Homer's life through various Hellenistic biographers' works based on earlier materials (p.14). Homer is also credited with the writing of another great epic poem, the Iliad, which tells of the destruction of the city of Troy at the hands of the Greeks in a war that lasted for 10 years. The purportedly impenetrable city of Troy fell when the city's guardians wheeled in a wooden horse left behind by the seemingly retreating Greeks as a kind of peace offering to the Trojans. The wooden horse was a ruse devised by Odysseus, a man of great cunning and one of ancient Greek's most celebrated heroes (Tracy, 2005).

The Odyssey tells the story of the same Greek hero, Odysseus, who tried to sail back to his home in Ithaca after the Trojan War, but was confronted with many obstacles that delayed his homecoming for 10 years. His journey was fraught with incredible tales of sympathetic and treacherous gods—some of whom were with him and some against him; of goddesses and strange creatures of the sea who would tempt him with seductive pleasures of heaven and deceitful voice of

the ocean; of evil men who were trying to vie for his wife's attention as suitors to replace him as master of his great estate; of awesome monsters who were terrible to behold; and of his ability to survive the great journey home based on his cunning and wits (Lombardo, 2000).

Initially, he was a reluctant member of the Greek's invading army that was assembled to punish Paris, The Trojan prince who eloped with Helen, Queen of Menelaus of Sparta, but was forced to go despite his desire to be with his wife Penelope and their month-old son Telemachus. According to Hoena (2004), the odyssey is a quest myth where the protagonist had to perform incredibly painful tasks in order to achieve his objective. It is also a tale of encouragement where we are taught never to give up even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Harold Bloom (2007) in his illuminating book on Homer's Odyssey discusses several important elements in the epic poem: the ritualistic strands in Odysseus' homecoming; the theme of endurance as a trait of heroism; the narratives of wandering; and the feminist perspective of the narratives.

This paper will discuss the 4 aforementioned elements in light of Tamar Jalis' *Bercakap Dengan Jin or Discourse with the Jinn*, a supernatural thriller in the Malay tradition, which has seen a reprint of over a million copies and has been touted as one of the most popular horror thrillers to hit the Malay

vernacular printing scene. This paper will show that Tamar Jalis' *Bercakap Dengan Jin* is a modern-day odyssey but in the Malay tradition. It tells the story of an itinerant ghost buster cum faith healer who was endowed with supernatural ability to fight evil on its terms. His journey took him to many places in Malaysia and into several provinces in Indonesia, his place of origin. The journey took place in 1960s and was narrated by Tamar Jalis who was in his late teens as he accompanied his grandfather Long Piah, the protagonist, who was in his fifties (Megat Lutfi, 2015). The writer, whose real name was Mohamed Radzi Mahmud, remained anonymous for more than thirty years before he finally decided to reveal his true identity to the public (Sahidan Jaafar, 2017). He passed away peacefully on August 26, 2018 at his residence in Kota Damansara, Kuala Lumpur (Khairulanuar Yahaya, 2018).

The story will be immortalised in time to come as both a literary and cultural artefact since it adroitly captures the essences of the Malay psyche and reflects the community's belief in the supernatural but wrought within the teachings of Islam. The collection of stories is also well-written and displays literary finesse as the narrator describes the natural ambience of yesteryears as the two traversed the land in search of adventure and to serve those in needs of redemption and spiritual healings. The collection of stories has spurred other writers to write supernatural thrillers in the Malay tradition and provides an exemplar non pareil.

THE NARRATIVES OF WANDERING

Narrative is a natural part of human life. All of us are involved in narrative as we engage in conversation with a friend; talk to our teachers or employers; enjoy what we read of events unfolding in a work of fiction; or watch a movie. According to Abbott (2008), narrative is "the representation of an event or a series of events" (p.12). It is different from exposition or description in that it has element of action in it. Several writers have written extensively on the significance of the narrative in movies and fiction (Adami, Bellino, & Mengozzi., 2017; Audley-Miller & Dignas, 2018; Blum-Reid, 2016; Di Gennaro, 2015; Reinders, 2016). And Homer's *Odyssey* is replete with action involving humans, gods, demi-gods and creatures of different shapes and sizes. The first part tells the story of Telemachus as he frantically searched for his father at the prompt of Athena who disguised herself as a Mentor. The second part tells the story of Odysseus who finally made the treacherous journey back to Ithaca to reclaim his right as king of his estate. The epic poem is full of the adventures of both son and father as they frantically raced against time to save Penelope from greedy suitors who were deservedly slain at the end of the story (Tracy, 1990). The poem is one great narrative of wandering, a journey undertaken by two great men on a parallel quest for definite closure to their lives where, in the end, father, mother and son were reunited to regain their rightful place as ordained by the gods.

In *Bercakap Dengan Jin*, the stories are told through the eyes of a boy who followed his grandfather on his journey and how, along the way, they came across minions of the Devil bent on destroying mankind through deceit and su-

pernatural means. In the opening scene of the first series in the collection of stories we are given an early impression of Tamar's grandfather's prowess as a hunter:

Datuk memang handal memburu. Tidak ramai orang kampong Mandi Upeh macam datuk. Cukup asyik dengan kegemaran memburunya, hampir seluruh hutan Jajahan Dinding dijelajahnya. Orang-orang kampong menganggap datuk bukan pemburu sebarangan. Pemburu yang ada isi, kalau tidak masakan dia berani masuk ke dalam hutan yang tidak pernah didatangi oleh manusia [Grandfather was a great hunter. Not many in the village of Mandi Upeh were like him. Due to his predilection for hunting, almost the whole district of Dinding was explored by him. Villagers did not look upon him as an ordinary hunter. He was one of a kind, if not he wouldn't have set foot into areas where none dared tread] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.1)

To die-hard fans, *Bercakap Dengan Jin* is a sort of Malay odyssey where the protagonist undertook numerous perilous journeys, meeting evil along the way and, equipped with a strong faith in God and an unquenchable desire to help others, traversed the land without fear or favour. It is God who metes out rewards to those who work in his path. In the Malay psyche, the need to help others without expecting any reward in return except that from God is the ultimate sacrifice.

Another interesting element in the story is the prevalence of real-life events and characters. Take this particular scene as an example:

Masa di rumah Dukun Nong, Datuk dijemput oleh seorang lelaki ke Cameron Highlands lagi sekali untuk mencari seorang saudagar sutera dari Thailand yang berbangsa Amerika dan didapati hilang ketika berjalan mengambil angin di kawasan sebuah banglo. Datuk mencari saudagar itu bersama dengan pasukan keselamatan. [When we were at Dukun Nong's house, Grandfather was invited by a man to go to Cameron Highlands once again to search for a silk trader from Thailand of American descent who went missing while traipsing around a bungalow area. Grandfather went searching for the missing trader together with members of the security forces] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.2).

Dukun Nong is a real-life figure who was appointed Royal Healer by the Sultan of Pahang and died in the seventies. The missing trader alludes to Jim Thompson, an American expatriate living in Thailand and was classified as missing in Cameron Highlands in 1967 ("Misteri Jim Thompson", 2015). There are numerous allusions to other real-life characters and events in the story which firmly anchors the narrative as one that contains elements of truth and not pure fantasy alone. Prior to mentioning the scene about Jim Thompson's disappearance, readers are told of how Tamar's grandfather went to Cameron Highlands to investigate large man-like apes which roamed the highland region and wreaking havoc on an Orang Asli or aborigines' settlement. Tamar's grandfather could not really defeat these humanoid primates; they just fled into the hinterland after an ensuing confrontation. Another example of a well-known real-life character mentioned in the story is Pendekar Meor Abdul Rahman:

Datuk dan saya terus naik bas ke Kampung Air Kuning. Rumah yang kami tuju ialah sebuah rumah berbumbung

lima yang letaknya tidak jauh dari rumah Pendekar Meor Abdul Rahman, seorang guru Silat Seni Gayung yang terkenal. [Grandfather and I took the bus to Kampung Air Kuning. Our target destination was a house with five roofs and was not far from Pendekar Meor Abdul Rahman's house, a well-known martial art Guru of Silat Seni Gayung] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.25).

This foregrounding technique of storytelling is efficacious as it adds an aura of reality to the story. Readers would find this foregrounding technique of alluding to real names, places and event as reinforcing their inner-most belief that they are reading something worth reading, hence the volume of sales.

Fear and suspense followed Tamar as he and his grandfather travelled to various places in Indonesia as well. Beginning with Series 139 onward until the last instalment, Series 284, readers are taken on a road trip fraught with exciting events that took place in various places in Indonesia. In Series 284 we are told that the two made the return trip home to Malaysia and Tamar bade goodbye to readers and thanked them for being faithful followers of the series. In Homer's *Odyssey* the first four books tell of Telemachus' journey to various parts of Greece and it is only after that Odysseus began his narration.

RITUALISTIC STRANDS OF THE STORY

The Malay psyche is very much governed by beliefs in the supernatural but wrought within the folds of Islamic teachings. Islam teaches its followers that other-worldly beings exist; in fact, they co-exist with Man in this ephemeral world from the time Adam and Eve were cast out of Heaven due to their insubordination not to eat the forbidden fruit. Accompanying them in this world are Iblis and his entourage of jinns. If Shakespeare sees this world as a stage where man struts his stuff then Islam sees terra firma as a place where there is constant struggle between Man and his nemesis Iblis, the former having determinate shape and form and prone to forgetfulness, as the name "insan" implies in Arabic, while the latter amorphous, deceitful and is always in hiding, as the Arabic root word "Jann" denotes. In the opening scene of the first series in the collection of stories we are told:

Datuk tidak menembak sebarang pada binatang-binatang buruannya. Dia akan memilih tepat di kening di antara kedua-dua kening binatang itu. Dan setiap kali datuk masuk ke hutan dia akan memulakan langkah kaki kiri dahulu. Kedua belah tumitnya tidak memijak bumi, kecuali sesudah lima tapak melangkah. Lepas itu datuk berhenti dia membaca sesuatu, lalu mematah ranting kayu yang berada di bawah ketiak kanannya. Dilemparkannya sebelah kiri [Grandfather wouldn't shoot wantonly at the games. He would shoot them right between the eyes. And every time he stepped into the woods, he would go in with the left foot first. Both the heels would not touch the ground until he reached the fifth step. Then, he would stop and recite something after which he would break a small branch which he put under his right arm pit. He would throw this to the left] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.1)

The ritual he performed before entering the woods is an example of the many ritualistic events he engaged in before

he performed an exorcism or fight evil the supernatural way. Here is one example where he prepared himself for battle against evil, in this case a gang of thieves who would use an old skull as part of their ritual to hypnotize their victims:

Malam itu Datu berusaha untuk memberkas ketua pukau. Dia berazam untuk menangkap ketua pukau itu dan mahu menasihatinnya supaya jangan meneruskan kerja yang boleh menyusahkan orang ramai. Datuk mahu menasihatkan ketua pukau itu supaya mencari rezeki yang halal. Datuk membentangkan kain hitam di tengah ruang pondok. Dia meletakkan keris panjang di tengah kain. Mangkuk putih yang berisi air ditempatkan di bucu kain hitam sebelah kanan. Bucu sebelah kiri diletakkan tempurung serta sabut. Datuk berdiri tegak menghadapi benda-benda itu semua. Datuk memakai seluar hitam serta baju hitam dan pinggangnya diikat kain merah. Kepala dililit dengan kain kuning. Datuk berdiri sambil memeluk tubuh. Datuk terus membaca surah Al-Iqra' hingga tamat. [That night grandfather strove to apprehend the gang leader. He was determined to apprehend the gang leader and advise him not to further engage in an act that had caused much grievance to others. Grandfather wanted to advise the man to take up a permissible profession.

Grandfather spread a piece of black cloth in the middle of the hut. He placed a long kris in the middle of the cloth. A white bowl filled with water was placed on the right-hand corner of the black cloth. A coconut frond and some husks were placed on the left-hand corner of the cloth. Grandfather stood up straight, facing the things he had prepared. He wore dark pants and shirt, his waist was wound a piece of red cloth. His head was adorned with a piece of yellow cloth. He stood with arms crossed in front of him. He recited verses from surah Al-Iqra till the end] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.21).

In other circumstances he would adopt a different kind of preparation and recite a different surah or chapter from the Quran. It all depends on the kind of evil he confronted, but the ritualistic strand is a motif that is ever-present in the collection of stories. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus travelled to the underworld Hades as advised by Circe, the enchantress, and in order to communicate with the dead, he had to pour libations and performed a ritual sacrifice (Said, 2011). Ancient Greeks were definitely no stranger to rites and rituals.

THE THEME OF ENDURANCE AS A MODE OF HEROISM

Odysseus is definitely one of ancient Greeks' most famous heroes. Many books have been written to commemorate his traits as a hero (Barnouw, 2004; Fajardo-Acosta, 1990; Houston, 1992; Montiglio, 2011; Swain, 2014). In a very early article published in 1922 in the *English Journal*, Odysseus is described as a military hero "who ranks far below Achilles, but he is a much greater figure-one who can endure without despair even the disfavour of the gods and can by strength of will and the guidance of reason eventually triumph against unbelievable odds" (The Study Club, 1922, p.115). Tamar's grandfather Long Piah is definitely no military hero, but his exploits against the evil jinns has endeared him to such a huge cadre of readers that the horror serials managed to weather the stormy sea of print for more than

23 years; this is an unprecedented record in the history of Malay vernacular press.

In the Malay psyche, it is believed that not every man has the power to fight evil; only those who steadfastly carry out their obligation as Muslims will be rewarded by God with powers that equal or exceed those of Iblis and his followers. A man like Tamar's grandfather is one of those who have the ability to mediate between man and God and deliver the much-needed help in the fight against evil. Normally a person who is accorded the ability to do this is called Bomoh. According to Drake (2003), the Bomoh "mediates between the world of reality and the world of spirits... Bomohs are knowledgeable of bringing about energetic shifts in the client's environment, thereby, facilitating a total healing process" (p.127). And in the Malay psyche this is all possible only if Gods wills it; if not the healing process will not be efficacious. But Tamar's grandfather is one who does not like to be referred to as a Bomoh since it connotes one who partakes in the power of the supernatural rather than God's. In a scene when someone calls him a Bomoh, Tamar says:

Datuk terdiam, saya tahu Datuk tidak berapa senang kalau dia di panggil pawang atau bomoh. Itu bukanlah cita-citanya, tetapi kalau dia dipanggil pemburu atau tok buru, dia memang tidak menolak [Grandfather was reticent; I knew he was not comfortable when someone called him a pawang or Bomoh. That was not his calling, but if someone called him a hunter or master hunter, he wouldn't mind] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.16).

According to Tamar, his grandfather was an extremely pious man who would recite the Quran every day, perform supererogatory prayers and fast. His training to become one who was able to confront evil began early in life in Jambi, Sumatera under the tutelage of his mentor. The ability to heal and confront evil was gained through years of training and observing the proper practices of Islam. This is something which is deeply entrenched in the Malay psyche where if one desires to become a faith healer then he must submit himself completely to the ways of Islam. This sounds simple, but in reality it is something that only the steadfast and committed can do. And the collection of stories reinforces this belief, ergo its drawing power.

In the Malay psyche, humans are considered frail in comparison to Iblis and his followers from amongst the jinns. This is what the Quran says about Jinns: "Indeed We created man from dried clay of black smooth mud. And We created the Jinn before that from the smokeless flame of fire" (Quran 15:26-27). The Quran also tells us that the jinns have been endowed with great power and ability of which humans do not. One of the abilities granted by God to them is great speed. In the story when a prominent leader among the Jinns promised King Solomon that it would only take him a shorter time than that taken by someone standing from his sitting place to bring the throne of Sheba to Jerusalem, and when Solomon saw it placed before him, "he said: this is by the Grace of my Lord"(Quran 27:39-40).

Humans definitely do not possess such magnificent power except for those who are considered Wali Allah or one who is close to God and whose wishes shall be granted by God, like a saint. Would Tamar's grandfather be accorded

such a coveted appellation? The collection of stories does carry that undertone but we are also told that his grandfather did suffer from occasional bodily suffering in his fight against evil:

Dua bulan berselang sesudah peristiwa itu, datuk telah diserang penyakit, seluruh badannya sakit dan bengkak-bengkak. Anak cucu membawa datuk ke klinik kerajaan dan swasta, tapi sakit datuk tidak juga mahu hilang.[Two months after the incident, Grandfather was inflicted with a malady; his whole body was aching and swollen. His progenies took him to see both private and government doctors but his sickness did not abate] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S. 5)

This motif of the frailty of human nature could be one of the reasons why the story endears itself greatly to its cadre of readers. If someone like Tamar's grandfather can suffer bodily harm then those who do not possess his abilities can suffer even more. And Tamar's grandfather definitely displayed great courage and endurance to be able to stand up against evil again and again without fail despite being inflicted with bodily harm. This is a trait of heroism that no ordinary man possesses.

FEMINIST ROLE IN THE STORY

Several female characters appear in the *Odyssey*, the most notable being Penelope, Odysseus' wife. Barbara Clayton (2004) says that Homer's *Iliad* is more of a story for men than for women because it depicts the heroics and exploit of men on the battlefield, but in the *Odyssey* "powerful females are prominently featured" (p.2). Despite coming under tremendous pressure to marry one of the many suitors that thronged her palace she stoically stood firm in her decision to wait for her husband's return. She displayed what Clayton (2004) called metis or "the like-mindedness that establishes parity with Odysseus" (p.15).

Other important female characters in the *Odyssey* are Athena, Zeus' daughter and Goddess of Wisdom and War, who came to Telemachus disguised as a Mentor and prodded him to start his task of finding out what happened to Odysseus—she was the one who really started the ball rolling in the epic poem; Calypso the nymph of Ogygia who detained Odysseus as her lover on her island kingdom for seven years before granting him his freedom; Circe the beautiful goddess-enchantress who not only became Odysseus' lover but also helped him with knowledge of several important rites and rituals that enabled Odysseus to travel to Hades for much needed information and supplies for him and his men to reach Ithaca; other female characters are the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis, who were depicted as thoroughly evil beings (Houston, 1992).

Tamar Jalis' *Bercakap Dengan Jin* is not without its fair share of good, strong women and femme evil incarnates. Like Odysseus' Penelope, Long Piah's wife, whom Tamar identified only as Nenek or Grandmother, is a woman who can be described as loving, caring and strong. Take as an example:

Nenek pun menceritakan pada anak cucu, sepanjang bulan puasa yang lalu, datuk tidak pergi turun memburu, ia banyak menghabiskan masanya di kampung orang buni-

an, bersama isteri barunya., Setiap kali datuk pulang, ia membawa buah tangan untuk nenek yang dibekalkan oleh orang bunian. Sebagai isteri yang setia, nenek tidak pernah bertanya tentang isteri muda datuk. Nenek tahu, kalau ditanya dan disoaljawab nanti datuk naik darah, akibatnya akan berlaku pertengkaran.[Grandmother told her progenies that during the whole of the previous fasting month Grandfather did not go hunting; he was idling his time at the home of his other wife, a forest nymph, in her village. Every time he came back he would bring with him goodies for Grandmother provided by the nymph fairy. As a devoted wife Grandmother never asked Grandfather about his other wife. She knew that Grandfather would be angry if she asked him about her, and this would lead to heated argument](Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.4)

This scene speaks volume about her patience, degree of tolerance and matrimonial bonds. In many parts of the story Tamar would always speak of her metis or cleverness, equalling that of Odysseus' Penelope. His Grandfather's other wife, the forest nymph is described by Tamar as a figure cloaked in a veil of mystery:

Bila hari sudah remang-remang senja, datuk pun menghentakkan kakinya ke bumi. Seluruh kawasan itu berbau harum. Saya terpancang bayang orang perempuan yang tidak begitu jelas duduk bersimpuh di hadapan datuk.

Tetapi melihat gaya perempauan itu duduk dan cara dia bertudung, saya yakin perempuan itu adalah isteri muda datuk iaitu, orang bunian. Perempuan itu bercakap dengan datuk. Saya tidak dapat menangkap dengan jelas apa yang diperkatakan oleh datuk dengan perempuan itu. Dengan sekelip mata perempuan itu hilang.[When dusk was about to come, Grandfather stomped his foot on the ground. The whole area smelled wonderful. I saw the silhouette of a woman sitting demurely in front of Grandfather. But looking at the way she sat and the veil she was wearing I was confident that it was his forest nymph wife. She spoke to him but I couldn't make out what they were saying. And in a blink and she was gone] (Tamar Jalis, 2015, S.35)

Tamar would describe her as always wearing the veil and every time she came the whole place would be filled with a most beautiful smell. No doubt she was the one who would provide his Grandfather with valuable assistance when the need arose or whenever he was in dire straits. It sometimes takes otherworldly beings to assist one in one's fight against creatures that cannot be seen with the naked eyes. This is reminiscent of Tolkien's Lady Galadriel and Arien.

Bercakap Dengan Jin is not short of its share of evil women or femme-like evils. There are many, but the strongest and vilest goes by the name of Halijah Supandi or Bomoh Munah Supandi. Readers are introduced to her when Tamar's Grandfather was attacked by a black-clad figure in Series 151. He was one of Munah Supandi's disciples. The female Bomoh Munah Supandi could be described as evil incarnate that had defeated other male Bomohs and she came to rule at the top of the echelon. The story that revolves around her begins with Series 151 and continues until Series 165. The number of series dedicated to confronting and defeating this vile female bomoh is testimony enough of her dark powers.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to show that the extremely popular supernatural thriller narrated by Tamar Jalis *Bercakap Dengan Jin* is a journey undertaken by a teenager and his grandfather, a faith healer and ghost buster par excellence, to many parts of Malaysia and Indonesia to help those who were in dire needs of assistance to combat evil; for the teenager it is a coming-of-age travel experience, and for the grandfather it is a journey that was done to fulfil his social and moral obligation as a Muslim and whose deeds were done with gratis. Their journey is one fantastic series of story that straddles the line between the real and the bizarre. It was in print for more than 23 years and has gathered a huge following of die-hard fans that have set up blogs to keep memories of the stories alive. The paper draws parallel to Homer's *Odyssey*, not to show how one imitates the other, but to showcase how the two contain elements that are similar to one another. Homer's *Odyssey* contains elements of the narratives of wandering, a ritualistic strand, the theme of endurance as a mode of heroism, and a strong cast of feminist characters who help carry the story forward. Likewise, Tamar Jalis' *Bercakap Dengan Jin* contains all these elements albeit hailing from a different time and cultural space. Both stories have enlivened the literary landscape of their respective tradition and created public interest in things obscure and arcane. Homer's *Odyssey* has inspired well-known modern writers like James Joyce, Margaret Atwood, and Charles Frazier to write their version of the epic poem but in the form of the novels. *Bercakap Dengan Jin* has definitely set a standard that would be hard to follow for those who want to write horror fiction in the Malay tradition. Hitherto, no other writers have managed to command such a huge following despite their attempt to write stories that offer a mimetic reproduction of the series. They would all seem to pale in comparison to it.

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