Thanatophobia: An Architectural Representation in Select Malayalam Horror Films

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Abstract

Architecture in horror movies is the “instrument of terror”. Being one of the central properties, it has always heightened the impact of fear in the audience by functioning as the backdrop at which most deadly events unfold themselves. In horror films, especially those with apparitions and supernatural figures, fear implies the presence of threat and death. This article examines two seminal Malayalam horror films, Manichitrathazhu and Aakasha Ganga, to prove how certain architectural elements, environment, physical surroundings, and their association with horror trigger thanatophobia (fear of death) in human beings. To assert this research claim, this article applies McAndrew and Koehnke’s theory of creepiness, which affirms creepiness to be a kind of fear or anxiety caused by uncertainty about physical, emotional, or psychological threat. By applying this theory, the paper finds out the various ways through which architectural entities give the sensation of creepiness and fear and, thereby, evoke a deadly atmosphere.

Keywords: Architecture, thanatophobia, horror films, theory of creepiness

Introduction

"Architecture exists like cinema in the dimension of time and movement" - opines the French architect Jean Nouvel (Top Architecture Quotes, 2021). Although architecture and cinema lie on different planes, they have certain peculiarities that unite them. Ashwitha R., Anvitha C.K., and Reshma (2020, p. 51) in "Architecture in Cinema" clearly consider these peculiarities. According to them, "architecture bears multiple roles in films, whether to define the setting and backdrop, magnify the mood and context or have architectural marvels in the background". It teleports the meaning of a story by functioning as the backdrop at which most of the events unfold themselves. Moreover, it can also convey diverse moods as per the need of the story and can maintain specific mental states without a halt.
It is mentioned that the architecture of film is the architecture of terror, happiness, melancholy, suspense, and fear. Malayalam horror films usually impersonate fear by incorporating domestic, cultural, social, and political issues into their narratives. Even though the scene in a movie varies, an incident of death tends to remain a common thread. Death is treated as a solid symbol to evoke fear, generate tension, convey ideas about mortality, and create a terrifying atmosphere. It often happens to fragile characters due to atrocities imposed on them, such as inhumane treatment, rape, sexual slavery, torture, and murder, constituting the birth of an inhuman spirit (Global Centre, 2018). Irrespective of the frequency of deadly incidents in horror films, the macabre atmosphere is maintained with the help of fear elements, as they imply the presence of threat and death (Ashwitha R., Anvitha C.K., and Reshma 2020, p. 54).

The fear of dying is so common that it has spurred multiple research projects and intrigued everyone from scholars to religious leaders (Morrow, 2023). There is even a discipline which is dedicated to deal with people's reaction to death, known as Thanatology. Although there are several studies focusing on people's response to death and its consequences, research dealing with architecture and death is very limited. This paper addresses this gap by providing a cinematic voice to the architectural representation of Thanatology in two celebrated Malayalam horror films *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) and *Aakasha Ganga* (1999). It tries to prove how certain architectural elements like the haunted building, its creepy corridors, winding stairs, interior rooms, wooden windows, and near waterbodies and and their association with fear create an eerie and unsettling atmosphere and trigger fear of death in human beings. To assert the research claim, the article applies McAndrew and Koehnke's (2016, p. 12) 'theory of creepiness' which affirms creepiness as an "anxiety aroused by the ambiguity" about the physical, emotional, or psychological threat. This article first examines thanatophobia to provide the theoretical underpinning essential for the study and shows its manifestation in select movies. Then, with the help of the theory of creepiness, it further connects the variables of the fear of death and architectural elements.

**Methodology**

The foundation for this study is provided by the Theory of Creepiness. As the theory states, "creepiness is anxiety aroused by the ambiguity of whether there is something to fear or not and by the ambiguity of the precise nature of the threat (Eg: sexual, physical violence, contamination, etc.) that might be present." The theory was introduced by the American Social psychologists Francis T. McAndrew and Sara S. Koehnke in the article "On the Nature of Creepiness" (13). The article studied the
experience of creepiness more psychologically and scientifically by conducting exploratory research to find out what causes creepiness to people.

Creepiness, being the root cause of the unpleasant feeling of fear, can very well explain how and why this intrinsic emotion is experienced. So, this article has selected the theory of creepiness to study how human beings have developed a strong apprehension to death with the help of certain architectural elements that arouse the ambiguity of threat in Malayalam horror films. This study is analytical and has used qualitative research methods by collecting and examining non-numerical data to explain the research claim.

**Phobia to Thanatophobia**

A phobia is defined as an "intense sense of worry or panic about certain activities, objects or situations". When people experience this intense feeling, they undergo a series of body changes, including panic, sadness, perspiration, giddiness, abnormal heartbeat, breathlessness, and quivering (Thanatophobia- Fear of Death, 2024). There are different types of severe anxieties, such as achluophobia (fear of darkness), autophobia (of being alone), bathmophobia (of stairs/ steep slopes), claustrophobia (of confined space), domatophobia (of houses), melanophobia (of the colour black), and noctiphobia (of night) to name a few (Osborn and Raypole, 2019). These heightened fear phobias are life-threatening and irrational. They can lead to chronic insomnia, making them more plausible to potential hazards and threats even in cases where there is no risk. According to a 2014 study published in Clinical Psychology Review, death anxiety has direct connections with numerous psychological disorders like hypochondriasis, panic attacks, and anxiety and depressive disorders (Fritscher, 2023). Experiencing such intrinsic fears and thoughts develops an increased awareness of their own physical fragility and mortality and compels them to be afraid of their fatality (Park, 2018, p. 22).

The fear of one's transience and impermanence is termed as Thanatophobia. It is defined as "the extreme fear of death or dying process" (Thanatophobia-Fear of Death, 2024). As per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, death anxiety is a specific fright that constantly resides at the back of our minds (Fritscher, 2023). There are specific reasons for this anxiety, including fear of the unknown, loss of control, pain, illness, loss of dignity, non-existence, and eternal punishment (for whatever they did sinfully) (Morrow, 2023).

This fright of extinction is common to all living organisms and is the root cause of all other phobias. It may be developed in human beings if they have
• Had a painful incident related to death
• Lost their beloved
• Witnessed someone’s complicated and distressing demise (Thanatophobia—Fear of Death, 2024).

Being a usual feeling, thanatophobia is taken and explored in various genres of films. By integrating this theme with subplots of other incidents, they invite audiences to ponder over mortality and human experience.

The plot and backstory of Death in Manichitrathazhu and Aakasha Ganga.

The history of death and murder spark the inherent phobia of mortality in us. This section clearly communicates such stories of fatal assassinations in select films that have become the fundamental cause for the characters to resolutely believe in the fear of death.

Manichitrathazhu (an ornate lock that cannot be unlocked easily)) is a famous psychological horror movie (1993) directed by Fazil, one of the unparalleled directors of Malayalam films. The plot revolves around a young couple, Ganga (enacted by Shobana) and Nakulan (played by Suresh Gopi), who shift from their hectic lives in Kolkata to the latter’s traditional mansion, which is believed to be haunted by the vengeful spirit of a dancer named Nagavalli. As Ganga becomes obsessed with the spirit of Nagavalli, bizarre and horrifying incidents occur in Madampalli tharavadu. Dr. Sunny (portrayed by Mohanlal), a psychiatrist and a friend of Nakulan, gets involved when the residents are affected by sudden and supernatural events (Rajan, 2021). The residents include Thampi (enacted by Nedumudi Venu, uncle of Nakulan), Unnithan (by Innocent, uncle of Nakulan), Bhasura (by K.P.A.C. Lalitha, wife of Unnithan), Alli( by Rudra, daughter of Unnithan and Bhasura), Sreedevi (by Vinaya Prasad, cousin of Nakulan), and Chandhu (by Sudheesh, brother of Sreedevi) to name a few (Manichitrathazhu, 1993).

As a psychological horror movie, Manichitrathazhu has various themes like unnatural elements, mental illness, and the hazy border between imagination and reality. It creates tension, unease, and fear with the help of its atmospheric cinematography, psychological suspense, spooky background music, a haunted house of mystery, and a vital backstory of the death of Nagavalli (Rajan, 2021). The backstory of Nagavalli’s murder dates back 150 years from the current scenario. Nagavalli was a great Bharatanatyam dancer who had to surrender to Sankaran Thampi (chieftain of Madampalli Tharavadu) and unwillingly came to Madampalli tharavadu as his concubine. However, to his dismay, Nagavalli kept loving her fellow dancer Ramanathan. On knowing this, Karanavar (the chieftain, as addressed in the film)
murdered Nagavalli on a Durgashtami (an auspicious Hindu festival dedicated to Goddess Durga, celebrated on the eighth day of the waxing moon) night and thereby evoked her spirit to wander vindictively. Since the apparitions are known for their vengeful nature, on the very night of Nagavalli’s death, her ruthless spirit went to terminate Karanavar but ended in vain. Fearing the consequences of her merciless character, Karanavar and a priest locked her monstrous spirit in Thekkini (southern block of the palace). Later on, Karanavar sacrificed his life for his evil deeds by committing suicide (YouTube Movies, 2022).

The second horror thriller this paper considers is *Aakasha Ganga* (1999), directed by Vinayan, known as the king of Malayalam horror films. The plot of this film centres on a young woman named Maya (performed by Divya Unni) being possessed by a spiteful spirit of Ganga (acted by Mayoori), who was buried alive by the royal members of Maanikkasseri tharavadu. When Maya becomes a royal family member, she sets out to uproot the whole royal family. The royal family comprises Maanikkasseri Thampuratti (played by Sukumari), Rama Varma Thampuran, Krishnan Thampuran, and Unnikkutan Thampuran (by Innocent, Jagadish, and Riyaz respectively, sons of Maanikkasseri Thampuratti) (*Aakasha Ganga*, 1999). This film comprises all the elements of a horror film – the presence of a yakshi (female ghost) who seeks revenge from the wrongdoers and their family members, background music that enhances the mood of the film, elements of shock, threatening atmosphere, scary incidents experienced by the characters, eerie apparitions, uncanny phenomena, and a backstory that is vital to the purpose of the ghost figure (*10 Elements*, 2019).

The backstory happens several years ago. Devan (portrayed by Madhupal), a Maanikkasseri royal family member, fell in love with a servant girl, Ganga, and as a result, she became pregnant. Consequently, his father, Maanikkasseri Thampuran (enacted by Spadikam George), opposed their union vehemently and resolved to end her chapter. With the aid of his royal servant Panicker (played by Shivaji), he brutally assaulted her and ceased her existence by setting fire to her pyre. As the consequence of this brutal act, she remained in the mortal realm as a bloodthirsty and revenge-seeking ghost. She became a conventional yakshi figure with long hair, clad in a white sari, singing dreary songs of her life, and thirsting for more lives. Furthermore, she could quench her thirst for Thampuran and Panicker, the primary wrongdoers, by killing them (YouTube Movies, 2021).

In these films, even though the intimate environment of death diminished with passing generations, the place of death never changed. In horror films, death often disguises itself as fear, and the architecture used in them provides an environment in which fear and death unroll concurrently.
Representing Thanatophobia through Architecture

Architecture can evoke diverse sentiments and feelings in human beings. Even though architecture and film are entirely different art streams, architecture functions as the setting and bearer of meaning in films. These architectural images symbolize definite emotions like 'architecture of happiness, melancholy, and fear' (Ashwitha R. et al., 2020, p. 55). Once established, films tend to use the symbols again as "human beings show a tendency to perceive common meanings embodied in a particular symbol as same, even at the unconscious level" (Varghese and Balasubramanian, 2017, p. 1). In horror films, these symbols become the primary protagonists of the story (Lakshman and Suresh, 2017, p. 153).

A brooding atmosphere is set up using architectural entities in films with apparitions and mysterious entities. They evince the characters and the audience of the inherent menace, bizarre incidents, and foregone death in addition to people's everyday lives and anxieties (Raj and Balasubramanian, 2017, p. 800). Such architectural properties include the haunted building, its creepy corridors or hallways, winding stairs, interior rooms, wooden windows, and adjacent waterbodies. These properties can be traced in the movies *Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakasha Ganga* to arouse dreadful emotions in the audience's minds.

*Manichitrathazhu* and *Aakasha Ganga* present splendid ancestral houses known as tharavadu or nalukettu. They are a type of indigenous architectural design found in Kerala, known as the vernacular architecture. It is renowned for its unique combination of conventional techniques, materials, and cultural impact. Characterised by pitched roof (often made of thatch or tiles) supported by wooden columns or pillars, this traditional architectural style uses locally available materials like timber, earth or mud, granite, laterite, and lime.

Nalukettu is a term used for Kerala's traditional houses, which are characterized by a central courtyard joining four blocks of the house, namely vadakkini (northern block), padinjattini (western block), kizhakkini (eastern block), and thekkini (southern block) (Goel, 2023). They have always been shown to be the abode of thanatophobia due to factors such as age, history, architectural properties, culture, superstitions, and portrayal in media.

1. **Age and history** - In Kerala, tharavadu houses are centuries old and carry a rich history of diverse escapades. The older the place is, the chances are higher for them to have outrageous deeds, power-bound exploitation, inequity, affliction, mysterious murders, unusual and perplexing incidents, hauntings, tragedies, and untimely deaths. Since the remote and secluded locations like haunted buildings and surrounding dense forests have been associated with actual ghost sightings, the architectural features and decaying infrastructure of these houses
stimulate people’s imaginations and fears and as a result, people tend to associate them with supernatural entities (McAndrew and Koehnke, 2016, p. 14).

2. Architectural Properties- Architectural elements, including multiple floors, interconnected rooms, slanted roofs, wooden windows, doors, stairs, ribbed vaults, byzantine designs, columns, wooden pillars, rich decor, antique products, towers, and tracery, kindle an atmosphere of paranormal occurrences through various reasons like weird and ghastly construction, historical connection with terrible incidents and unreasonable deaths, dim lighting and shadows, grinding floors and windows, and suggestion from past stories about the place (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).

3. Culture and Superstitions- The culture of Kerala has always been sufficed with folklores, myths, and supernatural beliefs. They include stories of monsters, ghosts, and supernatural entities going on killing sprees. Certain cultural practices connected with death, funerals, and ancestral spirits also evoke dread and fright in human beings because of the mysterious and dreary nature of these customs.

These factors lay a strong foundation for people to believe that tharavadu houses, antique artefacts, decaying infrastructure, and their surroundings are really possessed, producing the emotions of eeriness and fear for their own life. To generate the emotion of creepiness, architectural settings have three main reasons – 'lack of prospect' (lack of clear view), 'lack of refuge' (lack of security), and 'lack of legibility' (lack of the feeling that we will get lost if we wander around (McAndrew, 2020, p. 50). This lack of freedom, vicinity, and comfort prompt an urge in the minds of people to expect danger in such surroundings. The same happens with Unnithan at Madampalli and Thampuran at Manikkasseri tharavadu. Since these are the places where the brutal murder of Nagavalli and Ganga happened, they become natural places for them to haunt and cause the atmosphere dreadful (Heller, 2015). A ghost stands for an apparition of a dead person. They are the upshots of past injustices and are known for their "eye for an eye" agenda. Since past injustices lead people to expect future violence resulting in a catastrophic environment, others automatically fear the same violence and death as the decedent had to undergo (Lees and Baxter, 2011, p. 108). Since the select horror films have the presence of ghost figures, the indication of fear of extinction is already innate in other characters. It is important to note that although fatality and terrifying incidents do not occasionally happen in horror movies, the morbid and gruesome atmosphere will be carefully maintained through the medium of fear. This apprehension is the output of fear of death.
The opening scenes of these films set the brooding atmosphere. In *Manichitrathazhu* (YouTube Movies, 2022), Unnithan is frightened to be alone in a large house, and at night, when he sees a woman clad in a white saree with long hair wandering in a distant forest, the gigantic and intricate tharavadu makes us believe that this house is haunted (Rajan, 2021). In *Aakasha Ganga* (YouTube Movies, 2021), the scene of the terrified Maanikkasser Thampuran as he tries to flee from Ganga, the perplexing and enormous Maanikkasser tharavadu contributes to the macabre effect of her revenge and his helplessness. In both films, architectural expressions limit their freedom, obscure the clear view of places, and direct our imaginations to wander around more scary places (McAndrew and Koehnke, 2020, p. 52). Based on the elements of design, these tharavadu houses have an intimate scale (in order to show the gigantic nature of the building), congested volume and closed space (suggestive of claustrophobia), monochromatic and dark setting (to show the horror value of the places), minimalistic detailing, and rough texture to summon the emotion of fear to its extreme level (Ashwitha R., Anvitha C.K., and Reshma, 2020, p. 55). As a result, these haunted houses function as the source of fear, unease, and mortality, amplified by the evocative background music and rich cinematography (Urbex Underground, 2019).

These buildings have creepy corridors and hallways. They are "tight, narrow, walled, made for transit- and yet sometimes our most sensitive moments are out in the hall, doors closed behind us. Hallways are places for tense encounters, confusion, and fear" (Ripatrazone, 2015). When Alli in *Manichitrathazhu* (YouTube Movies, 2022) gets petrified by the sound of anklets, she finds it impossible to find any help other than running away from the menacing corridors. Since the corridors are convoluted, she loses her direction and faints in a cramped room. In another instance, when Unnithan walks along the corridors of the tharavadu, thinking about whether Sreedevi is possessed, he sees a moving basket and gets scared. He fears that the spirit of Nagavalli possesses it and tries to run away from there. However, the puzzling corridors appear never-ending and baffling to him, triggering a sense of entanglement and isolation. It is mentioned that the longer the corridor, the fewer the places to run into because "there is either towards or backwards" (Frank, 2018).

In another scene, when Dr. Sunny searches for the anklets' sound at night, he encounters Chandhu with a vessel in a narrow corridor (YouTube Movies, 2022). As night stands as the symbol of disorder, hazard, and death, it enhances the spooky effect of the intricate corridor and produces a jump scare in the audience (Archetypal Settings, 2023). In *Aakasha Ganga* (YouTube Movies, 2021), Maya chases Panicker since he tries to disclose the truth to Maanikkasser Thampuratti that the vengeful spirit of Ganga possesses Maya. Terrified, Panicker rushes through dimly lit and narrow corridors but lands facing his death. These enclosed and narrow spaces create an uneasy atmosphere by deepening the helplessness and vulnerability of humans as
no one will be there for any help, which is why people fear unnatural happenings, uncanny encounters, and moribund situations in these places.

The menacing corridors leading to winding stairs are another feature of these films. In *Manichitrathazhu* (YouTube Movies, 2022), as Kattuparamban (a priest, enacted by Kuthiravattom Pappu) and Thampi perform a ritual to lock up Nagavalli, we see a hand of a woman on the handrest of the stairs (Rajendran, 2018). Frightened, they start to abscond from there but find the long staircase impossible to move away from. Maanikkasseri Thampuran meets the same situation as he runs in fear of Ganga in *Aakasha Ganga* (YouTube Movies, 2021). These wooden stairs limit the possibility of escape and produce creaking sounds, making people believe they are not alone. They are winding, disorientating, and become settings for terrifying events. Irwin Yablans (Fraser, 2018) comments that the end of the staircases is unknown to us since we do not know what to expect there. Their labyrinthine structure heightens the sense of vulnerability in human beings as they find these stairways' paths to the unknown and mortality (Archetypal Settings, 2023).

Interconnected and secret chambers are a paragon of fear in horror movies. In *Aakasha Ganga* (YouTube Movies, 2021), when Ganga chases Maanikkasseri Thampuran to assassinate him, he runs through the twisted corridors and reaches a room that hardly seems lively. It is shadowy, scarcely adorned by furniture (only a swing is there), and with a limited view of the outside world, making it fearsome and ambiguous of dangers. In another scene, when Ganga chases Panicker, he gets trapped in a congested room that appears to be the size of a storage room. People barely visit a storage room, making it a suitable setting for paranormal actions and sinister encounters (Issac, 2019).

In *Manichitrathazhu* (YouTube Movies, 2022), Thekkini (Nagavalli's room), a dusty room located in the upper corner of the tharavadu, is festooned by cobwebs, a striking picture of Nagavalli on the cracked wall, jewels, a standing mirror, and other objects. This concealed room has been closed for ages with an ornate lock tying the ruthless spirit of Nagavalli within. Adjacent to Nagavalli’s room is Karanavar’s, whose expressive photo, walking stick, sandals, a swing, and other things are covered with dust and web. Karanavar committed suicide in this room, making it deadly and scary to other characters and the audience. Like Nagavalli’s room, Karanavar’s room also denotes the architectural disparity between the well-preserved Madampalli tharavadu and the ruined and shabby concealed rooms, revealing the dissimilarity between the normal and paranormal worlds (Truitt, 2016). These dim-lit and tattered rooms imply the neglect of the past, its cruel secrets, and trauma, promising to evoke deadly fears in the generations of people to follow.
Wooden and small casement windows, known as extended charupadi, have never been a novelty in horror films. These traditionally carved architectural structures are built of timber and consist of wooden frames and multiple panels. They are elated from the surface and provide a distorted and fragmented view of the outside world (Goel, 2023). Even though these windows function as the eyes of the haunted houses, they allow a mere glance at the outside world as they always trap freedom by limiting the outside view. They arouse an element of scare in these films because one cannot be sure if any predator is lurking outside or if there is any chance of being afraid (Caldwell, 2008). In Manichitrathazhu (YouTube Movies, 2022), when Ganga enters Madampalli tharavadu for the first time, Dasappan Kutty watches her through the split wooden structures and gets only a translucent perception of her eyes as enlarged, intriguing, and anomalous. They provide an eerie impact on him as well as the audience. The same eldritch effect is produced when Ganga looks at other characters through these windows in Aakasha Ganga (YouTube Movies, 2021). When these fragile windows stand between the characters and the apparitions, the sinister impact rises as they can easily break the windows to harm the characters.

Another mysterious dwelling place of doom is waterbodies. From the oral storytelling days, our traditions, myths, and folklores present them as a symbol of the unknown's charm, the unseen's enigma, and the unheard's murmuring and associate them with supernatural entities and apparitions. In horror films, especially those with tharavadu houses, ponds known as ambalkulam will be there for the family members to bathe (Goel, 2023). As a part of architectural elements, they are used to enhance the effect of horror. In Aakasha Ganga (YouTube Movies, 2021), when Rama Varma Thampuran encounters Ganga in the pond, the water current becomes violent and tries to swallow him. In another episode, as Kochu Thresya (Krishnan Thampuran's wife, enacted by Kalpana) performs a ritual to eliminate the spirit, the possessed Maya appears before her, making the water more turbulent. As they are already frightened by the apparition, the absence of light and the limited view of the waterbody make them lose their direction to horrific and monstrous phenomena (Park, 2018, p. 25).

The physical features of waterbodies also frighten us. The primal instinct of human beings suggests that humans detest the idea of boundless water under their feet. In Manichitrathazhu (YouTube Movies, 2022), when Chandhu leaps into the voluminous pond, a kind of fear is generated in the audience. It is "not a fear of water itself, but more of what might lurk within it," especially the "vast darkness beneath you, unknown depths and the multitude of horrors that might hide" (Doherty, 2020). Even though certain physical features are beneficial to us, those that raised a threat to our ancestors by intentional and accidental deaths are always frightening (McAndrew, 2020, p. 111). The frightening features of these architectural elements make themselves the symbols of mortality. They indicate that the brooding atmosphere of death feeds...
on fear. McAndrew (2020, p. 51) affirms it by stating, "Death is inherently creepy to us because of its ambiguity, and ambiguity is the soil in which horror grows". To sum up, the select horror movies present death as their central theme by incorporating diverse aspects like the evil side of human beings, its outcomes, the utmost demonstration of fear, and the fragility of human life. As as visual language to narrate this theme, the architecture used in these films employs structural anomalies and nightmarish designs to strengthen people's morbid attraction to the horror genre.

Conclusion

The depiction of architectural images and symbols in Manichitrathazhu and Aakasha Ganga plays an essential role in setting an atmosphere of horror and suspense, aiding the story's progression, and exploring the human psyche to understand human beings' intrinsic fear of mortality. Through the intelligent application of labyrinthine architectural settings, lighting, camera angles, and space, filmmakers efficiently and aesthetically craft a cinematic world where thanatophobia loiters every shadowy corner. With the help of McAndrew and Koehnke's theory of creepiness, these architectural components not only amplify the appalling atmosphere experienced by the characters but also function as an appropriate tool mirroring the fragility of life and the unavoidability of death. Since this study takes architecture as the core element to study the theme of select Malayalam horror films, future research may be developed using other elements of mise en scene, such as lighting, acting, make-up, or costume, to show how they work well in horror films. A quantitative study can also be relied on for the same purpose.

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