CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN TRIBUTIVE SONGS: 
TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF THE SONG “I AM MALALA”

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Abstract. The study aimed at analysing the transitivity patterns used in the popular song “I am Malala”. The song is an attempt by the Western media to pay tribute to Malala Yousafzai – a young girl from Pakistan – internationally acknowledged for her advocacy of women’s education. The objective of the study was to analyse the character of Malala as portrayed through an anonymous girl’s voice in the song. Transitivity analysis proposed by M. A. K. Halliday under Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) served as the tool of the study. The results of the study revealed the scope of transitivity analysis in yielding a better understanding of the construction of characters in a “tributive song” composed to pay tribute to important public figures.

Key words: systemic functional grammar (SFG), transitivity patterns, transitivity analysis, character portrayal, literary discourse, song

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

Language, simply defined, is a tool of communication. An utterance is communicative only if it is meaningful. In the words of Bloor and Bloor (2004) “when people use language, their language acts produce – construct meanings”. The basic purpose of human interaction, therefore, is to construct and communicate meanings. Language is a system that provides humans with the lexico-grammatical choices to create their intended meanings. This was the stance underpinning Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M. A. K. Halliday and his fellows in 1960s. According to Halliday (1985), language is a system of meanings while grammatical forms are meant to realize these meanings thus addressing the question of HOW meanings are formed. This meaning potential of language gives it a social or discursive value.
Language taken as a social construct or discourse does not only demonstrate reality but constructs it. Language is not just a medium of description and communication but a social behaviour – a way of doing things (Kroger and Wood 2000). For Fairclough (2003), discourse is a forceful tool to construct “realities of living and being”. The view can be extended to a literary discourse also where language is played at to construct events as well as characters involved in those events. As mentioned by Fowler (1986), literature is a discourse thus it does not express reality in a neutral way but organizes and classifies this reality in a distinctive manner. The language exploited to create events and delineate people reflects selections made out of all the choices a language system offers, hence, projecting certain meanings over others (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). In line with the view, the present study seeks how linguistic choices made in a literary text can reveal the construction of characters in it.

As reported in Nguyen (2012), Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approaches discourse analysis by focusing on the social, semiotic and functional aspects of language. Under SFG, language performs three meta-functions, termed as ideational, interpersonal, and textual forming a systemic network of linguistic choices representing the meaning potentials (Haratyan, 2011). Ideational metafunction is expressed in the content of language, reflecting language user’s experience of the real world as perceived by him. Interpersonal metafunction manifests social relations between the participants of a communication, while, how the message is structured within a situational context comes under the textual metafunction.

Transitivity analysis being a sub-network under the ideational metafunction is used to explore the content or the experiential meaning in a text. SFG analyses a text at the level of clause. A clause is defined as a realization of events. The basic premise of transitivity analysis is to explore “who or what does what to whom or what?” (Iwamoto 2008). In simple terms, transitivity analysis is helpful in revealing the participants involved in an action, how they relate to others and if they take an active or passive role in the utterance (Nguyen, 2012). Transitivity analysis, therefore, well suited the purpose of the current study as it attempted to investigate the portrayal of the main character in the selected text.

Transitivity system mainly classifies a clause into three components. The process which is realized by the verb phrase, the participant(s) carrying out or affected by the process and usually realized by noun phrases, and, the circumstance(s) forming the adjunct component of the clause generally expressed by the prepositional and adverbial phrases (Simpson, 2004). The process makes up the nucleus of the clause. Halliday (1994) has identified six process types under transitivity, labelled as: Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioural and Existential.

Material process represents “happening or doing”. It typically involves two participants: an actor who is the doer of the action and a goal towards whom the action is directed. Material processes as mentioned in Nguyen (2012) are physical and concrete actions.
Mental processes represent “perception, cognition and affection (feeling)”. It also involves two participants: a sensor who carries out the process and a phenomenon - what is perceived, thought or felt by the sensor.

Relational processes reflect the relationship of “having” and “being” between the participants. They are further categorized into attributive and identifying relational processes. Attributive category takes two participants, a carrier and an attribute. The identifying category also involves two participants, termed as a token and a value.

Attributive: “Y” is an attribute of “X”
Identifying: “Y” is an identity of “X”

(Iwamoto 2008)

Verbal process represents the act of “saying”. It includes any form of exchange of meaning, like “The booklet tells you how to find a job” or “The clock says it is ten.” It also involves two participants. The one who speaks called the Sayer and the one who is addressed termed as the Target. What is said is labelled as Verbiage (ibid).

Behavioural processes represent outer manifestations of inner workings, the acting out of processes of consciousness and physiological states’ (Halliday 1994). These processes represent psychological or physiological behaviour and lie between the material and mental processes. They involve a single participant – the Behaver.

Existential process, as the name implies, asserts that something exists. These processes usually take the word there as a dummy subject. They also involve just one participant – the Existent, which refers to what exists (Mwinlaaru 2012).

| Table 1. Examples of different process types adapted from Nguyen (2012) |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| **Process Type** | **Examples** |
| Material | I do my exercise near the lake |
| Behavioural | I smile at them |
| Mental | I do not understand |
| Verbal | They say, I have acted crazy all my life |
| Relational | I am a kindly grandmother |
| Existential | Today there’s Christianity in the south |

Previous research shows that transitivity analysis has been a widely used analytical tool for discourse analysis. It has been applied on a variety of texts and discourses to investigate and understand how linguistic patterns encode distinctive meanings in them. It has been more rigorously applied on the language of media – news articles, political speeches. Studies conducting transitivity analysis of literary texts specifically investigating the character portrayal are relatively few.
One of the pioneering examples is M.A.K. Halliday’s own research study of William Golding’s “The Inheritors” (1971) which illustrated how transitivity patterns associated with the main character in the text revealed his mind make up.

Kennedy (1982) analysed a scene from Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Agent”. Examining the processes in the scene, Kennedy attempted to explain how the selected murder scene reveals the murderer’s detachment from the murder that she has actually committed.

Among the contemporary studies, using Halliday’s transitivity framework, Yaghoobi (2009) has conducted a functional analysis of the news articles taken from two different newspapers. Identifying processes and the participants associated with those processes, the study proved that the depiction of same actors – Hizbullah and Israeli forces, by two different newspapers was ideologically opposed to each other.

“Transitivity and Narrative Viewpoint in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Weep Not, Child” (Mwinlaaru 2012) studied transitivity patterns in a literary text to expose the psychological viewpoint of the author as reflected in the story.

Azar & Yazdchi (2012) analysed transitivity patterns assigned to the main character “Maria” in James Joyce’s short story “Clay” in order to verify a literary critique on “Maria” as a symbol of Virgin Mary in the story.

The present study has also adapted Halliday’s framework of transitivity analysis to investigate character portrayal in a literary discourse. The study however is distinctive in that it intends to explicate the delineation of the main character in a song titled “I am Malala”. The selected song is a tribute to Malala Yousafzai – a 16-year-old Pakistani girl from Swat Valley who has grabbed global attention after being shot by the Taliban – the so-called terrorist network - for her advocacy of girls’ education in Swat while it was banned in the area by Taliban. A song as compared to other literary forms is a crisp medium for crafting characters and personalities. Important and famous public figures are often paid tribute through songs for a song can have a strong and wider appeal among audiences because of their musical and lyrical nature. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, transitivity analysis has not yet been exploited to investigate a song, portraying important public figures/characters, as a distinct literary genre.

**Significance of the study.** The study will be significant in reinforcing literature as a crafty medium where language is exploited to create events and build characters. It is likely to highlight the scope of transitivity analysis in yielding a critical understanding of the character sketches in literary texts, specially a song. The study can have pedagogical implications in teaching and learning literature. Teachers as well as students can benefit from the framework being an effective and convenient method for interpreting different literary genres which usually do not convey explicit meanings.

**Research question.** How transitivity analysis helps in interpreting the character construction in a “tributive song” portraying a public figure?
2. Methodology

The study is a close textual analysis of the selected text with a special focus on the portrayal of the main character in the text. The text selected for the study is a popular song “I am Malala” produced by the Western media, released in July, 2013, to pay tribute to Malala Yousafzai. The tool used in the study was transitivity analysis which makes up the ideational metafunction under M.A.K Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Analytical framework for the study was adapted from Nguyen (2012). As the first step of the analysis, the text of the song has been split into clauses; as the unit of analysis in SFG is a clause. The clauses are numbered according to the order they have occurred in the text (see Appendix B) so that they can be conveniently referred to in the analysis. In the next step, each clause is categorized into “Participants” and “Processes” (see Appendix C). The circumstantial component of the clause has not been catered in the analysis because the study focused on the character portrayal so the circumstantial element was out of scope of the analysis. The types of processes have also been labelled. The data has been interpreted and discussed qualitatively.

3. Data analysis

Malala has become an internationally known figure. Many texts and discourses are being produced about her. The song “I am Malala” is also one of such discourses produced during this time. It is an attempt by the Western media supposedly to pay tribute to Malala. It is one of the first songs produced about her. The song has been sung by young girls of approximately Malala’s age. The video of the song shows a number of girls belonging to different nationalities and races singing the song in chorus. The lyrics of the song (see appendix A) also talk generally of all girls around the globe through a collective pronoun “We”, but majorly reflect an anonymous girl’s voice represented by the pronoun “I”, identifying with Malala as the title of the song “I’m Malala” and the lyrics “I’m Malala (16), “Malala gave a voice to me” (33c) suggest (see appendix B). Since the main character in the song identifies with Malala, her character portrayal can give insights about the character of Malala as it is being perceived by West – the producer of the song.

The current analysis seeks the character portrayal of Malala as reflected in the selected text through transitivity analysis. To achieve the purpose, the “Processes” as well as the “Participants” involved in the processes have been taken into consideration leaving out the circumstantial elements for being out of the scope of the current study.

A broader picture of the text has revealed that the major processes (in terms of frequency) were Relational = 24, Material = 23 and Mental = 11. While the other three processes: Verbal = 9, Behavioural = 3 and Existential = 1, had relatively nominal appearance in the text.
As the analysis is targeted towards the character portrayal of the main character in the text, the processes have been considered in relation to the participants carrying them out.

Out of a total of 71 processes, the main character has been a participant in the subject position of only 20 (1b, 5c, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7a, 7b, 8a, 8b, 11a, 11b, 14a, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, & 24), represented by the pronoun “I”. 14 of the total processes (2a, 2b, 3a, 4a, 7c, 7d, 10a, 25a, 25b, 25c, 30c & 33b) involve an inclusive “We” as participant, where the main character is relating to other girls or people in general either by invoking their support or by talking about them as sharing her plight. The remaining 37 processes involve “they”, “you”, “it” and “those before” as participants, referring exclusively to people, new generation or the world in general (see appendix C).

The picture so far shows that only about one fourth of the total participant positions have been assigned to the main character who otherwise is the major figure in the text. Considering the process types, it has been found that the main character has been a participant of the majority of mental processes (i.e. 8/13). However, the majority of material processes in the song are being acted out exclusively by other people or an inclusive “We”.

The analysis suggests that the main character embodying Malala has been portrayed as an inspirational figure who can “dream” (6a), “hope” (8a), “guess” (11b), “open… eyes” (6b), “share… a vision” (6c), “focus… minds” (7a). But, when it comes to “say things loud” (2a), “change [the] world” (3a), “stand powerful” (7d), and “find any truth” (32a) she needs others’ support (14a, 14b). She can give voice to other girls (33c). She inspires people to “choose to fight for what [they] believe in” (12), “do what is right” (13) and “be clever” (29) so as to show resistance “when oppressed by the suppressors” (28b). She offers people to take a look through [her] eyes (15c) but work themselves to be the change [they] want to see (15a).

Her role as a participant of the material processes is just nominal. “I’m working on turning [the dreams] into a reality”, “and opening eyes” & “and sharing a vision” (6a, 6b, 6c – three dependant clauses connected through a single process ‘working on’) is the first of the few instances in the song having a material process taking the main character in the position of an actor and that too not representing any concrete physical action but abstract notions of turning dreams into reality, opening others eyes and sharing a vision with them. The second instance of the
material process – “how can somebody young like me even find any truth” (32a) – is also a failed process showing her ineptness and weakness. The other two material processes involving Malala directly: “Malala fought for education” (27a) and “then she fought for her life” (27b) also refer to a spiritual and psychological fight not exactly a material action.

The most frequent of all processes in the text – the relational process – is relatively least revealing for the study thus being discussed last of all the major processes. They are mostly attributive in nature, representing analogy, which is one of the poetic devices commonly occurring in lyrical texts. A few relational processes, however, are associated with the main character in the text. These processes expose her as a carrier of attributes like; “only young” (11a), “Malala” (16), “infinite hope” (17), plus, an inclusive attribute “broken inside” (7c), referring to girls in general.

4. Findings and conclusion

Transitivity analysis is the most widely used framework under Halliday’s SFL. It has proved to have a diverse scope in text and discourse analysis. Transitivity analysis can provide a comprehensive linguistic evidence for the readers regarding “who/what does what to whom/what?” thus, to arrive at a better understanding of the characters in a literary text.

The main character in the song “I am Malala” is an anonymous girl whose voice echoes Malala’s voice thus her character has been analysed as an embodiment of Malala. Analysing the “processes” and the “participants” associated with these processes, transitivity analysis of the song revealed that Malala is just like all the girls of her age – weak, timid and inept. She is not strong enough to change the world by carrying out any concrete material action on her own. The only power they can have is “the power of [their] speech” (3a). But, their speech too will be heard if they speak in congregation, for speaking alone will require them to disguise their identity (7d) as “Malala” did by using a pseudonym Gul Makai in her controversial blog writing.

Being “broken inside” Malala needs support and strength from others. She is only a voice, a vision, a dream, a hope and an inspiration for others to stand up for their rights. To compensate for their tender age and feminine fragility, she believes and advocates that all girls like her need to be “smarter” (24), “clever” (29) and vocal. Malala’s spiritual and psychological forbearance is a positive character trait highlighted in the song that made her withstand the oppression she has to face. It is basically this resilience on her part, being too much for her age and gender that she has been portrayed as an icon for young girls globally.

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References


APPENDIX A

Lyrics of the Song “I am Malala”

look, i wanna make a nation proud
one day we’ll say things loud and be free
with the power of our speech
we can change our world and how it’s perceived
we’ve got doubts and beliefs
but not one thing’s truly out of our reach
don’t tell me the sky’s the limit
cause nothing can pull me down when I dream
I’m working on turning ‘em into a reality and opening eyes
and sharing a vision with every person
who had chose to be blind
i wanna focus their minds
to show that despite we’re broken inside
we can stand powerful together without a cloak or disguise
i hope in the future that I can look back
on a new generation that’s peaceful
that’s grateful they’re equal
cause those before made a change for the people
with paints and an easel we picture perfect
drew our attention to making the most of our time
creating more than useless inventions
i’m only young so I guess it’s down for you to decide
would you choose to fight for what you believe in
would you do what is right if I needed you
would you stand tall with me right here by my side
be the change you want to see, take a look through my eyes
I am Malala
I am infinite hope
I am Malala, I am, I am, I am
I am Malala
I am infinite hope
I am Malala, I am, I am, I am
I am Malala
they say the harder the culture, they say the harder the girl
i say the smarter the girl, then the stronger our world
from a country where we made fortunes
of others misfortunes and betray our own people
then we mourn for a portion of time
always taught to fight for my rights
Malala fought for education then she fought for her life
it’s hard to strive to be better
when oppressed by the suppressors
treated like the lesser, just be clever
ignore the ignorance from the ignorant
society is ridiculous but it’s the world that we living in
chauffeurs our drive and denies our desire
being silent doesn’t help, it adds fuel to the fire
how can somebody young like me even find any truth
when nobody’s looking for truth in the youth
life isn’t a choice, so who are we to say what’s void
and Malala gave a voice to me cuz…
(repeat chorus)
hard work and talent equals infinite growth
in school a child and a teacher equals infinite hope

APPENDIX B

Clause listing of the song “I Am Malala”

1a. Look,
1b. I wanna make a nation proud,
2a. one day we’ll say things loud
2b. and be free
3a. with the power of our speech we can change our world
3b. and how it’s perceived
4a. we’ve got doubts and beliefs
4b. but not one thing’s truly out of our reach
5a. don’t tell me the sky’s the limit
5b. cause nothing can pull me down
5c. when I dream
6a. I’m working on turning ’em into a reality
6b. and opening eyes
6c. and sharing a vision with every person
6d. who had chosen to be blind
7a. I wanna focus their minds
7b. to show
7c. that despite we’re broken inside
7d. we can stand powerful together without a cloak or disguise
8a. I hope in the future
8b. that I can look back on a new generation
8c. that’s peaceful
8d. that’s grateful
9a. they’re equal
9b. cause those before made a change for the people
10a. with paints and an easel we picture perfect
10b. drew our attention to making the most of our time creating more than useless inventions
11a. I’m only young  
11b. so I guess  
11c. it’s down for you to decide  
12. would you choose to fight for what you believe in  
13. would you do what is right  
14a. if I needed you  
14b. would you stand tall with me right here by my side  
15a. be the change you want to see,  
15b. take a look through my eyes  
16. I am Malala  
17. I am infinite hope  
18. I am Malala,  
19. I am, I am, I am I am Malala  
20. I am infinite hope  
21. I am Malala,  
22. I am, I am, I am I am Malala  
23a. They say the harder the culture,  
23b. they say the harder the girl  
24. I say the smarter the girl, then the stronger our world  
25a. from a country where we made fortunes of others’ misfortunes  
25b. and betray our own people  
25c. then we mourn for a portion of time  
26. always taught to fight for my rights  
27a. Malala fought for education  
27b. then she fought for her life  
28a. it’s hard to strive to be better  
28b. when oppressed by the suppressors  
28c. treated like the lesser,  
29. just be clever  
30a. ignore the ignorance from the ignorant society is ridiculous  
30b. but it’s the world  
30c. that we’re living in  
30d. chauffeurs our drive  
30e. and denies our desire  
31a. being silent doesn’t help,  
31b. it adds fuel to the fire  
32a. how can somebody young like me even find any truth  
32b. when nobody’s looking for truth  
33a. in the youth life isn’t a choice,  
33b. so who are we to say what’s void  
33c. and Malala gave a voice to me cuz…  
33d. hard work and talent equals infinite growth  
33e. in school a child and a teacher equals infinite hope…
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause #</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Process Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a.</td>
<td>Look</td>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>wanna make … proud</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a.</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>’ll say</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b.</td>
<td>(we)</td>
<td>(will) be</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a.</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>can change</td>
<td>Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b.</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>’s perceived</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
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<td>4a.</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>’ve got doubts and beliefs</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<td>4b.</td>
<td>one thing</td>
<td>’s … not</td>
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<td>5a.</td>
<td>(you)</td>
<td>don’t tell</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
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<td>5b.</td>
<td>nothing</td>
<td>can pull…down</td>
<td>Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5c.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>dream</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<td>6a.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>’m working on</td>
<td>Material</td>
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<tr>
<td>6b.</td>
<td>(l)</td>
<td>(’m working on)</td>
<td>Material</td>
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<tr>
<td>6c.</td>
<td>(l)</td>
<td>(’m working on)</td>
<td>Material</td>
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<td>6d.</td>
<td>(every person) who</td>
<td>had chosen</td>
<td>Material</td>
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<td>7a.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>wanna focus</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<td>7b.</td>
<td>(l)</td>
<td>(want) to show</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
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<td>we</td>
<td>’re</td>
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<td>7d.</td>
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<td>can stand powerful</td>
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<td>hope</td>
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<td>8b.</td>
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<td>that</td>
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<td>8d.</td>
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<td>’s</td>
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<tr>
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<td>’re</td>
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<td>9b.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>would … choose to fight</td>
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<td>you</td>
<td>would … do</td>
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<td>you</td>
<td>would stand tall</td>
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<td>be the change</td>
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<td>15c.</td>
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<td>24.</td>
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<td>25a.</td>
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<td>made fortunes</td>
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<tr>
<td>25b.</td>
<td>(we)</td>
<td>betray</td>
<td>Material</td>
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<tr>
<td>25c.</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>mourn</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>(I)</td>
<td>('m) … taught to fight</td>
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<td>she</td>
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<td>(are) oppressed</td>
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<td>(we)</td>
<td>(are) treated</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>(you)</td>
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<td>ignore the ignorance from the ignorant society</td>
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<tr>
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<td>'s</td>
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<td>we</td>
<td>'re living in</td>
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<tr>
<td>30d.</td>
<td>(the world)</td>
<td>chauffeurs our drive</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<tr>
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<td>being silent</td>
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<tr>
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<td>it</td>
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<tr>
<td>32a.</td>
<td>somebody young like me</td>
<td>can … even find any truth</td>
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<tr>
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<td>a child and a teacher</td>
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