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An Investigation into the Genre Features of Funeral Announcements: People’s View in Social Communications in Focus

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Abstract

Genres are essentially defined in terms of the use of language in conventionalized communicative settings (Bathia, 1997). Generally speaking, funeral ceremonies, as a type of communicative setting, are composed of major communicative events such as epitaphs, tributes, dirges, obituaries, and funeral announcements (FA) (Moses & Morelli, 2004). Depending on the move structures, FAs, as a genre, might manifest the effect of language on social communication and norms. This study was conducted on Iranian FAs to see if covert socio-cultural relations have any significant effects on language. The present study analyzed FAs to see how they were viewed by the society in which they were used, and how these judgments might affect the interaction between the mourning family and the rest of the society. Adopting Swales’ (1990) rhetorical approach, the study examined fifty funeral announcements from various Iranian ethnic backgrounds. The analysis of the results revealed nine move structures, five of which were similar across the ethnicities. Such results indicate the potential interplay between FA features and a set of socio-cultural norms.

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1. Introduction

Death is an inevitable aspect of human life. This aspect has specific socio-cultural features which not only influence one’s individual life but are also of great social importance. One of these interactions is the case of funerals. According to Arnold van Gennep (1909), funerals are in a sense a rite of passage; events that mark a person's progress from one status to another, describing the life cycle of every human.

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This ritual, however practical and common, plays a substantial role with regard to the spiritual aspects of culture. Funerals help humanity submit to mortality. They prepare us for life after losing a loved one. In the present study, the focus is on funeral announcements (FA) or obituaries. Campbell (1971) believes that obituaries contain minimal information including the deceased’s name, date of birth, place of residence, date of death and sometimes cause of death. He believes that obituaries and FAs are written by expert publishers, so all of them follow somewhat similar patterns. On the other hand, Fernandez (2006) argues that the word obituary is a common euphemistic word for death, and it refers to the announcement of death, specifically in a newspaper, usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased. He made a distinction between informative and opinative obituaries. An informative obituary aims at giving details such as information about the deceased person as well as the place and time of the funeral. The language of informative obituaries is free from personal intentions and thoughts; it is a cliche. An opinative obituary written by the bereaved can be replied by emotions and a eulogy. It sometimes states how life and the society were cruel to the deceased. As can be understood; the discourse in this kind of obituary or FA is of a special kind. We shall consider the latter type of FAs.

Our study is guided partly by prior theories and empirical evidence (Fernandez, 2006; Campbell 1971; Marzol, 2004; Al-Ali, 2005; Harold, 2009) and partly explanatory in nature as there has been relatively little research done on this topic in the Iranian context. To this aim, the following questions stand out:
1. Which rhetorical patterns characterize the genre of FAs?
2. What linguistic devices are employed in FAs regarding social interactions and people’s judgments?

2. Review of the literature

The past 30 years have witnessed a dramatic reconceptualization of genre and its role in the production and interpretation of texts and cultures. This reformulation has been led in large part by scholars in linguistics, communication and, more recently, rhetoric and composition studies (Bathia, 1998; Halliday, 1984; Kress, 1995). Swales (1990) defines genre as particular forms of discourse with shared “structure, style, content, and intended audience”, which are used by a specific discourse community to achieve certain communicative purposes through “socio-rhetorical” activities of writing (pp. 8–10). Later, Swales (2004) describes “constellations of genres” in the forms of hierarchies, chains, sets, and networks, stressing the need to see genres as “networks of variably distributed strategic resources” (pp. 13–31). Hyland (2004) discusses the importance of genre approaches to teaching L2 writing by emphasizing the role of language in written communication. As a widely investigated genre, As have been examined from different perspectives in Ghana, Jordan, England and the USA, in the Arabic setting, for example, (Al-Khatib, 2005) focusing on identifying the structure of written announcements (Bonus, 2002), linguistic devices (Fernandez, 2006), and the analysis of obituaries (Watson 2008; Harold 2009) respectively. It seems that obituaries or FAs, in general, are a common feature among all human societies, in spite of the variations in their languages, religions, race and living environments. Al-Ali (2005) analyzed FAs in an Arabic setting and he described nine moves in the analyzed obituaries. Watson (2008) presented four moves for obituaries. The first move is composed of the name and age of the deceased as well as time and place of his death. The second move comprises the biography of the deceased; the third move is the list of relatives of the deceased, and the fourth move is additional information, which includes the address to which condolences and donations can be sent. Harold at el. (2009) present five moves in writing an obituary: announcement, biographical information, survivor information, scheduled ceremony and memorial services. On the other hand, Fernandez (2006), working on linguistic devices in Victorian obituaries, focused on figurative language, hyperbolic language, positively loaded words, negatively loaded words and mitigating apology expressions. Thus, the researcher found it necessary to investigate the generic structure of FAs in Persian by adopting a heuristic approach to studying FAs. We described the generic structure of FAs in terms of moves and steps, taking Swales view of genre as the theoretical basis for the study.

3 Methodology
3.1 Sources of data and Data collection

The data for this research was collected from two sources: recent funeral ceremonies around the country and
different printing houses that published FAs. The corpus of this research comprises 50 FAs which were codified from FA1 to FA50. By inspecting the collected FAs, it was revealed that they had been changed and updated daily based on people’s ideas and beliefs. The data consisted of a total of 12,222 words. The average FA had a length of 245 words, the longest contained 565 words and the shortest, 190 words. In our analysis, we focused on two aspects which were thought to be the most significant:

1. The schematic structure (both a detailed quantitative analysis of the whole corpus and a qualitative analysis of two FAs were performed).
2. The linguistic features, particularly, how the interpersonal dimension of communication was realized.

3.2 Data analysis

Linguistic characteristics, such as phrase and clause structures of the texts and discourse, were focused on. The problem of structural variants with nearly equivalent meanings was also addressed (e.g., particle movement, as in ‘pick up the book’ versus ‘pick the book up’). Another part of the study of linguistic structures went beyond the sentence, focusing on larger parts such as extended sequences of utterances or sentences, and how those ‘texts’ are constructed and organized in systematic ways. Swales proposes the CARS model for the analysis of moves, which he later revised in 2004. He studied the internal organization of texts; that is, the study of linguistic structure beyond the sentence in particular texts. Studies of this nature have usually been qualitative and based on detailed analyses of a small number (often fewer than five) of texts. These studies typically focus on the internal structure of a few texts from a single genre, such as research articles. To identify the discourse units, the whole text should be considered. Therefore, move analysis (Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004) is by far the most common example of genre-level analysis.

Move analysis was developed as a top-down approach (where the focus is on meaning and ideas) to analyze the discourse structure of texts. Text is described as a sequence of ‘moves’, where each move represents a stretch of text serving a particular communicative (that is, semantic) function. The analysis begins with the development of an analytical framework, identifying and describing the move types that can occur in this genre. These are the functional/communicative distinctions that move types can serve in the text.

Few studies have attempted to combine these two research perspectives. On the other hand, most corpus-based studies have focused on the quantitative distribution of lexical and grammatical features. On the other hand, most qualitative discourse analyses have focused on the analysis of discourse patterns in a few texts from a single genre, but they have not provided tools for empirical analyses that can be applied on a large scale across a number of texts or genres. Kwan (2006) provides a useful introduction to the functional-semantic methods used to identify discourse moves. Rather than reliance on linguistic criteria, functional approach to text analysis calls for cognitive judgment in identifying the intention of a text and textual boundaries (Bhatia, 1993a; Partridge, 1994). This approach is in line with the theoretical definition of a move; that is, each move has a local purpose and contributes to the overall rhetorical purpose of the text. First, in order to identify the move categories for a genre, it is important to understand the ‘big-picture’ of the overall rhetorical purpose of the texts in the genre. The second step is to look at the function of each text segment and evaluate what its local purpose is. Move categories need to be distinctive. Multiple readings and reflections of the texts are needed before clear categories emerge. The third step is to look for any common functional and/or semantic themes represented by the various text segments that have been identified, especially those that are in relative proximity to each other or often occur in approximately the same location in various texts representing the genre. These functional-semantic themes can then be grouped together, reflecting the various steps (or strategies) of a broader move type, with each move having its own functional-semantic contribution to the overall rhetorical purpose of the text.

To achieve generalizable corpus-based descriptions of discourse structures with communicative or functional purposes as the starting point of analysis, Biber et al. (2007) outline seven major analytical steps that must be followed, as shown in Table 1.
Table 1. BCU Approach: top-down corpus-based analyses of discourse organization

| Required steps in the analysis | Realization in this approach |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Communicative/functional categories | Develop the analytical framework: determine set of possible functional types of discourse units; that is, the major communicative functions that discourse units can serve in the corpus |
| Segmentation | Segment each text into discourse units (applying the analytical framework from Step 1) |
| Classification | Identify the functional type of each discourse unit in each text of the corpus (applying the analytical framework from Step 1) |
| Linguistic analysis of each unit | Analyzing the lexical/grammatical characteristics of each discourse unit in each text of the corpus |
| Linguistic description of discourse categories | Describe the typical linguistic characteristics of each functional category, based on analysis of all discourse units of particular functional type in the corpus |
| Text structure | Analyzing complete texts as sequence of discourse units shifting among the different functional types |
| Discourse organizational tendencies | Describe the general patterns of discourse organization across all texts in the corpus |

Adapted from Biber et al. (2007)

Using the above steps as a basis for analyzing FAs, two coders were used in segmenting the texts into moves; since the coders were seeking to understand the functional semantics of text segments, coding was done manually. Initial analyses were discussed and fine-tuned until an agreement was reached on the functional and semantic purposes of the text segments, resulting in a protocol of move and step features for our genre, with clearly defined purposes and examples.

For a corpus-based move analysis, this coding protocol was then applied to full set of texts. Inter-rater reliability was checked to confirm that there was agreement on what the move types are and how they are realized by text segments.

3.3.1 Application to the FA study

Determining the overall rhetorical purposes of FAs in the corpus was fairly easy: a eulogy, informing the reader about the social status of the departed, declaring the social standing of his/her survivors, and asking for people to pray for the deceased. Identifying specific move types was more challenging because it required reading all FAs carefully and keeping track of what the writers were trying to accomplish rhetorically. In this study, explicit text divisions in the different parts of FAs, namely, the use of section boundaries, paragraph divisions, and subheadings, served as textual marks for move recognition. As moves served rhetorical purposes, the introduction of new themes (example 1) and lexical references (example 2) to identify the moves, semantic and functional criteria were used:

(1) Zemnan majles exatm da ruze panjshanbe movarrexe 15/12/1390 bargozar migardad.
(2) Ba nahayate tasof va tasore faravan dargozashte pedari mehrban shad ravan Iraj-e qaderi ra be etela miresanad.

By inspecting the data set, it was observed that FAs comprised of nine moves: opening, concrete description, expressing grief, a direct or indirect description of the departed, informing and reporting, introducing the deceased, funeral arrangements, invitation, and list of names.

The second phase of the analysis, was analyzing the linguistic devices in each move. The purpose of linguistic devices in FAs is mainly to praise the deceased and stress the social status by his/her family and to
persuade readers in accepting the social standing of the departed and his/her survivors. After all, as Fawler (2002) suggests, obituaries can “help explain the inertia-the continuous reproductive re-enactment –of social structures (p. 37)”.

In Iran, FAs primarily serve the social purpose of a medium through which a family can demonstrate their place in the society. The demonstration of social prestige or the personal qualities of the deceased was carried out via a wide range of linguistic devices which could be commented on as follows: figurative language, hyperbolic language and positive/negative load words. Using a comprehensive, rigorous, and sustained analysis of the data, the research team identified a nine-move structure:

**Move 1- Opening**
The first move of the FA genre is presented as a starting point for a speech event. This type of move seems to be specific to the Iranian context and some Middle Eastern countries (Al-Khatib, 2005 and Al-Ali, 2005). Through the analysis of the first move of our corpus, three steps were uncovered. The first step was the use of a verse of the Quran: ‘هو الباقي’ (howalbaghi) which translates to ‘he who is immortal’, which is based on the religious beliefs of people. The Arabic form is used rather than the translated form, because they believe that it might benefit the deceased in the afterlife. The second step is using a Persian declaration: ‘آویز و پسری نیست من دردزم’ (azim va be soy oo bazmigardim) which translates to ‘All of us are from him and to him we shall return.’ It deals with death by defining it as anatural and inevitable part of life, while cautioning the living. This language might be considered as a type of psychological defence mechanism in coping with sorrow. The third step is to apply the name of Shiite leaders such as Imam Ali, Imam Hossein, etc. ‘يا ابا عبدالله الحسين’ (ya aba abdela a l-hossein), roughly translating to ‘Oh Aba Abdelah al-Hossein’. The language reflects the idea that the Imam will intercede in after death. This move displays the religious background and beliefs of the deceased. Having strong religious beliefs is important in the Iranian society. The type of language used is significant as to how the taboo of death has been accounted for by conceptual metaphors following the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, which displays death as a desirable event under the influence of religious beliefs. On the other hand, mitigating the sorrow of death for the survivors of the departed is a concern.

**Move 2-Presenting a concrete description**
The second move of FAs is meta-functional. An attempt is made to present a concrete description of the deceased. It is worth noting that in some FAs, this part is not used. This move consists of two steps: one is a group of FAs with a photograph of the departed, mainly used for men, and the other is a picture list FA, mainly used for women. This move in FAs is deeply influenced by religious ideas and judgments; of course, in some areas today the photo of females is used, but this is very rare.

**Move 3- Describing grief**
The third move tells of the misfortune of the deceased and that of the surviving relatives and friends. The value of one’s appearance, brothers, and sisters in the misery of their absence may also be stated in this move. This move contains three steps: a Persian poem, an excerpt from the Quran, and quotes made by a holy leader:

(3) Pedar dar sog to delhaye ma migeryad sarapa hamcho shami bi nafas migeryad .

We are crying in your absence like continuously and slowly weeping of a candle

(4) tabal bezan,bezan ke nabol shodam bar tar ghroobe zendegi pod shodam

Drummer beat, beat since, this is me who annihilated on the sunset of life and become woof of the death’s hand knitted.

Attempting to move the reader in drawing his or her attention to the virtues of the deceased, the obituarist tends to recourse to negatively loaded words to replace the words death or dying. For instance, the words absence, crying, annihilate, sunset in the above example clearly depict this calamity. And in the second, the obituarist opts for alternatives for the notions of death and dying based on a conceptual categorization in which death is viewed as a cruel and destructive enemy which can lead to one’s demise. The language of this move may be considered as an indirect attempt to inform the reader that the deceased was a father, a mother, a young boy or a young girl. This
function is performed along with a sense of sympathy, sometimes containing moral advice or religious teachings. It is a psychological feature that the obituarist states indirectly by politely starting with advice.

(5) Modar az mehr o vafa dard seresht name madar ra be zar bayad nevesht in sokhan az paghambar as zirpaye madaran bashad behesht.

Mothers are inherently kind and loyal. Their names should be written in gold, as the holy prophet says “the heaven is under the feet of mothers.”

The language of the FAs shows a rich variety of euphemistic and conceptual associations aiming at evading death-related linguistic taboos as well the occasional use of positively loaded words. Through the choice of words, the FA writer passes judgment and his use of lexical items with emotional content clearly reveals what his judgment is. In other words, the tendency to resort to positively loaded words illustrates the FA writer’s intention of complimenting the deceased by showing his or her social status or personal virtues.

Move 4- Describing the deceased
This step involves a poem or piece of writing indirectly describing the departed. The next step is a poem or blank verse directly about the deceased. In this step, the name of the dead person is used. The linguistic devices used may be different; most FAs are full of figurative language. The socio-cultural sentimentalization of human mortality provides fertile grounds for metaphorical, euphemistic language to be used to conceptualize and verbalize the taboo of death:

(6) Sotoni beshkast o kakhi foroo rikht. Az raftane to ghyamat bar pa shod. Be san krobatari khaste va ranj keshideh par keshid va raft.

A column was broken and a palace came down. with your gone there is doomsday. she flight like a sickly pigeon. The personal qualities of the departed are exaggerated hyperbolically:

(7) Digar baa nge azaane delaneshinash ra nemishenavim. Delneshintarin seda ra daasht. Dar behesht azaan migoyad .kasike saghaay teshnegaan bood saaghi behesht ast.

His izaan will be never heard from now. He has the most pleasant voice. He calls for prayer in the Garden of Eden. He who was the water carrier for people, now again is water carrier in the paradise. The subjectivity of death announcements can be seen by the positively loaded words used in FAs:

(8) Ostad Makvandi sedaye garmi dasht ,hanooz tannin andaz dar gosheman boode va az hanjare shgerdanash shenideh mishavad, hame oora dost dashtand.

Ostad makvandi had friendly voice. It is felt in the voice of his deciplers. everybody loves him Sometimes this positive language shifted to negative loaded words such as;

Move 5- Informing
Informing people of a funeral ceremony is based on the steps related to funeral formalities. These formalities are made up of five parts: the burial ceremony, the third day ceremony, the seventh day ceremony, the fortieth day ceremony, and the anniversary of the deceased’s death. The function of language here is to inform the readers:

(9) Ba ghalbi akande az gham va andoh maraseme sevomin va haftomin roze dargozashte farzande delbandeman ra be etela miresanim.

With a heart replete with grief and sadness, we should announce the third and seventh day of passing away of our
dear offspring to you.

**Move 6-Introducing the deceased**

The other move is introducing the deceased, which is composed of the person’s title, first name, and surname. The name may be printed in different colours and fonts, which might be due to symbolic reasons. For example, red is used for martyrs, and green for Imams:

**Move 7-Funeral arrangements:** this move gets information of the place and date of the funeral:

(10) Be hamin monasebat majles tarhim dar roze sheshanbe ....az saat..........vaghe dar Esfahan khayaban masjedsyeid......bargozar migardad, jahat gherate fatehe va sarfe nahar.

Along with this, a gathering is arranged in Isfahan Masjedsyeid street……….. From……….. For reading Fatehe and having lunch.

**Move 8- Invitation:**

This part is a general invitation to the funeral and contains compliments and gestures specific to the Iranian culture in an attempt to create a positive effect:

(11) Hozore shoma sarvarane gerami maye arameshe rohe azize azdast rafte va sepas bazman degan khaled bod.

Your attendance might get peace to the deceased sprit and the survivals will be thankful for it.

**Move 9-List of names**

This list contains the names of the dead person’s family, relatives(tribe),institutions and organizations affiliated with the deceased person. Most families like to show their social status by mentioning the titles of some of their relatives and the positions they might hold:

4. Results and discussion

This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature; the genre organization of the data gave it qualitative features, while the frequency counts of each move in search of social patterns gave it a quantitative touch. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate that the frequency of each move was 100, with the exception of moves 2, 4, 8 and 9. Move 2 refers to the use of a photograph of the deceased. This photo may help readers identify the deceased. However, 5% of the FAs did not use photographs or empty mounts. Move 8 shows that invitations were of little importance to 87% of the people. Regarding move 9, 35% did not state the social standing of the person that had passed away. On the whole, FAs in the Iranian society were noted for their deeply religious tone; all FAs were initiated with a religious statement, whether in Arabic from the Quran or Persian translations, or even the use of Shiite leaders.

| Move | Frequency |
|------|-----------|
| Move1 | 100       |
| Move2 | 95        |
| Move3 | 100       |
| Move4 | 83        |
| Move5 | 100       |
| Move6 | 100       |
| Move7 | 100       |
| Move8 | 87        |
| Move9 | 65        |
We also inspected the frequencies of each of the steps. Table 3 provides the findings with this regard. 23% of the FAs began with Koranic verses, 52% with translations of Koranic verses or religious statements and Persian and 25% with the name of Shiite leaders. This distribution shows the dominant social and ideological patterns in the society. 61% of FAs using photographs, only 1% was female. On the other hand, the whole 34% of move 2 step 2 were females. In move 3, the majority of FAs contained poems (around 65%), which might be due to the sociocultural features of the Iranian society in which literature plays an important part. Another point was the use of Hadises (quotes from our prophet and Imams). 15% of the announcements reflected the ties between language and religion. According to move 4, most people preferred to describe the deceased indirectly through blank verses; psychologically, some may believe that indirect praise may be more effective. Move 6, step 1 indicates that most people like to print the name of their deceased persons dead using different colours and font sizes; red was the most frequently colour in FAs probably because it is related to martyrdom. Regarding move 9, 53% of the FAs stated the affiliation of the deceased to specific tribes or groups.

Table 3 Moves and steps in FAs

| Move Type | Move | Frequency |
|-----------|------|-----------|
| Move type 1: opening | Step 1. Qur'an verses | 23 |
| | Step 2. Persian statement | 52 |
| | Step 3. With the name of shi'ite holy leaders | 25 |
| Move type 2: Presenting concrete description | Step 1. Photograph of the deceased | 61 |
| | Step 2. For ladies empty frame or with flowers are presented | 32 |
| Move type 3: Description of the grief | Step 1. Use poem | 64 |
| | Step 2. Use Qur'an verse | 21 |
| | Step 3. Use quotations | 15 |
| Move type 4: Describe the deceased directly or indirectly | Step 1. Indirectly description by a poem | 45 |
| | Step 2. Indirectly description by a blank verse | 65 |
Based on the obtained evidence, we believe that FAs are not limited to merely announcing someone’s death. They mirror people’s ideas and judgments, depending on such factors as economic standing, religious beliefs, customs, etc. So the structure and nature of FAs are completely dependent on the social status of the deceased. The genre structure of FAs state that all FAs have almost the same structural organization. Moreover, they reflect the social and ideological atmosphere which governs the society. This can be used as systematic evidence of the dominant values cherished in different places.

The effect of cultural background and today’s socio-political norms are reflected in the linguistic and generic structure of FAs. As revealed in the study, the main social functions of FAs are all based on shared cultural norms and social values, emphasizing the interplay between social and linguistic elements which can be summarized as follows:

1. Peoples’ judgments are very important in preparing FAs. This is based on the high frequency of moves 6 and 9 which are directly related to peoples’ judgments.
2. FAs primarily served a social purpose. In fact, eulogies serve as a medium to display social status.
3. The degree of linguistic elaboration in FAs is directly related to the deceased’s social role, status and wealth. Accordingly, the FAs of the socially relevant members of the community are longer and present a greater degree of linguistic elaboration than those of the gentry.
4. The over-sentimentalization of death can be reflected in the considerable number of semantic devices (poetic metaphors, metonymies and hyperboles) used to celebrate the virtues of the deceased person from a personal, social or religious viewpoint.

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**5. Conclusion**

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Step 3: describe the deceased directly poem
Step 4: describe the deceased directly blank verse
Step 5: describe the deceased directly piece of writing

**Move type 5** Informing and reporting
Step 1: the third day and seventh day after death
Step 2: Forty days after death
Step 3: one year after death

**Move type 6** introduce the deceased
Step 1: with changing size and different colours
Step 2: the name of the deceased with companionate name
Step 3: with specific feature

**Move type 7** Funeral arrangement
Step 1: place
Step 2: time

**Move type 8** Invitation
Step 1: a ritual or a general sentence

**Move type 9** list of name
Step 1: list of family members
Step 2: related people with their titles
Step 3: tribe
Step 4: institutions, offices, and so on.
5. Though religious beliefs were, in general terms, subordinate to purely social issues, Islamic faith played a prominent role in FAs. This can be considered from two perspectives: first, religion provided the basis for much of the metaphorical language displayed in funeral notices; and second, the FA of those who devoted their lives to religion (such as martyrs and clergymen) present a considerable degree of linguistic elaboration.

6. The FA author of emotionally manipulates his audience via highly emotional and hyperbolic language which commonly exaggerates grief and the virtues of the deceased – sometimes through deliberate lies – in an attempt to compliment the departed and, in so doing, satisfy his or her survivors.

Death is an inevitable part of life and, naturally, dealing with it is not easy. When attempting to inform people of the loss of a loved one, we do our best to manipulate different linguistic devices to express our sorrow and draw an acceptable -and often times -exaggerated picture of the deceased in an attempt to obtain the sympathy and respect of others. According to Gross (1985), death remains one of the greatest taboos in contemporary society, which, in a way, says it all the taboo.

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