

Examining Political Subjectivity Through the Truth Procedure in Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

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ABSTRACT

Ahmad Tohari's novel, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, portrays the struggle of the underclass of Dukuh Paruk in facing the political turmoil, particularly around the 1960s. The present study examines political subjectivity through the truth procedure in the novel. The research problems are answered by using a qualitative research method and post-Marxism as the critical approach. By applying a theory proposed by Alain Badiou, this study questions the role of Javanese women, represented by Srintil as the main character of the novel, in adapting to the rapid changes of the world. In Badiou's philosophy, truth is not a static state but appears as a procedure—in which it can be seen for a passing moment as an event. The results of the analysis show that the Dukuh Paruk community experiences an event of political propaganda which, eventually, leads to independence of the working class. Due to the incorporation, Srintil as a ronggeng (a local traditional dancer) who plays an essential role in the center of the community is subjectivated to become a reactive subject, one who denies the event of truth.

Keywords: Truth Procedure, Event, Subjectivity, Incorporation, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional societies are primarily characterized by strict adherence to applied social and cultural norms within their scope. In their everyday experience, this group of people maintains their widely shared principles, values, and ethics that are strongly rooted over generations. Besides, tradition-centered societies are mainly represented by their intimate relationship with nature, resulting in an eccentric viewpoint expressed in their behaviors, in which nature and culture are seen as an indivisible whole [1]. Accordingly, the structure of traditional societies is built upon unsophisticated technology and conservative ideas. There is indeed an absence in their knowledge about science and technology.

As a way of life moves ahead, ultimate changes therefore cannot be avoided by society. There exists a transformation in people's interests, perspectives, and manners towards the global challenges, in which they remodel their fundamental orientations. These alternations lead to an adaptation to their surrounding social and technical systems to a more advanced lifestyle.

Though it appears that there is a degree of development, they do not see the essential core of traditions as obstacles to their newly established circumstances. The constituents composed of traditional societies can still be traced far back, intersecting with the features of modernity [2].

Presenting the transformation from traditional to a more progressive society, Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is chosen as the material object of this current study. This Indonesian literary work tells an effort of the Dukuh Paruk community—a tradition-centered community living in a remote hamlet in Central Java—in confronting unfamiliar situations due to political changes in their home country. Represented by Srintil as the main protagonist, this work depicts the friction of the position of *ronggeng* affected by the factional issue during the 1965 events.

Although this trilogy is a work of fiction, it can be considered to partly represent reality since it presents the author's recollections of particular events. Like other authors who wrote during the New Order, Tohari made an attempt not to criticize the government officials straightforwardly due to the possibility of suppression, or

even worse, physical abuse, to those who dare to revolt. Tohari put great efforts to describe the situation in the novel to avoid offending the matters of brutality against communist sympathizers. To keep away from the undesirable consequences in writing this controversial story, his narrative does not explicitly express the role of the military in eradicating communist leaders [3].

On account of the political chaos that occurred in the governmental institution, a rearrangement of social order also happened to every level of social class, even to the bottom of the hierarchical social category. It can be seen that the political propaganda that emerged in the Dukuh Paruk community led to changes in their system. As a part of the set of this community, Srintil also experiences the event and all the consequences as well. In an attempt to reveal the phenomenon, this study examines the event, specifically to Srintil as she is a *ronggeng* of the hamlet who plays a crucial role in the community. Further, it also proves whether Srintil holds fidelity through the event of truth or not to determine if she is a faithful or an unfaithful subject.

To answer the problems, this study adopted a theory proposed by Badiou [4] related to truth procedure. In this theory, Badiou [4] links his very basic idea to the set theory, which is indeed a mathematical concept ([4][5]). The set theory has its direct roots in efforts to explain the fundamental logical foundations of Mathematics and it places Mathematics practice on a stable logical ground [6]. Principally, the set theory defines the existence of any object. This doctrine provides a detailed view of the nature and limitations of any object that is considered to exist.

A set is a description of multiple objects presented as a single unity. It is a result of the grouping of multiplicities that are inconsistent in their nature. This group of entities is almost always a part of another set so that at the most basic level, it is possible to have no further elements. This empty set is called the “void” in Badiou’s notion, which is proof that there is a limitation in multiplicities [6]. These multiple elements are presented as a single entity through a presentation—in other words, they are presented.

In Badiou’s [4] view, truth is not at all present in the form of knowledge, which actually is a derivative of opinions. Knowledge is seen as something that is not persistent and prone to change, not a fixed state that can be specified. For that reason, truth in Badiou’s [4] vision is not a state, but a process or procedure. To put it briefly, truth procedure can be defined as the consequences of an event that generates new forms of thinking that occur in the four primary fields of politics, love, science, and art through the interaction of subjects [7].

When a rupture emerged in a particular state, there will be a change due to subjective intervention. In this case, everything that happens because of over

determination will go beyond scientific objectivity and will become a source of subjective wager [8]. This is the stage where the structure of the situation is understood by fidelity to the event. In consequence, a subject as a blend of a body and a set of consequences produced by the event will be created. Those who possess fidelity through an event of truth are “faithful subjects”. On the other hand, those who are faithful to a negation are called “obscure subjects”, while those who deny an event of truth are called “reactive subjects” [9].

1.1. Related Work

Several previous studies have applied the theories proposed by Badiou [4] [5], especially on truth procedure and subjectivation. Joubert [10] conducted thorough research on Samuel Beckett’s works by using Badiou’s [4] concepts of poetics and ethics. From a different angle, Rauf [11] investigated the truth procedure in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* by focusing on the set theory referred to by Badiou [4] in elaborating his perspective. Emphasizing on a different issue, Utami [12] analyzed the process of subjectivation in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series by tracing the background of the author that led her to become a subjective element. Other studies reviewed Badiou’s theory in detail, discussing the core of ontology deriving from the set theory [6], the socio-historical formations of being [13], subjects of politics by seeing the bourgeois and the Islamist as their representations [14], etc.

1.2. Our Contribution

Despite an abundance of research on Badiou’s hypothesis, there are still limited studies on classic Indonesian literature applying this theory. Therefore, this study aims to explore the political subjectivity through the truth procedure in Ahmad Tohari’s *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* which leads to the process of subjectivation in forming a new subject. To give a scope, this study focuses mainly on the leading characters in the work, especially Srintil, as she is claimed to become the *ronggeng* of the Dukuh Paruk and hence plays a major part in the heart of the community.

2. METHOD

2.1. Data Sources

There were two data sources in this study. The primary data were collected from Ahmad Tohari’s *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* novel. The data taken from this material object were statements that show truth procedures, leading to the process of subjectivities to form a new subject. Meanwhile, the secondary data were in the form of references related to the history of

Indonesia, particularly regarding the 30 September Movement and anti-communist actions which have links to the story.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The present study used a qualitative research method due to the non-numerical data analyzed in the discussion session. To reveal how the literary work is constructed and to understand its social and cultural implications, the data were then examined using post-Marxism as the critical approach. This approach is applicable to elaborate the textual analysis because the theory related to revolutionary subjectivity adopted from Badiou is one of those that goes beyond Marxist problematic.

There were five steps undertaken in this study to collect and analyze the data. The first step was reading Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* novel carefully to determine how the truth procedure guides the process of subjectivities to form a new subject. The second step was reviewing the history of Indonesia, focusing on the period of 1965s, to build the context related to the story being studied. The third step was describing the first problem of this study related to the truth procedure, by looking at the event experienced by the subject. The next step was elaborating on the second problem of the study related to the process of subjectivities, in which there was an opportunity for the formation of a new subject. The final step was drawing conclusions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Truth Procedure in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

In the setting of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, the traditionality is a social order that drives particular patterns of human being's reality, both individually and collectively. Social order is constructed by elements that are the members of a set structure. These elements—also called the “inconsistent multiplicities” in Badiou's term [6]—are controlled by the same regulation, as long as they are in the same set. Dukuh Paruk has its particular regulation as well, which remarkably different from the community outside the hamlet.

Dukuh Paruk is formed by a set of community that shares the same destiny in struggling to face the remodeled world. The community is also composed of smaller sets within it, including the upper, middle, and lower classes. Alternately, seen from the Marxist tradition [15], the Dukuh Paruk community is established by two major sets of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The underclass is the majority group in the set, while the aristocrat as the opposite group includes those who basically the public figures in the community.

The regime transformation at that time provokes confusion among the people, more particularly the working class. Politically, the truth of the independence of the working class is created by the process of fidelity to the political propaganda that emerged within the community. To track the truth procedure in the novel, there are four substantial domains that will be discussed here, including politics, love, science, and art, in which each produces revolution, passion, invention, and creation, respectively. These four domains will show how a rupture emerged in the initial state in the Dukuh Paruk as political propaganda is carried out by people with political interests. The change will then mark the rise of an event due to the subjective intervention among the Dukuh Paruk community.

3.1.1. Revolution as a Consequence of Politics

Looking back to the history of Indonesia, the change in regime in 1966 led to the development of an army-dominated government. At that time, civil rights were immensely limited due to certain interests. Moreover, civil liberties were also remarkably restricted so that there was no freedom of speech anywhere [16]. No party could precisely guarantee the free will of every individual. This absence of freedom contributed to a great consequence on any group of society. In particular, to the lower class of society who were unable to unravel the political situation at that moment, the political turbulence was an issue they could not grasp.

Because Srintil and her *ronggeng* group are basically illiterate and ignorant, they involuntary make contact with left-wing politics. They make a deal to perform in an Independence Day Celebration, which actually is a Communist rally. This performance is only the beginning of their involvement in the political party's business. Ultimately, these innocents are drawn to political issues as they continually perform for the party. In this matter, the *ronggeng* group, especially Srintil, is their asset to attract the attention of the masses. The following is a remark by the host of the celebration event:

“And the Dukuh Paruk ronggeng,” he said with special emphasis, “they are artists of the people! Mighty people, such tough people, so that they still sing and dance despite living in oppression for centuries. Srintil and her group will soon perform on this stage. But, don't take it wrong. Whatever she presents, it cannot be but a meaning of the demands of freedom! Free from the oppression of the imperialists, capitalists, and colonialists along with their accomplices. Once again, free!” ([17], 187-188)

It can be observed that the host of the event highlights the capacity of the *ronggeng* group on that occasion. The performance is believed to stand for the freedom of the

people, especially the proletariat. This is to show a tendency that the political party is on the side of the lower class. Since the community is mostly untrained people, they are unaware of the propaganda. Also, the *ronggeng* group that is set as a symbol of the freedom of the people is unconscious that they are only used for the party's interests.

When the *ronggeng* group performs in certain rallies for the political party, there are always banners put on trees around the field where they hold the performance. The banners are full of information promoting the party. However, the Dukuh Paruk community, who are predominantly uneducated, accepts all the information without thoroughly paying attention to what they see. They only think that the banners are colorful and interesting. Unfortunately, they ignore the agitation, slogan, and rhetoric of the party affiliation. These people take no account of the persuasive writing nor speaking they receive, which will place them to disadvantage in the long run.

It is also worth noting that the lyrics of the songs sang by Srintil are modified in some parts for the benefit of one party. Words like "people" and "revolution" are inserted into the lyrics by the political group spokesperson when he visits Kartareja, the *ronggeng* caretaker, to invite the *ronggeng* group to make their performance. Those words, also the words "imperialists", "capitalists", and "colonialists", are not familiar to Kartareja. However, he does not ask the meaning of those expressions. To him and the Dukuh Paruk community, respecting Javanese privileged classes is a fundamental aspect they should uphold even though they do not truly understand the information these people are carrying. As they follow carelessly what they are told to, it eventually brings them to big problems.

3.1.2. Passion as a Consequence of Love

In practical terms, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is a story of unrequited love. It tells a story of one-sided love felt by Srintil towards her true love, Rasus. The young Srintil is different from the other girls in that hamlet. In her teenage years, she has faced a line of circumstance she has never thought before. Starting from her destiny to become a *ronggeng* in the name of cultural conservation, the surprising part is the *bukak-klambu* ritual.

From the people of Dukuh Paruk, I also knew the final requirement that Srintil had to fulfill was called bukak-klambu. The hair on my neck stood up after knowing what sort of a requirement it was. Bukak-klambu is a kind of contest, open to any man. What is celebrated is the virginity of the prospective ronggeng. Men who can hand over an amount of money as determined by the ronggeng caretaker are entitled to enjoy the virginity. ([17], 51)

In reference to the paragraph above, the *bukak-klambu* ritual is an initial point where Srintil is unfairly exploited by the *ronggeng* caretakers. This ritual literally means "opening of the mosquito net". There is indirect oppression in this process as Srintil is not conscious that she is indeed a victim in this case. However, her instinct leads her to give her virginity to Rasus. In this instance, Srintil does not go against her society's standards. She naturally chooses to lose her virginity to her best friend rather than somebody else.

After having sexual intercourse with Rasus, things do not go as Srintil has expected. The fact that Srintil has become the center entertainer of the hamlet brings Rasus to a well of disappointment. Consequently, he makes a big decision to leave the hamlet where he has grown up and therefore leaves his only grandmother all alone. Srintil is terribly frustrated when Rasus disappears from the hamlet and involuntarily joins military service [6].

When Srintil is awfully disappointed to Rasus as he joins military service, there is an official of PKI who persuades her to perform again, but this time as a *ronggeng rakyat*, or literally means a dancer of the people. Srintil has no idea that what she does is unintentionally related to the interest of the authoritative political party. This leads the military to arrest her and the *ronggeng* group, which then leaves them imprisoned for two years. This is a very traumatic experience for Srintil. Moreover, when there is a man she trusts who tries to "sell" her to his senior, she enters a state of being mentally ill. In the end, she should be given medical care in a mental hospital.

3.1.3. Invention as a Consequence of Science

Superstition becomes an ordinary thing—a fundamental element shared by the community to make it precise—in the Dukuh Paruk. The sacred tomb of their deceased ancestor, Ki Secamenggala, becomes the center of the life of the hamlet. Every incident and activity carried out by the community cannot be separated by the holy place of his tomb. When food poisoning attacks the hamlet or when Srintil has to follow a bathing ritual for the initiation to become a *ronggeng*, they carry out certain rituals in front of the tomb of Ki Secamenggala.

The history of food poisoning experienced by the Dukuh Paruk community has been told over the generations. The community once goes through this tragedy when a dozen of the residents die after eating *tempe bongkrek* produced by Srintil's parents. *Tempe bongkrek* is an Indonesian food of fermented soybean cake made from peanut residue. In fact, a number of food poisoning cases resulted in mortality has been recorded after consuming this food [18], especially at the place of origin where the *tempe* produced.

That was the nonsense story that was truly believed by every person in Dukuh Paruk. No one would succeed in changing that belief. Also, people needed not to condemn residents of Dukuh Paruk who fully believed that copper acid was the only cause of the disaster. Later, I was told that the copper acid was indeed poison. However, as it was related to the tragedy of tempe bongkrek, copper acid had not been proven to become the cause. The mistakes must be attributed to a bacterium of Pseudomonas coccovenenans which also grew on the bongkrek in the fermentation process. The bacterium produces strong poisons that become the cause of the death of people who eat tempe bongkrek. ([17], 33)

The extract above recounts the story of the tragedy of *tempe bongkrek* from Rasus's point of view. In the Dukuh Paruk community's version, food poisoning is due to the wrath of nature. Others believe that the food is contaminated due to copper acid reaction. Years later, as Rasus looks at this incident from a more scientific perspective, he understands that the fatalities are because the food is contaminated by certain bacteria, which apparently produce toxins.

Another illustration of the lack of knowledge among the community can be observed in the following narrative:

Kartareja chuckled. He felt no need to say anything. The "trap" referred to by Sakarya is certainly a matter of witchcraft, the mantra of love, implant, and other things that will make a ronggeng in demand. Kartareja and his wife are very skilled in this matter. ([17], 16)

With the background of unscholarly people, there is an unfilled gap between the community and science. Magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are a series of actions that are commonly carried out by the community for an individual's benefit. On top of that, the Dukuh Paruk community's lives are guided by the established norms of accepting the fate they believe it has been written to for them. The essential principle of *nrimo ing pandum*, meaning accepting fate, has become a custom across the generations. This causes the community to be passive in acknowledging every occurrence that happens in their circumstances.

3.1.4. Creation as a Consequence of Art

Art plays significant functions in the *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* novel. This work intrinsically illustrates the intersection of political turbulence and art performance in the life of a ronggeng at that time. For the Dukuh Paruk community, art has grown in their blood down through generations. In that hamlet, it is told that the last ronggeng has died years ago, leaving the residents in a

depression since there is no entertainment among the people. Subsequently, when Srintil's grandfather receives a vision that Srintil will become a great ronggeng, art arises again in the hamlet.

Recalling the long history of Java, it is believed that ronggeng had been a part of the Javanese local culture since the 19th century. The image of ronggeng is often associated with prostitutes since their performance is mostly followed by "erotic social dance" and sexual services [3]. In the 1960s, also as the setting of time of the novel, ronggeng had reached back its popularity after it was banned by the previous controlling authorities. However, their performance was affected by the New Order regime, so that they followed the New Order ideology.

This narrative below explains the development of beauty and visual form of the ronggeng performance in the realm of art.

There is no need for in-depth knowledge to say that, basically, the ronggeng dance is a rough imitation of the gambyong dance, a type of warming-up of passion dance among nobles. In its subsequent development, ronggeng dance also imitates the serimpi dance, Balinese dance, and mask dance. Even also Baladewa dance. Everything is imitated in a raw, ordinary style. Sometimes, the dances are mixed up frivolously, so that in the stage, one can say that the movements of a ronggeng are no more than a spontaneous movement, have superficial meaning, and more emphasized on the erotic impression. ([17], 190-191)

Drawn up on the basis of the paragraph above, the art that flourishes among the Dukuh Paruk community is indeed the art of the people. It is not a high-level, intellectual, nor luxurious art enjoyed by the elites. It is a low-rank art that the creation merely relies on instinctive visualization. The ronggeng dance might even drive the audience to an amoral attitude because it is possible for them to act mindlessly as they watch the performance. It is not a taboo for men to have sexual intercourse with a ronggeng, while surprisingly, their wives think that it is appropriate, or rather, impressive because it proves that their husbands still have good stamina. This sort of art is the one that constructs the passage of life in Dukuh Paruk.

3.2. Subjectivation in Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk

Following the Badiouian proposition, the subject is anything—not merely a person—that links an event and consequences in the situation. The subject is not even a thinking substance. In Badiou's view, it is not a void point following Lacan nor a transcendental function following Kant, but a faithful operator that acts to correlate the event and the generic procedure of truth ([7] [19] [20]). Further, there are three ways a subject can be

connected to an event, whether faithfully, obscurely, or reactively. To investigate the process of political subjectivity in this study, Srintil as the leading figure in the novel will be analyzed closely.

Srintil is only eleven years old when she is claimed as the next *ronggeng* by her grandfather, Sakarya. After seeing how his granddaughter can dance and sing effortlessly, he believes that a dancing spirit has entered Srintil's body. This *indang* leads Srintil to dance with moves no one has ever taught her and sing some *ronggeng* songs she has never heard before. The *ronggeng* tradition is then revived by this gifted dancer, who is apparently welcomed joyfully by the community. This is quite surprising because, even today, the term *ronggeng* is considered to be strongly related to impurity, which is morally wrong in a sense of sexual matters. Oppositely, the Dukuh Paruk community sees this phenomenon as an ordinary situation.

Through the journey to become an authentic *ronggeng*, it can be noticed that the patriarchal paradigm constructs the life of the Dukuh Paruk [21]. Despite her physical beauty, Srintil is uneducated. She is very naïve that she is not aware of her role in that hamlet. Thus, when her grandfather insists to become a *ronggeng*, she accepts the idea without any rejection. Besides, when she is directed by Kartareja to follow the initiation ceremony to become a *ronggeng*, she obeys anything said to her. In this case, her life is defined by those who have power, especially men.

The conflict arises as Srintil understands that she is not only expected to perform the dance to entertain the audience, but also to offer sexual service. Moreover, she is also exploited and indirectly traded by the Kartarejas who are responsible for her journey to become a real *ronggeng*. Though the sexual matter is a common issue shared by the Dukuh Paruk community, it leads Srintil to hard choices, between her passion as a *ronggeng* and her desire to build a family with Rasus.

In the initiation ritual to become a *ronggeng*, there is a sequence of procedure that must be followed by Srintil. These include a bathing ritual and *bukak-klambu* ritual. This practice has been carried out by the Dukuh Paruk community for a long time as they regularly run these rituals for the previous *ronggengs*. The *bukak-klambu* ritual makes Rasus extremely mad because it sells Srintil's virginity to the highest bidder. To avoid the ritual, Rasus eventually manages to rescue Srintil. Though they both never have done sexual intercourse before, they make love naturally, guided by the power of the universe.

At first, Srintil is totally innocent. She does not even understand that the concept of emancipation exists so that she can actually make resistance to any rules opposite to her sense. The worst part is the moment when she has to follow the *bukak-klambu* ritual. Even though the tradition

explicitly sells her virginity, she complies with the rules respectfully. It seems that she is not conscious of her body used as a commodity. This leads the *ronggeng* caretakers, Kartareja and his wife, to exploit Srintil's body for their personal gain. At this point, Srintil still does not comprehend the fact that she is continually manipulated as an object—much worse, as the sexual object of all people in the hamlet and the surroundings.

However, the sequence of events encountered by Srintil guides her to become a reactive subject. Because of unfair treatment done by all the close people to her, she tries to change her mindset in the end. She breaks the rule that even though she is a *ronggeng*, she does not want to provide sexual services to men. Even when Sentika, an aristocrat who holds power over the working class, asks her to become a *gowok*, she dares to make her own decision. A *gowok* is a rented woman to teach household and sexual affairs to an unmarried man. Regarding Sentika's request, Srintil tries to rule herself, as seen in this paragraph below:

When entering Sentika's house, the Dukuh Paruk community walked a little bent. Except for Srintil. Her attitude was very ordinary. She was indeed like the others; acknowledging that Sentika had certain strengths. However, Srintil thought that she did not have to bend her spine in front of a man who was respected in the Alaswangkal. ([17], 208)

Due to her important role as the hamlet's *ronggeng*, Srintil's existence is strongly protected by the community. The community safeguarding Srintil is not the Dukuh Paruk community only, but also those living around the hamlet, such as the Dawuan and Alaswangkal communities. This is because she has become the major entertainer of the community, which apparently also represents the hamlet's identity. This privilege contributes to enhancing Srintil's self-confidence. Thereby, when everyone else bent their spine in front of a nobleman, a gesture maintained in Javanese tradition throughout the ages, Srintil keeps walking upright with all her pride.

Srintil had sworn in her heart not to serve men who hunted her. Men who considered there was no residual value after the selling and buying transactions, where Srintil did not play a role in the determination. ...

*Anyone in the Dukuh Paruk knew that such thoughts deviated from the habits of a *ronggeng*, Srintil too. But, at the age of eighteen, Srintil knew that such deviations had to be made if she wanted to have a share in herself. ([17], 202)*

The narrative above indicates that a set of events encountered by Srintil has led to subjectivation that created Srintil as a reactive subject. Several factors, including economy, education, and belief, raise Srintil to become a radical subject. She can even be a rebellious

woman within the patriarchal community of her place of residence. Thus, it is possible that she can dominate men, bureaucrats, also women of higher status. Within this framework, Srintil reveals her image as an unfaithful subject by actively denying the present. In her embodiment, the body avoids carrying the truth of the event.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* illustrates a conflict among the underclass in facing the dispute in their homeland. The truth procedure shows the political propaganda which leads to independence of the working class. Srintil, as a representation of a Javanese woman, undergoes a series of events as she is chosen as a *ronggeng* of the hamlet. At first, Srintil is not aware that she is actually the victim who is fully exploited in her role as the local dancer. In the end, due to the confrontation during her course of life, Srintil is subjectivized as a reactive subject. In this sense, she refrains from all the consequences of the event. There is indeed a violent denial dictated to her body so that she refuses the very existence of the new present.

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