

## **Social Insecurity At The Intersection Of Disabilities And Poverty In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men***

**Melania Priska Mendrofa**  
Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Prayoga

**ABSTRAK:** Poverty is much experienced by disabled people and vice versa. Having less or even no chance to public access has caused the feeling of uncertainty and social unworthiness. Social insecurity triggers anxiety about everything, and mostly about people's self-confidence to create a relationship with others. *Of Mice and Men* represents society's bad treatment for two disabled characters. The paralyzed condition, which is also worsened by their low-financial status, makes the two characters have some problems in adapting themselves to society. This paper aims to discuss kinds of social insecurity constituted at the intersection of disabilities and poverty using qualitative research analysis and descriptive methods. Intersectionality theory helps this paper to see and understand how oppression is formed because of people's multiple identities. The result of this paper showed that the multiple identities of disabled people become barriers that give them the feeling of insecure to build relations with others and improve their life.

**Keywords:** *social insecurity, intersectionality, disability, poverty*

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**Corresponding Author:** [priska.mendro@gmail.com](mailto:priska.mendro@gmail.com)

## INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities have experienced isolation and dependence on others. They need others' help in their daily activity. In some cases, people with intellectual and physical disabilities are even isolated by society. Their condition triggers inequality treatment. This group of people is not allowed to decide for themselves. There is also a limitation to some accesses, such as education, health, environment, and employment. Along with this restriction, insecurity is built. Disabled people have more risks to oppression and subjugation when they have less knowledge, poor financial status, and discrimination. This condition will trigger the feeling of insecurity for them. Insecurity is described as the state of having a lack of control and the individual's recognized risk of victimization (Farrall, Gray, & Jackson, 2007, as cited in Reid et al., 2020). This description shows how disabled people have a risk to feel fear and anxiety. They are vulnerable to being a victim in social life because of their multiple identities.

Regarding the multiple identities, Gopaldas (2013, as cited in Schneider et al., 2016) states that the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender can cause oppression and privilege. For this, he highlights intersectionality as a theory to understand the intersection of factors that contribute to the result and experiences of people's life. Intersectionality becomes a tool to analyze the lived experience of social marginalization and investigate how different identities collide with the access of rights and opportunities (AWID 2004; Gopaldas 2013, as cited in Schneider et al., 2016). In the case of poverty and disabilities, this paper sees how poverty can cause disabilities and vice versa. In the interaction and intersection, those two problems trigger social insecurity which locates the disabled person to stay oppressed and marginalized.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *Intersectionality of Disabilities and poverty*

Poverty, as the never-ending problem in society, has caused deprivation in well-being. Sen ([1987]1999, as cited in Traustadóttir & Rice, 2012) explains well-being as people's ability to function within the society. To function in society is affected by some factors, such as material, environmental and social. For example, one will be considered as a well-being person if he or she has good and stable financial status. Socio-economic is the fundamental factor for someone's well-being status (Traustadóttir & Rice, 2012). It is supported by Yunus (2009, as cited in Collins & Bilge, 2016) that poverty is the product of a socio-economic system designed by the top of society. If one has solid material factors, they may have a good social life. They will get access to life's sector and institutions. Erevelles (2011, as cited in Collins & Bilge, 2016) also addresses social and economic conditions as the crucial problem in society which later meet other political concerns; such as gender, nationality, disabilities, race, and so on. It indicates the importance of materialism in intersectionality. Therefore, a disabled person misses the opportunity to improve their financial status. Still, the issue of exclusion for their physical condition becomes an unresolved problem.

The existence of multiple identities should be figured out as the harmony of human characteristics. Exclusion for the disabilities reveals the absence of social attention to human rights. Sloan et al. (2018) has figured out how the stereotype of disabilities has constructed people's unconsciousness to behave to someone's condition without challenging the information. This statement constitutes the unequal treatment for disabled people where society keeps marginalizing them from social institutions and relations. The environmental barriers close the access of disabled people to participate in all sectors of life. However, the imperfect condition will usually lead to dehumanization. The disabled person may get bad treatment, such as physical violence and social exclusion. The prejudice toward disabilities makes people believe that they are harmful and should be kept from social relations (Parker et al., 2018). For the worse, they often get aggressive mistreatment such as prompt cruel, degrading, and violent behavior, and some even died in the police's hands (Goff et al., 2008, as cited in Parker et al., 2018). With this prejudice, disabled people appear as a threat to people. They are considered dangerous. It then limits their chance to go outside and get involved in the community, school, and working places. Many of them become unemployed and may need more money to support their impairment. This situation keeps the social insecurity for those who are also vulnerable to poverty.

The old cultural stigma about disabilities has spread everywhere. As is described by Sloan et al. (2018) that certain community still believes the disabilities as a punishment for their mistake. Sloan et al. further concludes that society should not generalize the negative condition of disabilities. People should see the value they give to family or society rather than focusing on their imperfect condition (Weaver, 2017, as cited in Sloan et al., 2018). Poverty and disabilities meet at the intersection and trigger subjugation and social inequality. Pearson et. al (2019) has mentioned the term 'survival of the 'fittest' to describe how people will feel secure if they are employed and have a private sector of income. Disabled people, without knowledge and having low-economic status, will fall into trouble. These two problems cannot be separated because of the lack of assistance from the government and society toward disabled people. Moreover, disabilities also affect the family and community. When disabled people lose part of their body due to accidents, it automatically affects their economic situation. The necessity for special needs and assistance makes the condition even worse. It is mentioned by Mitra (2006, as cited in Palmer, 2011) that disability diminishes people's competence to do anything variously. It is to assume that disabled people spend an extra payment for their life because they need others and some tools to help them keep alive for the rest of their life.

The intersection of disabilities and poverty results in a never-ending cycle where the disabled people stay poorest, incapable of getting knowledge, and being marginalized and oppressed. Poverty and disabilities put forward environmental and personal factors as the cause for social insecurity. Upali (2012) illustrates environmental factors as the background of a person's life and living conditions, such as social attitudes, customs, rules, practices, institutions, and

other individuals. While personal factors cover the background of a person's life, life experiences, and features, such as race, gender, educational background, age, personality, character styles, etc. Social insecurity is associated with someone's incapability to interact with society. Disabled people, may have anxiety and fear to open themselves to the 'perfect' society. Watson & Nolan (2011) clarified that stamina and health status bring impact to the quality of life and their power to participate and involve in social activities. This condition emerges the attitudes of a disabled person to be dependent on others and sometimes it causes discrimination too. As the result, disabled people experience social insecurity due to the social unequal treatment that makes them being trapped and difficult to get out of their shortcomings.

Based on the explanation above, this paper aims to discuss the issue of social insecurity confronted by two disabled people. The intersection of their low financial status, intellectual and physical disability, and elderliness arise some self-trust issues which make them incapable to interact in society and not be able to move from their hunch.

## METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research method was applied in this research to describe the phenomenon of social insecurity as the result of the intersection between disabilities and poverty. The writer supported the analysis using a social approach. It addresses critiques toward social inequality and prejudices against disabled people. The data collection method was textual or content analysis. This method is identified as a technique in investigating the experiences and perspectives of a group or individual (Paradis et al., 2016). Here, the writer used research articles and referenced books to collect the data, description, and explanation related to the topic.

The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis. Bailey (2008, as cited in Harding & Whitehead, 2013) mentioned that the data needs interpretation and judgment. Thus, the writer read and interpreted data from related journals and books to analyze poverty, disabilities, and their intersection which result in social insecurity. Data analysis is conducted in three steps. In the beginning, the writer read and analyzed the novel. Related problems are then found concerning how social insecurity was formed in the intersection of disabilities and poverty. Second, the problem was interpreted, and the research questions were arranged. Finally, it directed the writer to identify the concepts used for analyzing the data, which were intersectionality.

In this case, the writer obtained two factors; environmental and personal, which trigger the emergence of social insecurity. Social prejudice and people's multiple identities collide and construct social insecurity.

## RESULT

*Of Mice and Men* issues the social inequality toward a disabled person. Two disabled characters, Lennie and Candy, fall into social insecurity in which they feel unconfident with their condition and recognize the risk of being impaired. Lennie, who is a mentally disabled one, sometimes has lacked control because of others' treatment and negative judgment of him. He becomes unconfident and

thinks of himself as a burden for his friend, George. While Candy, the old-disabled man, has to overcome inequality in his workplace. The social insecurity comes to Candy in which he feels so useless, hopeless, and frustrated when he deals with others and his work condition. The following points are kinds of social insecurity experienced by Lennie and Candy at the intersection of their multiple identities.

### 1. Having self-distrust issue

The two characters who have different kinds of disabilities experience different social exclusion. Having a low-economic background and intellectual issues, Lennie has a difficult time socializing with society. Since he needs someone who should lead and tell him what to do, he sometimes becomes more oppressed and excluded from a social circle. Social exclusion, which is defined as the inability to participate in the normal activities in every life sector, affects someone's quality of life, justice, and the union of society (Addo, 2018). Lennie is stigmatized as the weird person on the ranch because he is forbidden to speak to others. Behind Lennie's life, there is George, Lennie's friend, and helper who dictates everything and even forbids him to talk to others:

.... George gestured with his spoon. "What you gonna say tomorrow when the boss asks you questions?"

Lennie stopped chewing and swallowed. His face was concentrated. "I . . . I ain't gonna . . . say a word."

"Good boy! That's fine, Lennie! Maybe you're gettin' better. When we get the coupla acres I can let you tend the rabbits all right. 'Specially if you remember as good as that." (p. 8)

To avoid the problem, George asks Lennie not to say even one word when they get into the ranch. Both of them come to the ranch to find a job and get better finance. They both dream of a better life, as seen from the phrases:

"O.K. Someday – we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a

little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and –"

"An' live off the fatta the lan'," Lennie shouted. "An' have rabbits. Go on,

George! Tell about what we're gonna have in the garden and about the rabbits

in the cages and about the rain in the winter and the stove, and how thick the

cream is on the milk like you can hardly cut it. Tell about that, George." (p. 8)

Lennie, with all of his disabilities, still has a dream to have his land. To execute the dream, he needs George. Therefore, the intellectual disability becomes an obstacle for him and also for George. George makes Lennie repeat the words so many times so he won't trigger trouble for them; "Good boy. That's swell. You say that over two, three times so you sure won't forget it." (p. 4). The command seems to

be a threat to Lennie later cause Lennie will get into trouble if he let a word come out of his mouth. The word '*Good boy*' also shows how George manipulates Lennie. Therefore, this way brings a negative impact on Lennie himself. He finds difficulty to socialize with others because of George's threat.

In the ranch, Lennie's silence makes things worse. People in the ranch suspect him of a foolish and crazy person. While Lennie is not taught to say other words, he finds barriers to dealing with others' questions. He comes so unconfident to talk to others:

The boss said suddenly, "Listen, Small!" Lennie raised his head.  
"What can you do?"

In a panic, Lennie looked at George for help. "He can do anything you tell him," said George. "He's a good skinner. He can rassel grain bags, drive a cultivator. He can do anything. Just give him a try."

The boss turned on George. "Then why don't you let him answer? What you trying to put over?" (p. 12)

Lennie always looks for George's help in any situation especially when he has to deal with others. Being unable to speak for himself, to say what he is supposed to say triggers insecurity. The phrase, *Lennie was looking helplessly to George for instruction* (p. 14), also implies Lennie's fear of making a mistake for every action he does. George controls and threatens Lennie to save both of their life, mostly not to lose a chance for a job:

When the sound of his footsteps had died away, George turned on Lennie.

"So you wasn't gonna say a word. You was gonna leave your big flapper shut and leave me do the talkin'. Damn near lost us the job."

Lennie stared hopelessly at his hands. "I forgot, George."

"Yeah, you forgot. You always forget, an' I got to talk you out of it." He sat down heavily on the bunk. "Now he's got his eye on us. Now we got to be careful and not make no slips. You keep your big flapper shut after this." He fell morosely silent. (p. 13)

George's words '*Damn near lost us the job*' implies his fear of losing the chance because of Lennie's carelessness. "*Yeah, you forgot. You always forget, an' I got to talk you out of it.*" *He sat down heavily on the bunk* also indicates George's resignation of Lennie's attitude. It is mentioned in the novel how Lennie always feels guilty when he makes mistakes. He is panicked, and the way he always relies on George's help represents his insecurity to confront society. Lennie, who is not ready for social relations due to his disabilities, cannot get full and effective support from George as his helper. Instead of helping Lennie comes out of his incapability, George's action even made a negative stereotype for the intellectual-disabled person. People stare at him peculiarly, and this reaction also risks Lennie's chance to get a job and find a better life.

## 2. Feeling of being a burden to others

In his life, Lennie sometimes realizes that he is a burden for George. Lennie's disability to control himself provokes George's anger frequently:

George stood up and threw the mouse as far as he could into the darkening brush, and then he stepped to the pool and washed his hands. "You crazy fool. Don't you think I could see your feet was wet where you went across the river to get it?" He heard Lennie's whimpering cry and wheeled about. "Blubberin' like a baby! Jesus Christ! A big guy like you." Lennie's lip quivered and tears started in his eyes. (p. 6)

Lennie's cry shows how a disabled person can have an emotional state. They have feelings, fear, and anxiety as well. George nags when Lennie asks something they don't have:

Lennie watched him from over the fire. He said patiently, "I like 'em with ketchup."

"Well, we ain't got any," George exploded. "Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, .... And Lennie's face was drawn with terror. "An' whatta I got," George went on furiously. "I got you! You can't keep a job and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time. An' that ain't the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and I got to get you out." ... (p. 7)

The part of the story above shows how Lennie can do nothing and hope for nothing because his only hope in life is George. Lennie is symbolized as the 'heavy burden' for George because of his multiple conditions, being poor and disabled. This situation then activates Lennie's feeling to speak up. He wants to leave George once:

Lennie still knelt. He looked off into the darkness across the river.

"George, you want I should go away and leave you alone?" "Where the hell could you go?"

"Well, I could. I could go off in the hills there. Some place I'd find a cave."

"Yeah? How'd you eat? You ain't got sense enough to find nothing to eat."

"I'd find things, George. I don't need no nice food with ketchup. I'd lay out

in the sun and nobody'd hurt me. An' if I foun' a mouse, I could keep it.

Nobody'd take it away from me."

George looked quickly and searchingly at him. "I been mean, ain't I?" "If you don' want me I can go off in the hills an' find a cave. I can go away

any time." (p. 7)

Lennie's intersectionality brings him to unfavorable conditions. His shortcomings become the barrier for himself to get acquaintance to others and the social world.

### 3. Feeling useless

Candy, another disabled man in the novel, also experiences the unconfident feeling when he is not able to do works effectively. Candy is an old handicap-man who lost one of his arms while working. Candy overwhelms complicated situations since he is no longer has the power to work well. His weak condition makes him sometimes feel insecure and useless while socializing with other workers. In the ranch, Candy gets negative stereotypes from others. People do anything to him arbitrarily, and his voice seems useless. They intimidate him and decide something for his life. Some workers settle to kill Candy's old dog because it's stingy and lame:

The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. "Yeah," he said. "You can have a pup if you want to." He seemed to shake himself free for speech. "Carl's right, Candy. That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple." (p. 23)

The phrase '*That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple*' is a satire for Candy's disabilities. The workers see Candy as the hopeless man. Candy cannot defend himself because the workers are young, strong, and passionate. *Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim's opinions were law.* ... (p. 23) indicates his submissiveness toward the social condition. Carlson, the executor, also shows his power by grabbing a pistol immediately from the bag:

"I don't see no reason for it," said Carlson. He went to his bunk, pulled his bag from underneath it and took out a Luger pistol. "Le's get it over with," he said. "We can't sleep with him stinkin' around in here." He put the pistol in his hip pocket. (p. 24)

The domination and intimidation of young people are seen from Carlos' immediate action of pulling the pistol to kill the dog. "*I don't see no reason for it*" reflects the young man's passion who usually does something without thinking further. This situation triggers insecurity and a feeling of being useless for the disabled person. Candy is unable to hold Carlson because he might not be able to defend himself from Carlson's pistol. Candy's need for the job forces him to stay silent and let others do whatever they want as well. Candy is trapped in the intersection of a bad-financial situation and being handicapped. Arbitrariness and negative stereotype from society make him unable to get equality in life.

### 4. Being hopeless and frustrated

Losing his arms makes Candy so hopeless and frustrated. In his old age, he realizes that he will no longer be useful on the ranch. After the workers kill his dog, he plans to join George and Lennie to find a new house for them:



Candy said, "I ain't much good with on'y one hand. I lost my hand right here on this ranch. That's why they give me a job swampin'. An' they give me two hunderd an' fifty dollars 'cause I los' my hand. An' I got fifty more saved up right in the bank, right now. Tha's three hunderd, and I got fifty more comin' the end the month. Tell you what—" He leaned forward eagerly. "S'pose I went in with you guys. Tha's three hunderd an' fifty bucks I'd put in. I ain't much good, but I could cook and tend the chickens and hoe the garden some. How'd that be?" (p. 29-30)

From the narration, Candy is seen as a hardworking person who has already saved his money for a financial emergency. Therefore, the narration above reflects his social insecurity in which he becomes so hopeless and frustrated about his future after leaving the ranch. He knows that his poor condition will be problematic for his future path, financially. So he tries hard to persuade George and Lennie to allow him to join their plans. The way he describes the amount of money reflects his effort to convince them that he can help the plan with some money he has already had.

Besides that, he is so hopeless and frustrated living with the normal workers. Since the tragedy of the killing dog, he is aware of his life on the ranch:

Candy sat on the edge of his bunk. He scratched the stump of his wrist nervously. "I got hurt four year ago," he said. "They'll can me purty soon. Jus' as soon as I can't swamp out no bunk houses they'll put me on the county. .... He said miserably, "You seen what they done to my dog tonight? They says he wasn't no good to himself nor nobody else. When they can me here I wisht somebody'd shoot me. But they won't do nothing like that. I won't have no place to go, an' I can't get no more jobs. I'll have thirty dollars more comin', time you guys is ready to quit." (p. 30)

Candy has a fear of his safety on the ranch. He is suspicious of the workers as if they will shoot him while he sleeps because of his shortcoming and he can do nothing to help himself. Thus the bad treatment from society arises new anxiety and psychological threat to the disabled person.

## DISCUSSION

Intersectionality, as the idea of multiple and unseparated identities, has helped this paper to see the overlapping condition of two disabled persons, Lennie and Candy. Each of their different elements interacts and produces oppression. Though for some people the multiple identities may generate privilege, it brings such an unlucky life for the disabled person. There are inherited negative stereotypes to mental and physical-disabled persons and it makes them suspected by society. There is a such as blame toward the wrong body (Clare, 2001, as cited in May, 2015). Society makes a wrong common perspective that the disabled person is being unproductive and unworkable. It cannot be denied that the revolution and innovation era demand people's knowledge, education, and training (Latchem, 2017). Meanwhile, a mental-

disabled person is capable of doing things in a certain areas. They may have a lack of intellectual ability but not the physical one. Like Lennie, he may not behave well and cannot decide for himself but he has physical strength. Therefore, this condition should be under control. As it is presented by Sarrett & Ucar (2019) that people with intellectual and disabilities development are vulnerable to be a victim and as accused. Being an accused here can be considered as the victim indeed because this person knows nothing of what he does. It is an uncontrollable impulse of the natural illness or the syndrome.

The intellectually disabled person is also vulnerable to social injustice. There are some influencing factors, such as poverty, unemployment, abuse, and poor educational background (Dowse et al., 2014; Søndena et al., 2008; van Dooren et al., 2015, as cited in Latchem, 2017). In the novel, when Lennie's anxiety flares up and he does something out of his control, the victim makes a fake-rape report to the police, *"Well, that girl rabbits in an'tells the law she been raped. The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie. As an intellectually disabled person, Lennie is easily provoked by his anxiety, as it is explained by George: "Hell, no. He just scared her. I'd be scared too if he grabbed me. But he never hurt her. He jus' wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time."* Here, it can be seen that many people have less knowledge of the condition of disabled people. Even some of them take irresponsibility action toward them as the woman does. As the impact, Lennie should live in fear.

Disabled persons may confront more problems, such as the inability to accomplish self-care activities that may be required to finance their life (Powers & Oschwald, n.d.). Lennie's economic status has also made him a subjugated person who must stay under every condition to survive. Goodman et al. (n.d.) mentioned the extra costs needed by disabled people which can limit their economic opportunities. Lennie who has already had poor economic status must survive the job field which requires a normal worker. These two conditions, disability and poverty, have completely interacted and resulted in a disadvantage for the disabled person. Moreover, working-age people with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than people without disabilities in all racial and ethnic groups (Goodman et. al, n.d.). To such a degree, some disabled people need a helper.

Salam et al. (2021) state that encouragement and motivation are needed by the disabled person to increase confidence. When disabled people need help from somebody else, they should be supported well with good treatment and be given a chance to practice socializing with others. A disabled person like Lennie needs self-reliance so he can be confident and exercise his ability. On the other hand, the helper (George) cannot let him speak out or they both may be in trouble. This condition creates a never-ending situation in which Lennie is not able to recognize himself and to be accepted by society. After all, it is not only the helper's responsibility to help the disabled person out of his shortcoming. The most important subject here is society, a community that human will spend their entire life to deal with. An intellectual-disabled person like Lennie needs social support to grow his self-trust and confidence. If there is understanding and

acceptance about their disability from others, there will be a chance for him to improve his financial status as well.

In another case, Candy also experiences a complicated intersection in his life. He has to bear his old age, physical disability, and financial problems at once. Latchem (2017) states that to live longer means to work longer. In Candy's case, he no longer has a complete body and being old as well. It reflects the importance of having sufficient energy to work. This is problematic for the physical-disabled person when they do not have the power to handle the job. It grows the feeling of being useless and being a burden for others and affects their financial state. This condition is supported by Bloom (2011, as cited in Latchem, 2017) who explains that older workers can be a burden for society. Employee prefers a younger candidate who is physically able to work efficiently. This decreases the chance for the old-disabled person to have a stable financial future if they do not save their money from the beginning.

Both Lennie and Candy's cases show the emergence of social insecurity because of their multiple identities. Poverty and disability are interconnected; both are a cause and consequence of poverty and can increase vulnerability and exclusion (DFID, 2000, Trani & Loeb, 2012, as cited in Rohwerder, 2015). Disability itself hinders an individual's opportunity and constructs frustration (Musthaq & Akhouri, 2016). These people are trapped in their shortcomings and also social judgement. Their multiple identity; low-financial status, the problem of intellectual and physical disability, and elderliness, appear as obstacles for society to accept their status. As a result, the rejection from society causes various feelings of insecurity, such as self-distrust issues, feeling of being a burden, hopeless and frustration. All of these feelings contribute to people's loss of social interaction and participation which may lead to invisibility and vulnerability.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People with disabilities often meet negative stereotypes and exclusion from society. Their incompetence to meet society's demands forces them to stay within their limits. Further, it gives an impact on the self-development of the disabled person. When people have no proper understanding of one's condition, especially people with an intellectual and physical disability, they will keep looking down on and enforce the same rules and requirements. Because of this unequal treatment, thus the disabled person will stay within the limited space of movement; they are not being able to get a job and improve their low economic status. Limited mobility due to disability and elderliness also worsen the condition of disabled people because they are considered useless in their work. Being at the intersection of this complex identity makes people with disabilities have social insecurity in socializing with normal people; such as having a self-trust issue, feeling useless, being a burden for others, hopeless, and frustrated. In the end, these problems need social attention and understanding of intersectional life. People are formed with various backgrounds and identities. If all people in

this world know things needed by a disabled person, thus they can avoid subjugation and inequality toward them.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

This paper limits the discussion to the intersection of disabilities and poverty. However, other multiple identities can be explored from other characters for further research, such as race and gender. Hopefully, the intersection concept helps people to avoid oppression to some group of community and create harmony in life.

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