

Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics: A Case Study on the Controversy of Shahrur's thought of Religious Reform in Media

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Abstract: This article discusses the controversy of Muhammad Shahrur's reform ideas documented in media. Shahrur's proposal of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics which mainly falls on two points, documented off and online attracts different responses. Shahrur believes that there is no synonymise words in Arabic language of the Qur'an, and the second, Muhammad PBUH has roles and positions either as ordinary, prophet or as the messenger. Using descriptive-analytic method, this study discusses how scholars responded over Shahrur's proposal of religious reform which are circulated in media. Shahrur also utilizes information technology by opening a question and answer column at www.shahrur.org as medium to discuss different kinds of issues. The study find that reader of Shahrur's works can be grouped into two mind groups; those who appreciate Shahrur's reform and the other are those who decline his modern hermeneutic reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

1 INTRODUCTION

Muhammad Shahrur was a Muslim Reformist thinker, born on March 11, 1938 in Damascus, Syria. His father named Dayb Ibn Dayb and his mother Shiddiqah Bint Shalih Filyun. Shahrur married 'Azi>zah. From his marriage he was blessed with five children. His first child, T{a>riq, had followed and developed his father's modern hermeneutics method in reading the sources of Islam through contemporary reading, by writing a book "*an al-Rūh wa al-Nafs wa al-Ma'rifah fi al-Tanzīl al-Ḥakīm: Qirā'ah Mu'āshirah (2018)*".

Shahrur continued his studies in civil engineering in Saratow, near Moscow, the Soviet Union (now Russia), in March 1957 on a local government scholarship until he obtained a diploma in civil engineering in 1964. Subsequently, in 1968 he was sent to the University College Ireland in Dublin to obtain a master's degree and doctorate in the specialization of Soil Mechanics and Foundation, to obtain a Master of Science degree in 1969 and a doctorate in 1972.

Although the Shahrur study has a civil engineering background, his attention is very high to study Islamic studies. Starting in 1972, Shahrur intensely read books and discussed his ideas with

colleagues. In 1980, precisely during the month of Ramadan, Shahrur managed to find a distinction between "*al-'amal* or "*'amala*" which has meaning in general action (work), and "*al-fi'l* or "*fa'ala*" which refers to the meaning of specific actions (do).

The first person Shahrur invited to discuss his ideas about the meaning of the word *al-Kitab* was, a linguist Ja'far Dik al-Bab. The discussion lasted long enough, between 1980-1982. Precisely in May 1982, Shahrur managed to find two important elements of *al-Mushaf al-Sharif*, namely the book which has subjective elements, and *al-Qur'an* which contains the element of objective truth. Shahrur felt very surprised and happy. He also talked with his family. His father was the first person to understand the concept, he was very interested and asked some questions that were quite difficult to answer at that time. Then not only that, Shahrur also succeeded in placing the significance of the meaning of *al-inzāl* and *al-tanzīl*, the distinction between *al-imām al-mubīn* and *al-lauh al-mahfūz*, *al-islām* and *al-īmān*. Shahrur also succeeded in placing *tartil* meaning in *al-Muzammil*: 4 "*auzid' alaihi wa rattil al-Qur'āna tartīla*".

Tartil is a derivation of the word *ratala* which means composing and publishing. According to Shahrur, it is impossible for the verse to be understood with the meaning of beautifying it in

reading of the Qur'an (*ta'annuq fi al-tilawah*). Because the following verse (*inna sanulqi 'al aika qaulan tsaqila*) is completely unrelated to beautifying the reading. The sentence of "*qaulan tsaqila* (heavy words)" is more correctly interpreted as a difficulty in understanding the contents of the Qur'an. Thus, the verse "*wa rattil al-Qur'ana tartila*" must be interpreted in the attitude of Shahrur, namely compiling the verses of the Qur'an which have the same topic, and sort it so that it is easy to understand the content. At the same time Shahrur did not have a computer, so all his hard work was written by himself in paper sheets, and told his son to keep the manuscript. Then Shahrur bought one computer and started the writing process again, it was completed in 1987. Only in 1989, all of the texts were corrected in the final. Shortly thereafter, the first *magnum opus* book was published in 1990.

In general, Shahrur's works can be divided into two groups of themes, namely about technique and Islam. For the Islamic theme, Shahrur included a Muslim thinker who was productive in pouring his Islamic ideas into an article, in the form of books, - just mentioning a few of his books - like the "*al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āshirah* (1990)" which underwent a revision, in 2011 was published with the title *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Ru'yah Jadīdah, Naḥwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmi: Fiqh al-Mar'ah* (2000) revised, reissued in 2018 with the title *Naḥwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmi: Usus Tashrī' al-Aḥwāl al-Shakhsīyyah, al-Islām wa al-Insān: Min Natā'ij al-Qirā'ah al-Mu'āshirah* (2016), this book was translated in English under the title "Islam and Huminity: Consequences of a Contemporary Reading (2018)" by George Stergios with a foreword by Dale F. Eickelman. Shahrur's book has won the 2017 Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the category "Contribution to the Development of Nation," an indication of its continuing relevance to contemporary issues.

And the writing in the form of articles which can be seen on the official website; <http://www.shahrour.org>, twitter, facebook, and others. For example, it can be seen on the newsyrian.net web site, and *abwa>b*. Almost all the themes of the discussion from the writings of the Shahrur article are just a development or elaboration further from the theme of the discussion in his book. It's just more contextual, because it is related to various aspects of the reality of life.

Whenever a speaker at a scientific event, Shahrur often spoke of the defeat of the Arab world over a country as small as Israel, which occurred in 1967.

At that time Shahrur was 29 years old. Shortly after the incident, he heard a Friday sermon delivered by Imam Masjid, that "*in fact we suffered defeat because our women left home without head coverings and open clothes*". On the same occasion, there was one community group that said, "*we lost because we fasted Ramadan*". Commenting on the case, according to Shahrur, Arab Muslims experience a crisis or a problem of inequality in thinking. At that time he was encouraged to express his urgency in carrying out contemporary readings. One of the starting points used as an answer to the defeat of the Arab world is the attitude towards tradition and modernity. Shahrur is a figure who always emphasizes critical and proportional thinking. For example, when a mufti said that "*in fact Islamic fiqh has successfully completed hundreds of thousands of fiqh problems*". Then it is not taken for granted as truth without evidence of a clear and comprehensive construction of knowledge. Shahrur also made a counter by asking straightforwardly and critically, "*have we all called it a religious teaching that has a mercy character for every human being?*"

Through his comments, Shahrur stated that the fundamental problem of Muslims now is that they have left the *Kitabullah*, and cling to what the jurists have said. As a scientist, Shahrur greatly appreciated the hard work of the early thinkers, especially the sect imam (*imam mazhab*). According to him, they successfully interacted with religious sources well for their era. Indeed, it is the followers of the Imam of the School who often predicate as a freeze on the understanding of the Islamic Shari'a, especially towards the Qur'an, Sunnah, ijma', and qiyas (the four components are also referred to as "sources of law"). The discourse of religion becomes static, what is used is the product of expert jurisprudence, not all the examples that are in the Messenger of Allah. For Shahrur, it is precisely we who have to take responsibility for the problem of the reality of the pace of life in which we live, not the people who have held *ijtihad* in the first century and so on. Because none of them said, that all his words and statements were made equal to the sacred Qur'an. But on the contrary, they have explained, that what they say is the result of *ijtihad* products, and their understanding in the context of the time that surrounds them. Therefore according to Shahrur, we are also obliged to do what they have done, namely we do *ijtihad* as they do *ijtihad*.

2 METHOD

The methodology is the epistemology section which examines the sequence of steps taken so that the knowledge gained meets scientific characteristics. Related to this, the methodology can also be seen as part of the logic that examines the proper rules of reasoning. Methodology is an expression of how the mind works so that it becomes directed, systematic, and objective.

This type of research is qualitative research, which is research that intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the subject of the study (read: factual history), for example the behavior of perception, motivation, actions, etc. holistically, and by way of description in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by utilizing various scientific methods. The definition of qualitative research can be simplified as research data that is not numerical, or cannot be assumed. Because, in analyzing the data using words. What is clear, the main nature of qualitative research is to develop new concepts that are fundamental and theoretical.

From the author's observation, it appears that quite a number of scholars are interested in responding to Shahrur's thinking. So, the study of it is not new anymore. Already many thinkers are peeling his thoughts from various perspectives. However, those who tried to discuss the issue of various debates that occurred between the pros and cons of Shahrur's thinking had not yet elaborated. In the process of collecting data, writing this article uses a literature study or text studies, whether in the form of books, or articles and videos in the media as the primary data source. After the data is collected, the data is analyzed to get conclusions. The analytical method used is descriptive analytical method, which is a method that describes the discussion then analyzed. Using descriptive-analytic method, this study discusses how scholars responded over Shahrur's proposal of religious reform which are circulated in media.

2.1 The Method of Shahrur's Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics

One characteristic of Shahrur's modern Qur'anic hermeneutics is to gather verses from the Qur'an that are still one topic or theme. Then the collection of Qur'anic verses which are still related to one object of the discussion is carefully analyzed using the "awareness nothing similar in language" of the

Arabic language of the Qur'an, that the diction of the Qur'an is so unique that it does not have synonymity language. Because however, adheres to the synonymity of language, making an important thing from a language understanding to be untouched and neglected, which results in the loss of constructs of critical and philosophical religious understanding.

Based on the principle above Shahrur chose the *Mu'jam Maqāyis al-Lughah* (Encyclopedia of Language Standards) owned by Ibn al-Fāris, to support the projection of his Qur'anic study methodology. Shahrur succeeded in distinguishing the words "al-Kitāb" and "al-Qur'ān", "al-Zikr" and "al-Furqān", "al-Sunnah" and "al-Hadīth", "al-Nabi" and "al-Rasūl", "al-Nubuwwah" and "al-Risalah", "al-Muhkamāt" and "al-Mutashābihāt", "al-Lauh al-Mahfūz" and "al-Imām al-Mubīn", "al-Kitāb al-Mubīn" and "Kitāb Mubīn", "al-Islam" and "al-Imān", "al-Muharramāt" and "al-Manhiyāt", "al-Nisā'" and "al-Rijāl", "Kataba" and "Farad}a", "Kufr" and "Syirk", "Waṣiat" and "Warith", "al-Ab" and "al-Wālid", "al-Umm" and "al-Wālidah", "Ijtānībū" and "Lā Taqrabū", "al-Israf" and "al-Tabzīr", "al-qada'" and "al-qadar", "al-Naba'" and "al-Khabar".

Shahrur's book that specifically contains the principles of modern hermeneutics is, "Dalīl al-Qirā'ah al-Mu'asirah li al-Tanzīl al-Hakīm: al-Manhaj wa al-Muṣṭalahāt (2016)". This book can also be referred to as "a contemporary dictionary of terms". Because, Shahrur explained more than eighty words in *al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf*.

Modern Hermeneutics initiated by Shahrur is a methodological offer in understanding the primary Islamic books, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah. This Shahrur methodology is supported by two basic aspects, namely belief and thought; in it includes philosophical, linguistic and Islamic law aspects. For example, Shahrur clings to his principle, that *al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf* is "kalāmullāh". As for the objective reality of life - both related to nature and humans - is the "kalimātullāh" (read: the existing reality). Only through "kalimātullāh" we can understand "kalāmullāh" well. It's just that we need to keep in mind, our understanding of the natural legal system and humans is subject to the context of development, from "conditions of process" to "conditions to" (becoming). Therefore, all our understanding of "kalāmullāh" is manicured and always develops accepting change, in contrast to "kalāmullāh" itself, which is constant as a text (Muh}ammad Shah}ru>r, 2008, 2016).

Shahrur is also principled, that the important key to understanding *al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf* is actually inside (internal), it does not need to bring things from outside, because the key is not outside. As an objective reality in nature and humans which contains the secrets of the key to understanding it is automatically inside (internal). Based on this principle attitude, Shahrur addressed the *Kitābullāh* as understanding the structure of the human body. Because both have the same accuracy and detail. Every member of the human body has their respective roles, duties and functions. Likewise with *al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf*, each branch has its own role and function of knowledge (Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, 2015).

The main principles of modern hermeneutics in interacting understand the source of religion; **1).** *Kitābullāh* as the primary source. Never assume the *Kitābullāh* is secondary. **2).** The Book of Allah who controls the ḥadīth, not the ḥadīth that becomes the power and judge of the Book of Allah. **3).** All ḥadīths other than those related to the moral system (which actually develop and duplicate the moral system in the *Kitābullāh*), and other than the hadiths related to the rites (such as prayer, *zakaat*, fasting and *ḥajj*) are actually *ijtihād* from the Prophet that are relative and not final. So that it can be read again, or amended. In other words, hadith besides the two things above are the “*qānūn madani*” (civil law) the Prophet used in his era in the Arabian peninsula. **4).** Applying the principle “*the text of divine verses interprets one another*” consistently. The application of the method “text of divine verses interprets one another” so that the product of interpretation is more objective or minimizes subjectivity. Let the verses of the Qur’an talk about themselves “*al-istintāq*”, we as readers or reviewers just catch the nomena (essence) behind the existing phenomenon (structure). And no less important for reading supports the spirit of objectivity, it is necessary to apply the reading principle “*naḥariyah al-nuzm*” (the theory or principle of reading the text by observing the context of the language system that matches the text structure “*siyāq al-kalām*”).

3 RESPONSE ON SHAHRUR’S MODERN QUR’ANIC HERMENEUTICS: PROS AND CONS

Shahrur’s first book “*al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān*” was published in Arabic in Damascus and Beirut in

1990. The original edition was quickly sold out, requiring a reprinting three months later. The modern Qur’anic hermeneutic method contained in the book “*al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān*” makes its name famous in the world of Islamic thought. The book was written for a long time, which is 20 years, about 800 pages. Because, immediately received a response from religious experts and jurists. Apparently Shahrur chose not to respond too often, so as not to waste energy and time, even though sometimes Shahrur responded. Shahrur continued to work, criticisms from religious experts and jurists did not make him stop to write his ideas regarding modern hermeneutics (Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, 1996). Shahrur also utilizes information technology that is increasingly rapid, making various media such as Facebook and the Website to spread his thoughts widely and at the same time invite discussion by opening questions and criticisms against him.

Just because Shahrur expressed the main points of his thoughts in reinterpreting the divine verses in *al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf*, Shahrur was often reviled, blasphemed with harsh words, such as the devil, the dajjal, the infidel. There are quite a number of articles uploaded intentionally on the internet, with the aim of inviting Muslims to stay away from and be aware of Shahrur’s perverse and misleading thoughts, far from Islam, the “sunnah destroyer” or “*mukir al-sunnah*”. Among them: the article uploaded on 08-08-2004, 10:05 PM entitled “*al-Taḥzīr min al-Ḍāl Munkir al-Sunnah Muḥammad Shaḥrūr*”, which means “Alert from the Misdirection of the ‘Sunnah Rejection’ Muḥammad Shaḥrūr”. Articles uploaded on 03-06-2008, 11:29 AM. by Mustafa on the Website *Muntadayāt Bawābah al-‘Arab - al-Muntadayāt al-Syar’iyyah – Muntadā al-‘Ulūm al-Islamiyyah al-Mutakhaṣṣah* entitled “*al-Radd ‘ala Ba’di Kitabat Munkir al-Sunnah Muhammad Shahrur*”, Which means “Criticism of Some of the Books of ‘Sunnah Rejection’ Muhammad Shahrur”. The same-tone article was also uploaded on 01-11-2010, entitled “*Dr. Shaḥrūr: Ankara al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawi... wa al-Jins bayna al-‘Uzzāb Ḥalāl*”, which means “Dr. Shahrur: has denied the Prophet’s Hadith...and having sex with an unmarried person is permissible”.

Still in the same tone, in another article uploaded more recently on 04-05-2016, 09:49 PM., Written with the title “*Taḥzīr min Fikr al-Murtad Muḥammad Shaḥrūr*”, which means “*Watch Out from the Thought of an Apostate Muhammad Shahrur*”. There is also an article entitled “*Iḥzarū*

al-Mad'u Dr. Muḥammad Shaḥrūr... Ya Banāt wa Ya Syabāb”, means “Be careful of the Da'wah of Dr. Muhammad Shahrur, Young Woman and Youth”. According to the author, the articles on the website were too hasty and rash in accusing Shahrur. One of the reasons is, reading the book of Shahrur partially.

Likewise, the counter view came from Syaūqī Abū Khalīl and Gazi al-Taubah. According to both of them, the whole offer of Shahrur's thoughts is deviant and heretical. His works did not provide a solution for the stagnation of Islamic thought, instead destroying all the foundations and pillars of Islam. The perspective of contemporary reading of Shahrur can “*tear down or destroy the sunnah*”. Because, Shahrur rejected the position of the Sunnah as interpretation, *taqyid* and detail on the Qur'an. Whereas, based on Surat al-Ḥasyr verse 7, Muslims are required to take and practice the sunnah. Understanding the Qur'an without going through the hadith will produce strange interpretations. Maybe, after destroying and shifting it from a position as one of the basic sources of the Shari'ah, slowly Shahrur will begin to destroy the Qur'an (Syaūqī Abū Khalīl, 1990), (*Gāzī al-Taubah*, 2012).

So, Wah}bah al-Zuh}aili in Studium Generale on Islamic Response to various Contemporary Problems, in the IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Postgraduate Program, May 2001, said that Shahrur was “*dāll wa muḍill*” (heretical and misleading). Due to, not mastering Arabic, lack of understanding of the proposals of jurisprudence, and not having adequate knowledge of classical Islamic discourse. Shahrur is also accused of being a person who often misreads divine verses.

In short, the view of the people that contradicts contemporary hermeneutics initiated by Shahrur is about the interpretation products that are considered deviant, strange and different from the existing and developing interpretations. According to them, contemporary hermeneutics like allowing *khamr* (that's right, Shahrur doesn't say “*haram*” to *khamr*, but is limited to “*naha*”. That is, for cases of anesthesia before doing surgery for example, alcohol may be used, while for drunk, it is not allowed. “*Khamr*” to get drunk is in the category “*ism bi gair al-ḥaq*” as based on QS. al-A'raf: 33, then this is *haram*. The *khamr* for anesthesia before performing the operation is “*ism bi gair al-ḥaq*”, so for that case it is permissible, because there are benefits as based on QS. al-Baqarah: 216. Foresight like this that is not understood by those who are against the modern hermeneutics Shahrur), allowing adultery, and allowing women to only dress in bikinis. The

deviation does not get there, Shahrur's hermeneutics make there are two words “*al-Nisā*” in *al-Muḥaf al-Sharīf* which means men, as well as “the concept of Islam and Faith” (consider Muslims for people who simply believe in God who is the most single and absolute, final day and righteous deeds, without having to believe in the Prophet Muhammad). For further explanation, so as not to misunderstand, please see: Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, *al-Islām wa al-Insān: Min Natā'ij al-Qirā'ah al-Mu'āṣirah*, (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2016).

What is clear, Shahrur cannot be said to be a sunnah destroyer, only because of his statement about the Prophet's hadith which took past settings, and certain places (read: the Arabian peninsula). So many of the Prophet's hadiths are no longer relevant, due to their temporal nature. In fact, in the book “*al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān*”, Shahrur asserted that he did not mean at all to reject the Sunnah. It's just that it puts the Sunnah proportionally and critically.

Then Shahrur also never allows adultery, he only says that sexual relations between unmarried men and women are forbidden (*haram*), and the community cannot punish whips when there are no four witnesses at least. For bikini issues, need separate discussion and writing to discuss the issue of women's clothing based on Shahrur's interpretation. But clearly, Shahrur has no intention to allow naked women for example. And clearly, the local wisdom of the community is also a basis for legal consideration. Then for the problem there are two words “*al-Nisā*” which can mean the men, is in QS. al-Aḥzāb: 55 and al-Nūr: 31. According to an Arabic grammar lecturer, Dr. Muḥammad 'Inād Sulaimān, the interpretation of Shahrur can be justified. Because, etymologically, the word “*al-Nisā*” is indeed possible to designate the meaning of a men, and in the context of the divine verse structure it also demands to be given meaning as a men. See, facebook Muḥammad 'Inād Sulaimān on June 15, 2017.

Today, Shahrur became a famous reformist thinker. Often Shahrur is invited to attend scientific forums, in the electronic mass media such as newspaper or magazine, radio and television stations. Example, the TV program “*la'allahum ya'qilūn*” (so they can think) which was broadcast during the Ramadan month of 2018 is a continuation of a series of programs related to modern Qur'an Hermeneutics that was broadcast during the month of Ramadan in 2017 “*al-Naba' al-'Azīm*” (TV program “*al-Naba' al-'Azīm*” [great news] Dr. Muhammad Shahrur, broadcast by the Rotana Khalijia channel, was made into a book in three

parts with the title according to the TV program, published by Hattlan Media and Hattpost). This was because at the request of the public. Shahrur explained all his thoughts rationally and intact, especially regarding hermeneutic methods and interpretive products which had been considered wrong by religious experts and jurists. Starting at this time many Muslim communities have accepted Shahrur's offer of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics approaches, rather than interpretive approaches and products that have been present and developed. We can clearly see the comparison of the audience between the programs delivered by Dr. Muhammad Shahrur who greatly emphasized reason in understanding divine verses, with a series of religious programs starring Shaykh al-Azhar Ah}mad al-T}ayyib that greatly accentuated the text rather than reason. Equally in 30 episodes, the Ramadan program, starring Shaykh al-Azhar Ah}mad al-T}ayyib was around 18,751 spectators, while the Ramadan program, starring Shahrur, was around 1,553,453 spectators. This shows the victory of "reason" over "text".

This is all evidence that the community has begun to accept its contemporary hermeneutic products, Shahrur opened an official website on contemporary hermeneutics methods and products, on the website there is a question and answer column directly with Shahrur. All negative features of Shahrur's contemporary hermeneutic products cannot be justified at all, many thoughts of Shahrur's hermeneutics are read partially.

For those who are pro for contemporary hermeneutic products, among them there are those who call Shahrur as Immanuel Kant in the Arab world, or Martin Luther in Islam, as the book written by Shakib Halaq regarding the thoughts of Muhammad Shahrur in French (<https://almasdare.com/68091>).

Therefore, while the use of contemporary hermeneutics in order to find objectivity, significance, and relevance of objects with context, there is no obstacle to applying modern hermeneutics in different contexts, even though it must intersect with existing interpretation products.

A scientific method that corrects itself. Shahrur does not find it difficult to improve his ideas. The holiness of *al-Muṣḥaf's* text is because it is a living text for living people. What is required of the modern Qur'anic interpretation of Shahrur is to see the credibility and relevance of the text, to say the great truths of God (*ṣadaqallāh al-'aẓīm*). The application of divine revelation in the era of the Prophet and companions is the only example. How

do these early generations act with absolute divine revelations to be applied to relative reality. One of the goals of contemporary reading Muhammad Shahrur is to move the center of religion from the seventh century to be adjusted according to era, tools and epistemology. Traditional reading of religious texts keeps us away from reality.

4 CONCLUSION

Whatever and however type of text, it must be constructed by three patterns, namely the author of text, text, and the reader or listener. From this it is understandable, every time the reader examines the text, he will automatically use all the knowledge he has to understand the text being studied. If he does not do it, he has paralyzed his own reason, so that he cannot understand the meaning of the text being studied at all.

Based on research related to public acceptance of Shahrur's contemporary reading in electronic media, the conclusion of this article confirms several things, that people begin to accept modern interpretations of the Qur'an. This is normal. Because, the method of reading the Shahrur is unique and rational. Shahrur's method of interacting with divine verses seeks to take off subjectivity, and also attempts to capture the mind's ideas objectively from the divine text. Even though later this interpretation will fall relatively, so it is still open to reinterpretation. But at least it can be able to allow the space of discourses in the divine texts to talk about themselves.

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