

Presencing in the Boundary: Re-reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Roman Stories Postcolonially

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Abstract

Homi Bhabha concedes that the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration. Boundary, in the postcolonial world, poses to be the razor's edge on which the rigorous process of reception and construction of identity hangs, and it essentially provides with the space which generates the process of presencing and redefining. Jhumpa Lahiri, a diaspora author at present dividing her time between the USA and Italy, questions the postcolonial politics of naming, defining and constructing the identity of the diaspora living in the 'third space' characterized by ambivalence and anxiety in her latest collection of nine short stories titled Roman Stories. In all these stories she, through her intentionally nameless characters, questions the postcolonial conception of the boundary, being preoccupied with the ideas of geography, history, nation, and global interconnectedness. This paper will address the research question pertinent to the spatiality of the identity of the diaspora from the postcolonial perspective and suggest some areas in which further studies can be carried out on Lahiri's oeuvre. Primarily the study draws on the theories of Homi Bhabha among others to interpret Lahiri's writing and its engagement with themes like migration, identity and boundary.

Keywords: presencing, boundary, diaspora, ambivalence, identity

No definition of the term 'identity' can hope to provide a single and unambiguous meaning. It is rather a multi-disciplinary term including multifarious topics such as globalization, ontology, cartography, cultural interaction, diasporic experience, gender and sexuality. Intersection of all these diverse aspects of the postcolonial world transforms identity into a liquid concept. In the postcolonial world, people seek to migrate from one country to another country. The paradigm of identity is always shifting on the face of the ever-changing locations of human beings. This migration has become frequent and commercialized from 1271 AD while Marco Polo set an expedition from Italy to China. Many think that migration started commercially from 1492 with the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean islands, though mistakenly he thought that he reached America. However, in the 20th century two World Wars, political independence of the colonies, triumphant march of capitalism, rise of Crony capitalism, frenzied industrialization, frequent humanitarian catastrophes, and wide range of indentured labor cause derangement

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in wider scale. Consequently, cultural intersection, linguistic hybridity and the liquidity of ideology construct postcolonial identity whose ingredients basically come from neurosis, ambivalence and trauma. All these issues affect not only the migrants but also the natives who face challenges to sustain the radicalism of their identity. So, the problem of identity is a two-edged crisis, affecting both the parties. In her *Roman Stories*, Jhumpa Lahiri explores how both the parties respond to each in their effort to maintain their respective identities.

In fact, identity requires affiliation of the authority under which the entity lives. From the psychological perspective identity encompasses the characteristics, individualities, belief-system, ways of expressions, ideas and views that construct an individual and a community. It also requires self-appreciation which differentiates one from other. Identities are paradoxical and dislocate or intersect each other. Identity is not properly systematized; it is rather liquid and amoeboid, ever changing its shape and content.

Among the prominent short story writers in the present literary arena, Jhumpa Lahiri is remarkable for her intensive diagnosis of the crisis of the diaspora or immigrants who fall into the pit of cultural ambivalence. Gabriele Lazzari, in her essay titled "Place-Based Translingualism, Identity, and the Contemporary World Literary Space: Jhumpa Lahiri's Turn to Italian" assesses Lahiri appropriately in the following words:

Among contemporary short-story writers who convey "perfect, nuanced, subtle, luminous understanding and expression of people's lives, of the human heart" (Baker, "Irresistible"), the name of Jhumpa Lahiri stands out. (Lazzari, 2024, p. 312)

Similarly, her 2023 *Roman Stories* makes a scathing exploration of the human heart, especially of the people living in what Homi Bhabha terms 'Third Space' created through hybridization in the postcolonial situation tinged by socio-cultural realities. This book, a collection of Lahiri's nine short stories, is dedicated to diagnosing both the physical and mental conditions of the immigrants in Italy as well as the local Italians shattered in the space between tradition and modernity, becoming and unbecoming, belonging and unbelonging.

The first story of *Roman Stories* titled "The Boundary" offers a touchy narrative of a family which has come to a pastoral area of Italy on a sojourn to spend its vacation. A couple and their two daughters pass only a week in the cottage taken care of by the narrator of the story, a teenage girl, her father and her mother. Her mother works in a nearby town to supplement the family income. Two daughters of

the couple are only six and nine, and they playfully enjoy running after the crickets, going to the sea beach with their father and passing carefree time. Their mother remains busy in doing household chores and washing clothes. Father usually enjoys bathing in the sea and celebrating his birthday party. The narrator observes the activities of the family stealthily. The narrator's father took this job many years ago, after the birth of the narrator. It is convenient because he does not intend to speak and laugh in presence of other people as he feels ashamed of his toothless mouth. Once while selling flowers he was beaten by some hooligans who told him that he did not belong to their country. In that incident he lost some of his front teeth. Actually, this is the state that is, belonging and unbelonging on which the author focuses. The narrator's family is a diaspora and so homelessness is a common issue with them. They are neither absorbed by the host culture nor able to live with their home culture. Thus, they live in the third space characterized by namelessness.

Lahiri intentionally gives her characters no traditional names probably because the diaspora does not have actually any specific name for their condition of being treated by the natives as aliens, devoid of identity. And in this connection, Stuart Hall sounds very relevant and he claims:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall, 2003, p. 234)

Diaspora is caught between two different worlds that they cannot define and identify distinctly as the home and homelessness get entangled into a singular mind characterized by tremendous ambivalence and existential angst. They sway between being and non-being, chased by an acute sense of foreignness. In her short story "The Delivery" the narrator, a woman belonging to a diaspora community fails to adopt Italiness wholly. She cannot receive the postal delivery on behalf of the Signora who is outside on vacation. Even in the post office where she goes to collect the package after being asked by the Signora, she feels her being alienated. The women in the desk were busy to talk to each other, not to her. While her turn comes, she is informed that the package is sent back to its sender. At this point the conversation in which she engages herself seems to be devoid of emotional involvement:

"Where was it sent back to?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Who sent it?"

"And now what?"

“Now I help the next person in line, arrivederci.” (Lahiri, 2023, p. 129-130)

An undercurrent of existential crisis runs through the veins of this story and the characters encounter the consequential lack of self-determination and interconnectedness. Actually, the sense of autonomy is required for the formation of nationhood and this impulse takes shapes out of mutual accommodation and acknowledgement. In the present era of melting borders and seamless migration, identity turns into a very complicated term involved in all possible forms of thought processes and cognition. In this connection, Phillip L. Hammack sounds very appropriate when he concedes:

Identity is the anchoring concept for thinking about difference and sameness in our time. It is not a concept confined to the jargon of the social sciences or the humanities; it permeates our everyday conversations, our moment-to-moment cognitive processes of sense making in a world increasingly characterized by human diversity. (Hammack, 2015, p. 11)

‘Difference’/‘sameness’ binary constitutes the core of the concept of identity marked by flickering tentativeness emanated from the ambivalence which characterizes the location of the diaspora. Similarly, in the ‘Delivery’ the storyteller faces corrosive ambivalence. While she finds the local teenagers gathering in the street and chatting hilariously, she feels a kind of affinity with them and at the same time, she feels one of the pellets that she received from the hostile police’s gun lodged in her heart, and it hinders her to go beyond the boundary of cognition and reciprocation and thus, she apprehends to consider herself to be one of them. Even she does not feel secured in presence of the police, one of the potent ideological state apparatuses. After she was shot deliberately by the police while thinking of reporting the incident to the police for justice, one of her cousins discourages her to go to the police as it has chances of further harassment. The storyteller concedes, “He discourages me from filing a report. In his opinion, it is better not to get mixed up with the police” (Lahiri, 2023, p. 136). Actually, the most chronic problem of the immigrants or diaspora are the problems of the lack of control over their own lives. Identity, in the age of global interconnectedness, though liquid, paradoxically requires autonomy and self-determination in association with equal political and economic standing. It is a paradox as it pursues a unifying existential entity by synthesizing tremendously insoluble diversities. Acceptance and rejection create anxiety which characteristically shapes the disposition of both the host nation and the immigrants or indentured laborers. Cultural, economic and psychological dislocation of the immigrants inevitably gives birth to an acute sense of homelessness leading to inferiority complex which always comes between the immigrants and the natives as a boundary. The motherland that the immigrants

have left works as “a repository of memory, a site to be mined for remembrance” (Chancy, 2003, p.167). The problem of acceptance and rejection emanated from the loss of the repository of memories and remembrances makes the narrator of the story “Delivery” anxious and this anxiety does not allow her to develop confidence among the natives. Besides, constant consciousness of the natives that whatever the immigrants think or assert, is ‘in context’ or positioned. The shadowy homeland lies in the ‘context’. This contextualization of the host country also acts as a block to cultural and social integration.

Loss of confidence does not allow to develop any sense of belonging and it is depicted through the characters of an immigrant couple in the story “Well-Lit House” living in Italy. The man, his wife and five children live in an impoverished area located at the outskirts of the city where they fall victim to cruel hostility of local women whom the man calls ‘raven women’, and the bullying of the young people who even threaten the member of his family with knives. In course of time, the man is forced by the situations to send his wife along with his five children to his native country. The woman puts on veil, a specific dress-code that the followers of a specific religious ideology follow. But she is so taunted and tortured mentally for this kind of dress code that she breaks down both mentally and emotionally, and is forced back to her native land. The intolerance demonstrated by the natives towards this dress-code interprets how inhumanly the natives treat the immigrants. It is depicted through the conversation between the narrator and a local elderly man in the coffee bar. At the sight of a veiled woman who was at that time passing by both of them, the elderly man mutters something. When the immigrant man looks at him with curiosity to know what he has muttered, they engage themselves in the following conversation:

“I said, in this heat.”

“What?”

“That woman, all covered up.”

I might have told him that the fabric used for those dresses is very light, that it blocks out the worst of the sun, that she resembles the noblewoman you see only in paintings in churches and museums, here just like my wife— but before I could respond, the gentleman added: In twenty years, they’ll all be that way. (Lahiri, 2023, p. 75-76)

Anxiety that the gentleman demonstrates, which is mostly psychological, rather than physical, emerges out of the fear of losing ethnic and national identity. True, during the colonial period, immigration from the colonies to the developed countries was encouraged for the fortification and sustenance of the colonial authority. Towards the beginning these immigrants used to live apart from “local

indigenous people and were disliked and feared by them" (Brown, 2006, p. 114). Brown claims that as these immigrants gradually established themselves in the host countries, reared their children and integrated in elite groups, they engaged in "a series of struggles with the ... authorities to better their conditions in many areas of life and to claim membership of the colonial polity with clear rights as British subjects" (2006, p. 114). This historical condition of the immigrants threatens the natives of the economically developed country today lest they should lose their authority upon their own position as a culturally majority group. Besides, it is conspicuous that some European countries, even in Japan local birth rate is alarmingly low, which is causing anxiety among the natives that in course of time the immigrants may outnumber them. This anxiety leads them to aggression upon the immigrants in the form of social stigmatization and transforms them into, as the narrator of the story "Well-lit House" calls them "raven women". When anxiety is associated with anger, it makes a man display aggression and leads him to assault the vulnerable group. Besides, the role of the reporter in the same story, who interviews the man and vows to publish it in a public newspaper to let the people know his predicament but never publishes it, explicates the political game regarding the immigrants among the local politicians and the power-structure. Local power-structure does not seem to be sincere to the narrator to settle the contention between the natives and the immigrants.

Xenophobia among the natives takes up a role of a political strategy to marginalize the immigrants, and the politics of otherizing or alienating, as Ayo A. Coly (2010) claims, "... preempts the development of emotional and affective ties" (p. 6). In the postcolonial world the conception of home is associated with the signifier of national cultural values and sovereignty. Loss of home is the loss of national and cultural sovereignty, and the awareness of this sovereignty creates anxiety which generates non-cooperation, even hostility among the natives. On the other hand, the immigrants who have already lost their motherland wrestle recklessly to construct a new signifier to define their 'self' and challenge the postcolonial narrative of home. The displacement of the immigrant family in the story titled "Well-lit House" turns it into a non-subject through the rejection of home. Home validates identity and hence, immigrants by all means wrestle to rebuild their home in the host country. On the other hand, the natives also wrestle not to share it with the outsiders because sharing home means sharing identity. Such contrapuntal relation gives birth to non-cooperation on the part of the natives and resistance on the part of the immigrants.

Similarly, the short story "Notes" depicts the same xenophobic disposition of the natives. The protagonist, that is, the immigrant woman has lost her husband who once died of heart attack. She struggles hard to bring up her two sons. They

have left for jobs and they are now working in a small island town. The woman works in a tailoring house. Once for supplementing her income took a part-time job in a school to look after the kids during the lunch-break. But while doing the job, she discovers the rooted hatred of her colleagues for her. One day in her workplace she discovers a piece of note "We don't like you" (Lahiri, 2023, p. 165). Again, one day she finds a note in her purse, "We don't like your face" (Lahiri, 2023, p. 165). In such an embarrassing situation the narrator woman helplessly utters, "I didn't even know where to turn. Almost nobody at school said hello to me" (165). True, dominant cultures exercise hegemony upon the peripheries, but "[C]ultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid..." (Said, 1997, p. 290). Hybridity challenges the purity of which Europe is always boastful. Due to the inherent nervousness emanated from the apprehension of losing purity of culture in contact with the immigrants; they very often grow hostile to them. For synthesis an understanding from both the parties may pave the way to juxtaposition. But "understanding is more a state of mind than a mental process. Understanding is the state of seeing" (Fulglesang, 1982, p. 13). Seeing requires curiosity which does not work in the space dominated by the superiority complex embracing the European natives. True, culture is a product of history. But it also reflects that history and embodies a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their places in time and space" (Thiong'o, 1993, p. 60). For synthesis between two different communities cultural dialogues are essential. But the superiority complex on the part of the European colonizing culture acts as a block to such synthesis. Jhumpa Lahiri draws attention to this point in this short story.

Both the processes of formation and resistance work simultaneously within the immigrants. They derive it from the postcolonial situations which inspire the natives who were once colonized to create 'cultural self-definition' and 'political self-determination', "two sides of the same coins" (Bertens, 2003, p. 194). It also leads the immigrants to a confronting state with the natives. On the other hand, the natives are not willing to recognize their presence in the mainstream cultural and political realities. In such an ambivalent situation, the immigrants suffer from the problem of self-effacement, namelessness. This theoretical condition is manifested through all the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri in her book *Roman Stories*. They are not given any name whatever nationality they have. This namelessness interprets the state of self-effacement of the immigrants. It is a process which leads the immigrants to dehumanization and transgression. Western colonial hegemony now transformed into imperialism goes on with the mission of perpetuating its dominance and hegemony by accommodating them in the margin, not in the centre of the power-structure.

Similarly, in the short story titled "Procession" a local couple comes to visit

Rome with a view to enjoying a special procession. Both of them are university teachers. They are in Rome now with a view to celebrating the belated 50th birthday of the wife. They rented a house to pass a few days there. The wife is haunted by a memory. While she was 19, she used to study in Rome for one year. At that time, she was 19 and fell in love with a local young man. But her love was not fulfilled. Now while after so many years she comes back to Rome she cannot wipe out the memory. Her husband knows the truth. They also engage themselves in conversation with each other about her past memory. She assures her husband that she no more feels any soft corner for that very Roman youth. But the husband knows that memories cannot be erased out because it is true that man lives in memories. Memories make a man/woman restless both physically and mentally. Its exemplification is demonstrated when she comes back home even after she and her husband go to the piazza to see the procession. She tries to rent hotel rooms after deserting the house they rented previously because she cannot unlock the door at the end of the hallway, though she knows that it is not for them; but for the owner of the house. She tries to unlock the door but fails. Metaphorically interpreted, it portrays the wife's intra-psychic conflict emerging out of her desire to fulfill her wish and the impossibilities impeding the gratification of her desire. According to Freudian concept of psychoanalysis, "... man must cope with wishes (and fears) in a world that denies them relief" (Skura, 1981, p. 63). She defends against her wishes, one of which may be her repressed desire to meet her boyfriend with whom she had fallen in love at her nineteen. Failure of physical fulfillment, equivalent to her failure to develop an authentic self, is transformed into her persistent wish to unlock the room. She tries to dig out her memories which define her entity and identity as well as her location. In this way, Jhumpa Lahiri has diagnosed the problem of the modern city dwellers, too, who like members of a diaspora community are constantly migrating within their own territory both physically and mentally and liquefying their national and self-consciousness which emerges out of the discourse of modernity "generally regarded as referring to modes of social organization ..." (Ashcroft, 1989, 210). Under such situations, as Du Bois (1903) terms it in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* as 'double consciousnesses' (p. 9). This bi-living state resulted in double consciousness weakens the resistance on the part of the immigrants because it tempts them to assess themselves through the borrowed eyes of the natives. The natives also develop this state of mind as an intensive anxiety out of the apprehension of losing the self identity and again confidence in self-superiority creates a dilemma which also leads them to crisis of identity.

True, naming ensures inclusivity and hence, it is never apolitical. In the postcolonial period, imperial control is implemented through naming. Again, on the part of the diaspora, naming of their own 'self' is essential to differentiate them from the imperializing power and establish their own identity. The factors such as

race, language, religion, territory, state and nationality melt down unless the entity of the diaspora is defined by naming. Demarcation line between the diaspora and the natives get blurred if the naming is not accomplished. In the Roman Stories Jhumpa Lahiri's strategy of not naming her character explicate the ambivalent location of the diaspora on the one hand, and on the other, it may be interpreted as an inability of the diaspora to define themselves, which consequently marks them still to be controlled by the imperialist power to whom they subjugate. Though born in England, Jhumpa Lahiri considers herself of Indian origin as her parents are from India. Hence, the imaginary homeland that she constructs from her visits to India and the stories that she comes to know from her parents lets her comprehend how a person with dual identity feels. This feeling emanates from the conflict between the present location and the parental location. Conflict between tradition and modernity which is a common experience of her characters in this book is mostly responsible for the anxiety which impedes the development process of identity. Lahiri depicts the failure of the diaspora in developing its identity, which leads the immigrants to construct a borrowed identity, a form of subjugation in the postcolonial or imperialist set up. Lahiri's technique of not naming her characters interprets the problems of the diaspora on the one hand, and on the other, it depicts that the diaspora is not able to form their own identity and hence, they should depend on the imperial power structure.

In the same vein, Lahiri has experimented with the characters without names in her another short story "Dante Alighieri" where two girls live together in a romantic relationship, though one of them maintains secret attachment with a boy who hands over her an envelope with a pseudonym called Dante Alighieri. Namelessness is, of course a crisis in the postcolonial reality encountered by the postcolonial generations. But naming pseudonymously is more alarming for the postcolonial generation as it transforms them into Babington Macaulay's 'mimic men', devoid of self-identity and self-dignity as it is characterized by 'indeterminacy' which acts as an impediment to the development of the 'self consciousness' of the natives. In Homi Bhabha's words:

... mimicry stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. (1994, p. 126)

Such indeterminacy works not only in political level but also in private level and alienates the individual from his or her surrounding environment. This problem is found with the speaker of the story "Dante Alighieri". The narrator criticizes the silence of her parents who are grappling with indeterminacy emanated

out of their apprehension of discovering the horrible realities their daughter is living with. The speaker goes on:

My parents were totally oblivious to my first romantic crisis. They tended to be unaware of my thoughts, problem, and worries. They didn't ask many questions, as if their curiosity, once activated, would reveal too much about the creature they'd made together. (Lahiri, 2023, p. 181)

As such, not only the power relations but also self-alienation creates a profound breach between an individual's self and his or her surrounding atmosphere. Such mental inertia is also a direct outcome of the postcolonial situations where power relations, this way or that way, patronizes the binary, us/them and thus, accelerates the process of being transformed into marginalized or others since it "... becomes tangible in a very material experience of a division into 'us' and 'them.'" (Textor, 2024, 157). Consciousness of this binary never brings peace and but repressive silence which ultimately burst out in the form of a cruel truth that instigates to enunciate "This city is shit" (Lahiri, 2023, p. 204). It is the city in the postcolonial world which snatches away man's own way of living, and which transforms the unwelcomed world into a prison where everybody lives in silence, homelessness, namelessness and suspicion.

Actually, all the characters of Roman Stories recklessly struggle to fit in the time and place they live in as they acutely feel displaced and deranged. "P's Parties" and "The Steps" depict the same problem of displacement in terms of race, gender and colonialism. The story "Notes" depicts how a mother is segregated by her two sons. The woman has lost her husband one day suddenly and since then she has been struggling hard to bring up her sons. As the sons gradually grow up they leave their mother for jobs in the next town. Mother having been left alone consoles her mind with a solace that her sons are caught up with their jobs. But if gaps and absences are generated by the children, then why should man be called social beings? It is a crucial question and it is asked helplessly by the mother of "Notes". She goes on:

It's strange that maternal anxiety grows with time, that you get worse with the years. I'd have thought the opposite, but how can we bear the distances, the absences, the silences our own children generate? (Lahiri, 2023, p. 161)

This mother's question points to the existential crisis which frantically chases the people of the present society mostly run by the capitalist economy which transforms man into factory of labor. She, further, represents everybody living in the society which imperatively transforms man into machine under the subterfuge

of creating employment opportunities for all. It has detached her twins who once used to go to school holding her hands and "talking in their high-pitched voices" (Lahiri, 2023, p. 162). She still feels her family, her sons and her husband who have taken resort to her memories. Actually, capitalism constantly revolutionizes the instruments of production and concurrently revolutionizes the whole relations of the society, engages and transforms man into instrument. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (2021), in this connection, define the process of transformation in the following words:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away; all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all which is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind. (p. 37-38)

This bourgeois economy legitimizes its project of alienating man deliberately by giving it a cosmopolitan character and it succeeds in procuring man's verdict that whatever it is doing is right and it is the way of the world characterized by material progress and development. It dislodges man with a new framework and consequently, man is no more satisfied with the old ones. Hence, a close reading of all the stories of the *Roman Stories* discovers that the relationship among characters turn abortive soon, and they fall apart both mentally and physically. Alienation, trauma, discontent and anxiety regarding melting identity and social dislocation chase them to a point of life where they wrestle recklessly but fail to set their problems right.

The crisis of identity and alienation haunts all the characters, both local and immigrants, occurring in the *Roman Stories*. All the characters suffer from helplessness, homesickness, incapacity, trauma in different forms and all these emotions go with the postcolonial generations irrespective of locals and immigrants. Immigrants live in ambivalence, apprehension of not being welcomed in the land they choose as their host country. On the other hand, the locals live in apprehension of being displaced by the immigrants both culturally, racially, economically, and even in terms of number. So, both the parties live in an atmosphere of mutual apprehension and suspicion.

In conclusion, it may be said that in the present world of ever-shifting paradigm of identity, culture and sovereignty, there will be an emergence of a new phenomenon, and it will conspicuously be, in the words of the eminent British

historian Arnold Toynbee, a 'world-state'. Rigorous stance about nationalism segregates human community and civilization. Rigorous consciousness of cultural, topographical and ideological identity leads human being to clash, mutual hatred, intolerance and derangement. If human beings desire to live in peace, they must build up a society which will ensure everybody's inheritance and, in *Roman Stories* Jhumpa Lahiri seems to look forward "'to a time when every human being will belong to' a world-society, a world-state, and a world-city" (Tharoor, 2020, p. 83). Instead of grappling with the notion of the affective dimension of nationhood, if human beings learn to integrate diverse communities with diverse cultural and political realities, then it may be possible to posit a collective narrative of meaningful belonging, and thus in a nutshell, this study reinforces the participation of the successive researchers in this field for further investigation.

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