TRANSGRESSIVE EXISTENCE AS EMBODIED RESISTANCE THROUGH PERSONAL MEMORY MANIPULATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

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Abstract

Focusing on memory manipulation, the article evaluates how Arundhati Roy portrays the 'Other' and how the supremacy dynamic is challenged in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She incorporates a postcolonial "Anjuman" subjectivity that defies male and female (transgender) oppression. Arundhati Roy also describes the power dynamics involved in rewriting myths to paint the marginalized as 'the dark demons,' and how the marginalized do not let the dominant force write off the past and erase it; instead, they rewrite it in forms such as poetry and take over forgotten spaces like graveyards to create something new. In the novel, the graveyard becomes a metaphor for silenced stories: from the guest house 'Jannat,' where Anjum helps the outcasts find refuge, to the mausoleum of an obscene Sufi saint, Hazrat Sarmad. Arundhati Roy maintains the idea of memory as the repressive modality that speaks and restores the power to the voiceless.

Key Terms: Marginalization, Identity, Memory Manipulation, Cultural Narratives, Resistance

Introduction

A. Overview of the novel's exploration of marginalized identities and narratives

Through her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy explores how personal as well as collective memories are manipulated strategically to challenge dominant cultural narratives and give voice to the marginalized communities. Through the lives of diverse characters like Anjum, a *hijra*, Arundhati Roy illuminates the complexities of marginality, identity, and the politics of cultural narratives in contemporary India. The first major character studied in the novel is Anjum who becomes prey of social evils and transforms herself from a sexually exploited transgender to the one who finds her abode in a graveyard where she constructs a dwelling place for other socially rejected individuals. Arundhati Roy describes her, "She was living in the graveyard like a tree...I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing" (TMUH 9). This powerful imagery establishes the graveyard

as a liminal space where the marginalized can exist authentically, defying societal norms. Moreover, through the novel, Roy exposes how collective cultural memory is distorted by dominant groups to subjugate minorities further, echoing theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Dominant nationalist forces try to rewrite the Ramlila epic, portraying the "evil demons" as "dark-skinned Dravidians" (TMUH 47), while state propaganda after 9/11 fuels Islamophobia to persecute the minorities. However, marginalized groups resist this enforced amnesia by preserving oral traditions and reclaiming forgotten public spaces like Anjum's graveyard sanctuary.

II. Personal Memory and Identity Construction
A. Anjum's rewriting of her past to create a "simpler, happier life" for Zainab

Anjum's act of rewriting her past to create a "simpler, happier life" for her adopted daughter Zainab is a poignant example of personal memory manipulation. Faced with the trauma of her own experiences, Anjum edits out painful details to shield Zainab from the harsh realities she herself had to endure. This revisionist storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming her narrative and constructing a more nurturing identity as Zainab's mother.

One striking instance is Anjum's retelling of the "Flyover Story" - her account of walking home with friends after a night of revelry. As Arundhati Roy narrates,

"Edited out of the Flyover Story...was the fact that the incident had happened in

1976, at the height of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi" (TMUH 23).

Anjum skillfully and intentionally omits the oppressive political context of forced sterilizations and civil rights violations to present a lighthearted, even whimsical tale to her young daughter. Moreover, Anjum is highly selective in what she shares about her past as a hijra, the stigma she faced, and the violence inflicted upon her community.

Arundhati Roy writes,

"She loved it when Anjum transformed herself into a young sex-siren who had

led a shimmering life of music and dance, dressed in gorgeous clothes with

varnished nails and a throng of admirers" (TMUH 23).

Anjum curates her life story, editing out adversity to create happier memories aligned with Zainab's childhood imagination. This deliberate manipulation is not merely an act of deception but, a profound expression of maternal love. As Arundhati Roy observes, "…the rewriting in turn began to make Anjum a simpler, happier person" (TMUH 23). By controlling the narrative, Anjum finds healing and can embrace a more joyful identity, shielding Zainab from the traumas that haunted her own past. Anjum's revisionism resonates with insights from scholar Gayatri Spivak on the subaltern's struggle for self-representation to dismantle cultural hegemonies that erase oppressed groups (Spivak 104). Through her stories, Anjum asserts agency over her life and relationship with Zainab, transcending the stigma and violence that once defined her existence as a hijra.

B. Suppressing traumatic memories of 2002

Anjum's act of suppressing traumatic memories of the riots is a poignant example of how the mind copes with unimaginable violence and trauma. The riots, which saw widespread religious violence and massacres, left deep psychological scars on Anjum.

As Arundhati Roy narrates,

"She tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded

the men and unfolded the women" (TMUH 36).

The haunting line refers to the brutal acts of rape, torture and mutilation inflicted upon common men and women during the riots. Anjum attempts to "un-know" these atrocities, to suppress and erase them from her consciousness as a self-preservation mechanism. Moreover, when Anjum with her friend Zakir Mian, go missing amidst the horrific violence. Roy writes, "There was no news either from her or from Zakir Mian...the news from Gujarat was horrible" (TMUH Roy 28). The novel then details the gruesome acts of the rioters, from burning pilgrims alive on a train to the state's complicity in targeting the marginalized. Anjum's disappearance and the surrounding brutality suggest she was a direct victim or witness to unimaginable trauma. Upon her return, Anjum is deeply scarred, described as "a ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident djinn and spirit" (TMUH 36). Her appearance becomes increasingly unkempt and wild, reflecting her inner torment. As Roy notes,

"She tried to un-know that little detail as she rattled through her private fort. But

she failed. She knew very well that she knew very well that she knew very well"

(TMUH 36).

Despite her attempts, Anjum couldn't purge the traumatic memories completely. This suppression of trauma connects to insights from trauma theorist Cathy Caruth on how the "overwhelming" nature of trauma "defies...simple comprehension" and assimilation into one's life story (Caruth 153). Anjum's desperate "un-knowing" represents an inability to fully integrate and process the violence she experienced or witnessed in Gujarat.

C. Embracing the empowered identity of "Anjuman" through revisionist self-narration

A pivotal moment in Anjum's journey of self-discovery is her embrace of the empowered identity "Anjuman" - a gathering of all. This act of revisionist self-narration allows her to transcend the constraints of her assigned gender and assert a fluid, inclusive sense of self. As Arundhati Roy narrates,

"She was living in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and

welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite...I'm Anjuman. I'm a

mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing"

(TMUH 3).

By redefining herself as "Anjuman," Anjum reclaims agency over her identity, crafting a self-conception that defies rigid categorizations. This revisionism resonates with insights from theorist Homi K. Bhabha on the "Third Space" of cultural hybridity that disrupts colonial binaries (Bhabha 37). Anjum's "Anjuman" identity occupies a transgressive third space beyond the male/female binary, challenging dominant narratives that seek to contain her identity. Moreover,

Anjum's self-narration aligns with Gayatri Spivak's call for the subaltern to engage in "a persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (Spivak 28). By asserting "I'm Anjuman," Anjum critiques the societal impositions on her identity while articulating her own desired self-conception. This act is particularly powerful given Anjum's marginalized status as a *hijra*. As scholar Serena Nanda notes, hijras face immense societal stigma and their very existence "threatens the cultural values that maintain and perpetuate the system of gender" in South Asia (Nanda 13). Anjum's revisionist self-narration subverts these oppressive cultural narratives, allowing her to embrace an identity that transcends rigid gender norms. Also, Anjum's self-naming echoes the significance of naming and renaming in postcolonial discourse. As theorist Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, "Renaming...is the struggle over the means of self-definition in the production of knowledge" (Thiong'o 105). By renaming herself as "Anjuman," Anjum seizes the means of self-definition, rejecting imposed identities and asserting her own empowered subjectivity. This act of self-narration is not merely symbolic; it has material consequences for how Anjum navigates the world. Arundhati Roy writes, "She hung the key around her neck on a black thread along with her bent silver toothpick" (TMUH 10). This symbolic gesture represents Anjum's newfound ownership over her identity and her refusal to be confined by societal expectations. Through her revisionist self-narration as "Anjuman," Anjum exemplifies the power of marginalized individuals to challenge dominant narratives and assert self-determined identities. Her journey resonates with postcolonial and feminist theories on subverting oppressive discourses, making space for fluid, hybrid subjectivities that defy rigid categorization.

III. Manipulation of Collective Cultural Memory
A. Rewriting Hindu mythology to marginalize minorities

Arundhati Roy poignantly depicts how Hindu mythology is rewritten and distorted to marginalize minorities, echoing postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's insights on how colonial narratives create the marginalized "Other" (Bhabha 94). The novel highlights the subversion of the Ramlila epic, portraying the "evil demons" like Ravan as "dark-skinned Dravidians" subjugated by the Aryan invaders:

> "Some audacious scholars had begun to suggest that the Ramlila was really
> history turned into mythology, and that the evil demons were really dark-skinned
> Dravidians - indigenous rulers - and the Hindu gods who vanquished them...were
> the Aryan invaders" (TMUH 47).

This revisionist portrayal transforms Ravan from a mythical villain into a symbol of the oppressed indigenous populace, upending the traditional Hindu narrative. As the novel notes,

> "in the rise and rise of the Parakeet Reich, regardless of what may or may not
> have been meant in the scriptures, in saffron parakeetspeak, the evil demons had
> come to mean not just indigenous people, but everybody who was not Hindu"
> (TMUH 47).

The demonization of "Other" in Hindu lore becomes a tool to marginalize religious and ethnic minorities. The novel depicts how this rewriting enables violence against minorities, as the

giant effigies of Ravan are "packed with more and more explosives" each year, with their fiery destruction symbolizing oppression:

"When the giant effigies were blown up, the sound of the explosions would boom through the narrow lanes of the old city. And few were in doubt about what that was meant to mean" (TMUH 47).

The subverted mythology legitimizes hostility towards the minorities of Old Delhi. Arundhati Roy's critique resonates with theorists like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who argued that the "renaming" of people and cultures is central to the "struggle over the means of self-definition in the production of knowledge" (Thiong'o 105).

B. State propaganda erasing Muslim identity and fueling Islamophobia after 9/11

The novel poignantly depicts how state propaganda in the aftermath of 9/11 fueled Islamophobia and sought to erase Muslim identity. As Anjum observes:

"The Poet-Prime Minister made a lisping speech...He warned that what had happened in America could easily happen in India." (TMUH 26)

This allusion to the Indian government's response after the 9/11 attacks reflects how the trauma was exploited to demonize the Muslim community. The Prime Minister's rhetoric, with its infantilizing lisp, paints Muslims as an inherent threat, echoing the stereotyping of "Mussalman" who "doesn't like the Other and needs to spread...Terror" (TMUH 27).

Arundhati Roy depicts the state's enactment of draconian anti-terror laws that enabled widespread profiling and detention of Muslim youth:

"A new law was passed which allowed suspects to be detained without trial for months. In no time at all the prisons were full of young Muslim men" (TMUH 27).

This systemic targeting resonates with theorist Gayatri Spivak's insights on how the nation-state constructs an "ideological high ground" to marginalize minority groups as the "alien" Other (Spivak 96).

The novel further illustrates how Islamophobic narratives permeated media discourse, with "TV reports about bomb blasts and terrorist attacks that suddenly proliferated like malaria. The Urdu papers carried stories of young Muslim boys being killed in what the police called 'encounters'" (TMUH 26). This climate of fear and suspicion erased Muslim youths' individuality, rendering them potential "terrorists" to be eliminated. Arundhati Roy's searing critique exposes how the Indian state capitalized on the 9/11 tragedy to legitimize its own agenda of oppressing the Muslim minority. The propaganda machinery, from political rhetoric to biased media coverage and discriminatory laws, functioned to cast Muslims as the reviled, threatening "Other" and erase their complex identities and narratives.

C. Revisiting historical figures like Hazrat Sarmad to reclaim minority narratives

Arundhati Roy poignantly revisits the historical figure of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed to reclaim minority narratives and perspectives often suppressed by dominant cultural forces.

Sarmad, a Jewish-Armenian merchant who embraced Islam and Sufism, was executed in 1661 for refusing to recite the full Islamic proclamation of faith until he had completed his spiritual journey.

As the novel depicts, Sarmad's story and shrine in Old Delhi offer a counter-narrative to mainstream religious orthodoxy:

"To suppose...that those who went to pay their respects to Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed without knowing his story did so in ignorance...would be a mistake" (TMUH 12).

His spirit celebrated "the virtue of spirituality over sacrament, simplicity over opulence and stubborn, ecstatic love even when faced with the prospect of annihilation" (TMUH 12).

Moreover, Sarmad's shrine becomes a space where marginalized identities can forge their own meanings from his defiant legacy:

"Sarmad's insubordinate spirit...permitted those who came to him to take his story and turn it into whatever they needed it to be" (Arundhati Roy 11).

This resonates with theorist Homi Bhabha's insights on how marginalized groups can subvert dominant narratives by "revaluat[ing] the premises of the master-discourse" (Bhabha 162).

For Anjum's mother Jahanara Begum, a distraught new mother grappling with her child's intersex identity, Sarmad's shrine offers spiritual refuge:

"Perhaps he had called her to him...Suddenly they seemed to be the most important people in the world" (TMUH 12).

Embracing Sarmad allows Jahanara to find meaning amidst the "scrambled" certainties of her world and connect with a counter-tradition-affirming non-normative identity.

IV. Reclaiming Memory as Resistance
A. Preserving oral traditions and minority art forms

Arundhati Roy poignantly depicts how Anjum and the Khwabgah community resist cultural erasure by preserving oral traditions and art forms like poetry and Hijra culture. As the novel notes,

"Ustad Kulsoom Bi...believed nobody would ever write Urdu like that again and that no actor would ever be able to match the diction and delivery of Dilip Kumar" (TMUH 25).

This lament reflects the waning status of Urdu, once the language of courtly culture, now increasingly marginalized. Anjum herself embodies this resistance through her love of Urdu poetry and insistence on being referred to as a *hijra* rather than the more modern "transperson" (TMUH 25). Her recitation of Urdu couplets and verses is an act of preserving a rich literary tradition at risk of being forgotten. As theorist Gayatri Spivak argues, such acts allow the marginalized subaltern to engage in "persistent critique" of dominant narratives that erase minority perspectives (Spivak 28).

Moreover, the very existence of the Khwabgah as a sanctuary for the Hijra community constitutes a refusal to be rendered invisible. The novel highlights how

"Sarmad's insubordinate spirit...permitted those who came to him to take his
story and turn it into whatever they needed it to be" (TMUH 12).

By centering unorthodox figures like the Sufi saint Hazrat Sarmad, Arundhati Roy reclaims historical narratives typically suppressed by cultural hegemonies. The Khwabgah's residents, with their vibrant traditions of music, dance, and gender nonconformity, embody Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural "hybridity" that challenges rigid boundaries (Bhabha 37). Their very existence constitutes what Bhabha terms a "revaluation of the premises of the master-discourse" that seeks to contain and marginalize minority identities (Bhabha 162).

B. Reclaiming public spaces for marginalized stories

Arundhati Roy poignantly depicts how Anjum reclaims the graveyard as a sanctuary for marginalized stories and existences. The graveyard becomes a liminal space where Anjum and others on the fringes of society can forge their own narratives beyond the constraints of the "Duniya" (the outside world). As the novel states,

"She lived in the graveyard like a tree...She gathered they weren't altogether
unhappy at having excused themselves and exited from the story" (Arundhati Roy
3).

The graveyard offers refuge to those excluded from dominant narratives, allowing them to "exit" from oppressive scripts. Anjum's very existence in the graveyard subverts societal norms that render *hijras* invisible. As Serena Nanda notes, hijras "threaten the cultural values that maintain and perpetuate the system of gender" in South Asia (Nanda 13). By inhabiting the graveyard openly as a hijra, Anjum reclaims public space, making her marginalized identity and story impossible to ignore. The graveyard also becomes a repository for minority histories and figures typically suppressed by cultural hegemonies. Arundhati Roy writes that Anjum "watched him leave, tap-tap-tapping his way through the graves, his seeing-eye cane making music" (TMUH 10). Imam Ziauddin's blindness and presence in the graveyard symbolize how it shelters narratives rendered metaphorically "unseen" by mainstream society.

Furthermore, Anjum's guest house "Jannat" (Paradise) functions as "a repository of suppressed narratives" by providing refuge and final rites to those rejected by the city's graveyards and imams (TMUH 44). As Arundhati Roy notes,

"Gradually Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services became so much a part of
the landscape that nobody questioned its provenance or its right to exist. It existed.
And that was that" (TMUH 44).

Anjum's reclamation of the graveyard space solidifies the existence of marginalized stories and traditions.

C. Embodying counter-memories through transgressive existence

Anjum's very existence as a *hijra* embodies a powerful counter-narrative that challenges dominant cultural narratives and amnesia surrounding marginalized identities. Through her uncompromising embrace of her hijra identity and "transgressive" femininity, Anjum inscribes

counter-memories into the landscape itself. As Arundhati Roy poignantly depicts, Anjum's transition from Aftab to "Anjuman" - a gathering of all - represents a revisionist act of self-narration. By renaming herself, Anjum rejects the identity imposed upon her and articulates

"a persistent critique of what one cannot not want," echoing Gayatri Spivak's insights on how the subaltern must subvert oppressive discourses (Spivak 28).

Her new name signals her existence in a transgressive "Third Space" beyond rigid gender binaries, resonating with Homi Bhabha's theorization of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 37).

Moreover, Anjum's exaggerated feminine aesthetic and unabashed sexuality embody what Bhabha terms a "revaluation of the premises of the master-discourse" that seeks to contain marginalized subjects (Bhabha 162). With her "sequined, gossamer kurtas...silver anklets, glass bangles and dangling earrings," Anjum presents an uncompromising vision of *hijra* femininity that ruptures societal norms (TMUH 41). Her very presence on the streets becomes an inscription of counter-memory, making her identity impossible to ignore or erase.

This transgressive existence culminates in Anjum's decision to take refuge in a graveyard, transforming it into a sanctuary for herself and other marginalized figures. The graveyard becomes "a repository of suppressed narratives" where Anjum can reside authentically, giving physical space and form to identities typically rendered invisible (TMUH 41). Her guest house "Jannat" (Paradise) provides shelter to hijras expelled from traditional communities, preserving oral traditions and minority art forms in defiance of cultural amnesia.

V. The Graveyard as a Site of Memory
A. Anjum's refuge in the graveyard

The poignant title "Where Do Old Birds Go to Die?" holds profound symbolic meaning in the novel, encapsulating Anjum's journey to find refuge and authenticity in the graveyard. The graveyard becomes a liminal space where Anjum, as a hijra existing outside rigid societal norms, can reside authentically and inscribe her marginalized identity into the landscape. Imam Ziauddin's blindness symbolizes how the graveyard houses stories deemed metaphorically "unseen" by the cultural hegemonies that erase minority perspectives. The title also evokes the disappearance of marginalized cultures and communities facing existential threats, with Anjum and the hijra community standing in for many oppressed groups. As theorist Gayatri Spivak argues, the novel gives voice to the marginalized "subaltern" whose narratives are suppressed by dominant discourses (Spivak 104). Furthermore, Anjum's guest house "Jannat" (Paradise) becomes "a repository of suppressed narratives" by providing refuge to those ostracized from society (Arundhati Roy 39). The graveyard setting allows Anjum to reside authentically as a hijra, defying societal impositions on her identity.

B. The graveyard housing marginalized histories

The graveyard serves as a repository for marginalized histories and identities, housing the graves of Anjum's family members, fellow *hijras*, and societal "outsiders" who were denied burial elsewhere. Among the graves are those of Anjum's relatives like her father Mulaqat Ali, aunt

Begum Zeenat Kauser who returned from Pakistan, and sister Bibi Ayesha. But the graveyard also shelters narratives typically suppressed by mainstream society. Arundhati Roy writes of the grave simply marked "Badshah," with conflicting accounts of whether he was "a lesser Mughal prince...or a Sufi poet from Afghanistan" (TMUH 34). Another grave has the inscription "Islahi" Some people argue that he was an army general while other people argue that he was a pimp of this town (TMUH 35). These ambiguous graves allow marginalized figures to be memorialized, their contested histories preserved.

Moreover, the graveyard houses the remains of individuals rejected by dominant cultural and religious institutions during life. Arundhati Roy also concentrates on the grave of a young Romanian girl belly dancer called Begum Renata Mumtaz, who got cheated on and died (TMUH 35). Her tombstone, with the incongruous honorifics "Begum" and "Madam," was erected by Roshan Lal, the judgmental headwaiter who surprisingly organized her burial out of affection. The graveyard also provides a final resting place for *hijra* bodies that were turned away from other graveyards due to stigma. When Anwar Bhai cannot find a place to bury Rubina, one of his sex workers who died, Anjum's guest house "Jannat Funeral Services" agrees to inter her, as it "would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected" (TMUH 44).

C. Anjum's guest house "Jannat" is a repository of suppressed narratives

The graveyard shelters narratives of marginalized art forms at risk of being forgotten. Arundhati Roy notes how Ustad Kulsoom Bi "believed nobody would ever write Urdu like that again and that no actor would ever be able to match the diction and delivery of Dilip Kumar" (TMUH 25). By preserving Urdu poetry recitals and the fading traditions of the Hijra community, Jannat resists the cultural amnesia imposed on minority groups. Anjum's very existence as a hijra residing in the graveyard constitutes an embodiment of counter-memory. As theorist Homi Bhabha argues, such acts represent "a revaluation of the premises of the master-discourse" that seeks to subjugate marginalized subjects (Bhabha 162). Anjum's uncompromising commitment to living authentically as a hijra inscribes new narratives into the cultural landscape through her corporeal presence.

Furthermore, Jannat provides refuge to hijras expelled from the mainstream Gharana system, allowing their stories and histories to find sanctuary. As Arundhati Roy states,

"Gradually Jannat Guest House became a hub for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas" (TMUH 19). Figures like Nimmo Gorakhpuri can reconnect with their pasts and share narratives typically silenced within dominant discourses.

VI. Conclusion

Arundhati Arundhati Roy's novel '*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*,' emerges as a powerful "polyphonic counter-narrative" that challenges the cultural amnesia imposed by dominant groups on marginalized communities. Through its portrayal of characters like Anjum, the novel gives voice to those rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives of nation, religion, and

gender. Arundhati Roy deftly weaves personal acts of revisionist self-narration, like Anjum's embrace of her "Anjuman" identity, with critiques of how collective cultural memories are manipulated to subjugate minorities. A historical analysis of Hindu epics retold to portray indigenous people as 'evil demons,' and the post-9/11 Islamist propaganda more violently reveals how oppression is designed to veil minorities' narrative. However, the novel also contains countless instances of countering such erasures. For instance, from translating oral history into poetry to occupying shared territory as the graveyard, Arundhati Roy's characters of the Untamed represent counter-memory by the mere fact of their existence in the periphery of society.

Finally, Arundhati Roy exposes how memory can be manipulated and used as a tool of domination by the powerful and for defiance by the subjugated. Individual and collective acts of revisionism let oppressed groups rewrite cultural histories where they are erased or severely marginalized. The process of composing personal narratives in Anjum's case transforms her from a silent victim of the 2002 Gujarat riots to an empowered, transgender figure called 'Anjuman.' This allows her presence in the graveyard to rewrite the culture with counter-narratives of the embodied form. At the same time, the novel also reveals the capacity of the oppressors to use historical narratives, myths, and myths for further oppression. The exploitation of the 9/11 tragedy that resulted in hatred against Muslims and the bend of the Ramlila epic that portrays minorities as demons are employed as evil manipulations of the state. In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's polyphonic novel fractures the erasure often performed on minority communities, rendering them how to speak for themselves and write themselves into the social imagination.

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