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Unveiling Gender Roles: Analysis of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath in terms of 1950s American Society

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Abstract

In literary criticism, gender roles have always been under discussion from a variety of perspectives. Especially in 1950s American Society, after World War II within the effects of disillusionment, there have been overwhelming changes in society in terms of culture and politics. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath as a novel narrates these important compendiums in terms of gender roles by considering the new transformative culture of the USA. Thus, Plath strongly narrates these issues from such a perspective that the reader of the novel can obtain new perspectives towards relevant issues. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath in terms of gender roles from a feminist perspective by considering 1950s American Society, sexual double standards, identity of women, and the very discussion will be done within a perception of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Identity Crisis, Hypocrisy of Patriarchy, 1950s American Society, Conformity

1. Introduction

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath plays a crucial role in literary field. The novel was published in 1963 and is considered her touchstone along with her other precious works. The period of its publication and the era in which Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* is critically important in every sense to understand its multiple dimensions within its compendiums in terms of gender roles. Since Sylvia Plath was born and raised in USA, her observation of her period as a “woman” author is very important. Sylvia Plath, through her remarkable observations had written down her novel *The Bell Jar*. These observations are involved in the structural richness of the novel in which the reader can comprehend the infrastructural formulation of American Society in 1950s USA. In a historical context, when we look at 1950s America, we encounter a post-war country after World War II. Thus, USA was affected by WW II. in its core and its society was disillusioned in a wide range dimension. After the war, the country had gone under a cultural change which was filled with fatal errors. These fatal errors are sociologically open for argumentation in terms of gender studies, because societal expectations and the range of conformity was arousing in its structure, it was becoming patriarchal in all respects. This patriarchal transformation was existed to rout the signifiers of institution of family, education, and mass media in terms of gender roles.

It is important to give brief definitions of the cultural change of America in 1950s, because *The Bell Jar* is a narration of this very society from a woman's perspective. Therefore, before digging into details of the novel to understand its paratext, the first critical thing to comprehend from a feminist perspective is the term "gender" which is socially constructed and is a negative impression which is established to create domestication. In post-war era, this was the core base of the new culture in America. This new patriarch culture inevitably gave a birth to change the signifier of the term "woman". In this new order, "woman" became the object of production and "man" became the subject of provider. As Jennifer Holt states in her article "*The Ideal Woman*":

Most everyone is familiar with the storybook image of America in the 1950s. Images are continually popularized of a simpler, happier time emerging from the aftermath of the Second World War. Families moved to the suburbs, fostered a baby boom, and forged a happy life of family togetherness in which everyone had a specified role. Women were considered domestic caregivers, with sole responsibility for the home and child rearing, while men 'brought home the bacon. (Holt, 2014, p.1)

Jennifer Holt's definition provides a very beneficial perspective for us to understand the general concept of such a society and their patriarchally based ideologies. As a matter of fact, within the consideration of the changes in relation with the concept of the family, it caused a subliminally inherited separation in terms of gender-based requirements and conformism, this concept of family was called as nuclear family, in her article Bridget O'Keefe states that: "America during the 1950s and 1960s was grounded in and centered on the conception of the nuclear family." (O'Keefe, 2014, pg.1). All in all, the purport of family and the process of emplacement of women in the society became a very subject to make a criticism. In this regard gender roles found its own position to fit into the societies' core. By that, women were targeted from vantage point of views and as time passes through what was expected from women became something cyclopean until it is domiciliated. That's the very reason of this paper to analyze the thematic qualities of *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective by considering gender roles. By doing so, the reader of this article will acquire an understanding within the cultural realities of this very society in the novel.

Based on the given critical compendiums, when we focus on Sylvia Plath's book "*The Bell Jar*" we can say that we see a strong reflection of the effects of these realities. Sylvia Plath's novel presents Esther Greenwood, the protagonist who tries to survive under the circumstances of 1950s America to become a writer, under an order which is constructed upon patriarchy. In fact, this main character represents every women individual who struggled under such circumstances to achieve their goals to obtain their freewill. The implication of these significant elements in the book initiates a path for the reader to observe the fatal errors in this patriarchal order and shows how it can damage one's real identity to build its stereotypical one, as Simone De Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex* "We are not born woman, we become it" (De Beauvoir 1949, p. 102).

The protagonist of the novel presents us one's individual struggle in her personal life and her clash with societal expectations, to summarize being a "woman" with all these attached norms which we had discussed so far. The novel can be considered a journey of Esther's self-discovery; her journey is complex and introspective which also highlights remarkable thoughts of Sylvia Plath. The journey of independency of Esther Green from patriarchy can only be achieved by breaking through the societal conformity so that she can achieve what she desires. In this respect, this paper will discuss Sylvia Plath's "*The Bell Jar*" from a feminist perspective in terms of gender roles and will focus on 1950s American Society by regarding societies' fatal errors, thus "*The Second Sex*" by Simone De Beauvoir will be mainly used as a primary source to initiate a comprehensive path to understand the overall perspective.

2. Literature Review

In this very paper the aim is to provide a critical point of view of 1950s American Society in terms of gender roles. As a matter of fact, the chosen work to be analyzed is *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The reason of why this novel is the very subject of this significant argumentation is directly related with the novel and what it presents to reader with its narration. The novel depicts the life of Esther Greenwood, a young woman who lives in 1950s patriarchal American Society after World War II. Sylvia Plath with her novel makes a very distinguished feminist criticism

toward this patriarchal order. Throughout the novel, reader is able to encounter with multiple layers of this system, for this reason the concept of gender roles to be discussed with its concepts of sexual double standards, identity, and patriarchy becomes more significant to make a criticism of 1950s American Society.

For the very aim of this paper, a process of literary review has been done by the writer. Since the very aim is regarding the compendiums of gender roles, *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir and her perception on the relevant topic has been considered and applied to the paper. The very reason is that Beauvoir in her important criticism in her book, explores the problematic manner of the term “gender roles” which is artificial and constructed by the patriarchal society. The terms are socially controversial for the sake of conformity of woman as the binary opposition of man, thus for her, it is also related with the society of the individual in which she lives. The very term transforms itself within the changes of the society. In fact, Simone De Beauvoir states that women are placed in a secondary position compared to its opposition to men. In social life they became the inferior one, so that the concept of the family became a tool to get rid of the unreality, as Simone De Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex* “socially she feels inferior to man; she has no hold on the world or the future; she will try to compensate for her frustrations through the child” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 632). Therefore, in such a position women are expected to conform societal expectations to become submissive more than ever. Considering the information that is given in this section as a primary source *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir becomes very beneficial to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the 1950s cultural problems when it comes to the issue of gender. An implication of such perspective illuminates different ideas on Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.

On the other hand, İlkay Ağır explores the very alienation of women by regarding the historical context of the novel, in his article which is titled as *Identity crisis and alienation in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar*. He is mainly arguing the focal points of this patriarchal manner of approaching women. Thus, he mostly focuses on the main character Esther Greenwood in terms of gender roles and its relationship with her identity. As he states in his article “Especially, her female identity sharpens the role crisis between human and the society so that she was unconvinced by the unfair patriarchal society.” (Ağır, 2015, p.37). His point of view provides a very significant in-depth perspective for the relevant study of this paper.

For last, Vanessa Martin Lamb’s research in her article, *The 1950’s and the 1960’s and the American Woman : the transition from the “housewife” to the feminist* is a very detailed and extensive research of the main argument of this very article, examines 1950’s and 1960’s American Society by considering the contextual elements of the *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective. The insights and the very discussion of her article are very beneficial for the further study of this article.

As matter of fact, Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* used in this article as a primary source to discuss the relevant term of gender roles in *The Bell jar*, on the other hand İlkay Ağır’s, *Identity crisis and alienation in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar* and Vanessa Martin Lamb’s article, *The 1950’s and the 1960’s and the American Woman : the transition from the “housewife” to the feminist* are used mainly to make a further discussion to emphasize on the subject of identity and inferiority of women within a consideration of historical context of the novel. Other sources which are given in the references part are used to elaborate on the highlighting points.

3. The impact of 1950s “American Society” in *The Bell Jar*

1950s’ trajectory in historical context is remarkable to comprehend the new ideal structure after World War II in sociological dimensions to examine gender roles in an in-depth approach within a consideration to its cultural phenomena. The cultural shift which emerged after the war traumatized the identity of women. There was a significant separation between man and woman in social context. In fact, mass media was very effective to spread this ideological understanding to initiate its path into culture. As an example, for mass media, a magazine article which is published under the name of “*The Good Wife’s Guide*” (1955) is an example to this shift in culture. The article is a “guide” for women of its time in terms of manners of a woman and guides women how to act and talk in their marriage. If we give an example from the article, it would be easier to comprehend this very delusional ideology “Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you’ll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.”

(Housekeeping Monthly, 1955, p.1). In this regard, the given line actually is just “one” example of this gendered discrimination in American Society. This kind of publications were common to manipulate the society in a broader sense.

The identity of women became inferior as the manipulation progresses and the rise of patriarchy was inevitably taking its position in a very deep dimension, destructive, discriminative, separatist yet the ideal. For this very reason, in general perspective the manipulation obtained its own success by anti-feminists in American Society in terms of segregation between two sexes. As De Beauvoir states “The defiant position that American women occupy proves they are haunted by the feeling of their own femininity.” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.24). The patriarch order made American women to believe that their “femininity” is their very “inferiority” and its opposite is required to find the balance which is the essential “male”, a masculine figure which can inherit this very balance.

Furthermore, Sylvia Plath as a woman novelist and poet was also struggling under same circumstances. This is the very reason that in this paper a part is also focusing on periodical realities. The purpose is to open a way to understand the sociological aspects in a wide range. Sylvia Plath as an author involved these harsh discriminative realities into her novel by using the character, Esther Greenwood. The compendiums given so far are the significant structure of *The Bell Jar*. The novel profoundly gives vivid images with its depiction of the 1950s American society and its effects on the protagonist. Esther depicts this ideology and its expectations through her observations in the novel; the following lines presents the reader what a woman would dream of if they conform to the expectations of the society:

This hotel – the Amazon – was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn’t get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other (Plath, 1963, 1.2)

In this part of the novel, Esther depicts the middle-class white women’s education and their expectations. As it can be understood, she depicts an educational system that is structured for the “feminine”, a school system in which women can learn manner and how to dress-up properly. The only goal a woman could achieve in work environment is being a secretary of a “powerful” man and the only and biggest dream is getting married with a rich man. Sylvia Plath purposefully depicts these lines with the help of her character; in a way she depicts the circumstances how women are manipulated. The term “feminine” is important to re-consider understanding the structure of this patriarchal society, because this term was not only depicted but was tried to be shown as inferior scientifically and psychologically to persuade society that women are inferior in their own nature, Simone De Beauvoir makes an important statement about this problematic act:

it insists all the more fiercely that woman’s place be in the home as her emancipation becomes a real threat; even within the working class, men tried to thwart women’s liberation because women were becoming dangerous competitors—especially as women were used to working for low salaries. 6 To prove women’s inferiority, antifeminists began to draw not only, as before, on religion, philosophy, and theology but also on science: biology, experimental psychology, and so forth. (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.32)

In Simone De Beauvoir’s statements we can clearly indicate that, the era in which Esther Greenwood lives including the author Sylvia Plath, the term “woman” had been overwhelmingly targeted as a threat, its existence in an equal dimension compared to man was a problematic one if she can gain her freedom. This freedom must have been taken under control; in this regard this patriarchal order had implied some other formulations into the very core of the society so that woman can be transformed into an objectification process in which “it” is not a threat anymore. For this reason, they made it seem like they are inferior ones by using science and psychology, and this figure of speech was filled with errors. This problematic action is the important example of 1950s American Society.

This stereotypical indication of women found its process of objectification and it resulted with the general societal expectations as it is stated before, but in a more detailed perspective, the perception towards women from the

perspective of male figures significantly shaped around the ideology that women should present themselves in their “feminine” positioning so that they can establish what is expected from them. This patriarch mentality has been shown through the pages of the novel and again Esther Greenwood is aware of these circumstances. She is aware of the expectations and does not want to conform to them, however, if she does not, it is hard for her to find a significant place for herself, in this respect we can also emphasize her dilemma, as James Vandrau states in his article that:

The society Esther finds herself in levies different expectations for men and women in the workplace. The stereotype of woman focusing only on being homemakers, baby makers and housewives is beyond prominent and they are made to believe that caring for their spouses and children is better than pursuing their own dreams. (Vandrau, 2020, p.1)

As is mentioned in the introductory part of this research paper, we can state from the given quote that this dilemma is also a cause of the workplace too. In this regard we can emphasize that the traumatic experiences of women in 1950s are directly comes from the image of women as they are being a baby producing machines. In fact, the initiation of such a path in society resulted in another position for them to be submissive at their house. The role of being a housewife is more important compared to working when it comes to women. Thus, male should be the provider of money and women should be carers of their house, children, and husband. They should be sexually objected to please their male and should not try to achieve their dreams in life.

Since we had discussed some several facts about the representation of women in its different layers, the concept of marriage also another layer to consider to have a comprehensible understanding of the concept of marriage in 1950s through the lens of our protagonist Esther Greenwood. First of all, a reader of the novel can recognize that Esther sometimes makes comments on such societal expectations which in the very core of the society. She usually makes statements from her observations onto some specific concepts. In this regard, Esther Greenwood’s familial background is very important to consider too. Since she comes from a family in which she also struggled from their expectations, she wanted to establish a new life in which she can success and can “earn” her own freewill. Her struggle in this very sense has been greatly emphasized in his article by İlkay Ağır, “Patriarchal society and deficiency of her family have negative influence on Esther’s maturity.” (Ağır, 2015, p.30) Than, one of the most important concept in this context is the concept of “marriage”, in the novel Esther states that:

A man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn’t know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. (Plath, 1963, 7.54)

As we can see from the given quotation, it is a very important depiction which depicts the ideal goal of a woman and what is expected from this woman to conform by her family. This quote indeed shows the reader that these stereotypes are not only expected from the outer layers of society, but it also comes from one’s own family. In this respect, Esther concludes what was expected to conform, her mother’s statement is the proof of very structure of 1950s. What is expected from her is being successful in marriage and it can only be obtained through her femininity. Her mother is a very good example of these stereotypical women figure which this society appreciates, and she expects her daughter to conform into the same dimension and only in that way a woman can make sense in a family and can serve what she is expected to. As Vanessa Martin Lamb states in her article “In reality American social culture at the time was entirely based on the family” (Lamb, 2012, p.11)

In terms of gender roles, a woman will not only be under the authority of her husband to serve, but in general sense, she is also expected to serve to other male figures. If she has a brother, father, she is also under the control of patriarchy from other sides too, Simone De Beauvoir comments on this subject and states that:

After marriage, she is still subjected to the authority of her father or her oldest brother—authority that will also extend to her children—or of her husband after marriage, she is still subjected to the authority of her father or her oldest brother—authority that will also extend to her children—or of her husband. (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.106)

As a matter of fact, with this part of this research paper, the aim was to provide an overall picture of the 1950s American Society, and how it affected women individuals within a change in its cultural dimension. The perception of American Society changed after the effects of World War II. The society was disillusioned in this very post-war era, and it was structured by patriarchal order. Gender roles as an artificial terminology which is also constructed by this very patriarchal order initiated a new path to formulate new perspectives and ideologies towards women in every era of social life. An inferior image on “female” sex was indeed necessary to showcase the patriarchal power on women, thus this patriarchal order maintained to provide a stronger structure, to establish such a dimension, they used mass media, culture, and institution of family. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath with its narrations depicts the environment and circumstances of 1950s America from the perspectives of Esther Greenwood. The protagonists’ observations are not fictional but are reality which are also observed by the author herself.

4.From a Feminist Perspective, Sexual Double Standards in The Bell Jar

To begin with, the very idea of gender roles as a term significantly stands for societal expectations. They are existing for “one” to conform them in their stereotypical dimension. In feminist criticism, the dynamics between men and women have always been criticized from multiple perceptions. Within these terminologies, in a broader sense, it must be understood that there is an important term to point out, which is the gender “male”, this term has its own powerful indication compared to its opposite “female”. The inferiority of the “female” one is pre-constructed before her birth. Thus, what it stands for is ambivalent in relevance to its culture. Hence, almost in every aspect this reality of power relations and women as being the one who is inferior does not change. In this regard we can say that women are not able to be independent if they conform these societal expectations, as Simon De Beauvoir states in her book that, “women have never constituted a closed and independent society; they form an integral part of the group, which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place” (Beauvoir, 1959, p. 567). As it is stated by Beauvoir herself, it can be said that the society itself is “male”, but females are the ones who are just a part of it, the ones who are inferior. In fact, this situation provides a negative compendium which is hypocrisy in terms of sexual double standards.

Regarding the given dynamics above, the problematic manner of women in this context considering the novel is required to be analyzed from an extensive glance from a feminist perspective in terms gender roles; by doing so one can comprehend the ultimate errors and can see the reality of this two-faced patriarchal order. Considering what had been stated so far from a feminist glance in terms of gender roles, in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, we can encounter with the examples of hypocrisy of gender roles in which we can find our protagonist Esther Greenwood in such position that it proves us Beauvoir is significantly right in her statement when stating that women are just “an integral part of the group”. This integral part of the group is filled hypocrites, and our main character Esther is aware of this situation and states her disgust on it, “I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (Plath, p.100). In this regard, Sylvia Plath as an author of her own era (1950s) makes a very distinguish feminist statement by involving such lines into her novel which shows the reader sexual double standards. For that very reason, Esther Greenwood is an important character to focus on. Because her lines and the way she speaks and behaves are all representations of a woman individual who struggles under the errors of the patriarchal society in terms of her own exploration of what gender roles are standing for in this two-faced system.

The difference when it comes to Esther is her “consciousness” compared to other women in her environment in which she criticizes and is aware of the error in her own society. Since she is aware of the reality that there is something wrong with the expectations of society, she understands its errors and is aware of its hypocritic dimension. For this reason, she is not that much in obedience as other women but is submissive because of fear of not fitting in conformity. This situation of women in general and how they repeat every faulty positional circumstance without illuminating its fallacies is summarized by Beauvoir in a very strong way.

It is easy to see why woman clings to routine; time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past. If one knows the word and the formula, duration allies itself with the powers of fecundity – but this is itself

subject to rhythm of the months, the seasons; the cycle of each pregnancy, each flowering, exactly reproduces the one that preceded. (Beauvoir, 1959, p.569)

This hypocrisy has been significantly illustrated in the novel with Esther's relationship with men. Her relationship with Buddy Willard is an example of this context. Their relationship is hard to give a complete definition since it is not stabilized and is in change with Esther's points of view towards this relationship. Their relationship is a very strong exemplification of what is expected from women in relationship and how women should react to fit into the conformist ideology of male dominated society. This relationship is really hard because of Esther's mental changes, her "feminine" is targeted as being the inferior one and it causes her to struggle when it comes to relationships. On the opposite side, Buddy Willard is an exact definition of how a man should act in societal expectations. He represents the general ideology of this patriarchal society and dictates what this ideology expects from woman. He is maybe not ideal for Esther but for sure he represents what other would expect to see when it comes to man. In this respect, Sylvia Plath created this male figure to put an image of the very hypocrisy which we had discussed so far. Esther Greenwood as the lead female figure in the novel makes a strong definition to show the reader how much hypocrite he is "I discovered quite by accident what an awful hypocrite he was, and now he wanted me to marry him, and I hated his guts." (Plath, p.65) The main point here is that Willard is introducing himself as conservative, morally illuminative, royal and such. However, he also shows his other side in his relationship with Esther. He is actually the opposite of what he introduced. Such that, he tries to have sexual relationship with Esther, it is something completely opposite to what Esther thinks about, thus, he talks about women's purity afterwards. This act is the very summary and is an example of the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society, the system itself is already corrupted and is contradictory "Now I saw he had only been pretending all this time to be so innocent" (Plath, p.47). As a matter of fact, Esther was affected by this reality very much, her point of view towards life makes her question life in her society. This idea of purity makes her disgust, and she hates the idea of being in a relationship with Willard, in other words living in this morally corrupt society.

Considering the given compendiums within the novels structured narration in terms of its relevance to gender roles, its hypocrite ideology causes mental frustration on the main character Esther Greenwood. Indeed, she cannot "accept nor reject" because she tries to fit in, for this very reason her identity becomes something which she struggles to make sense. Thus, this frustration causes her to think about suicidal thoughts to end her life. "I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one" (Plath, pg.191). Since she cannot fit in and cannot imagine any future for herself, there is no purpose in keeping up with the struggle in this hypocrite and patriarchal order.

When we consider the overall plot of the narrative in *The Bell Jar* a pervasive dimension occurs, the rising hypocrisy of gender roles in such society is narrated with the help of the protagonist Esther Greenwood. Sylvia Plath uses her main character to serve as an evident of that time of period, in this regard we can say that the very gender roles which we had discussed so far are illuminating the reader that gender roles are duplicitous in its core. For such a purpose, Sylvia Plath challenges her protagonist to make depictions of the harsh reality in which the reader can observe the patriarchal dynamics of her society, and this society comes up with sexual double standards, and these standards are ultimately hypocritical.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discussed "*The Bell Jar*" (1963) by Sylvia Plath in terms of 1950s American Society within a perspective in which the argumentative focal point is gender roles. Considering the compendiums of gender roles, it can be stated that the significant positioning of women in a secondary dimension has been analyzed with the help of protagonist Esther Greenwood. In this respect, Sylvia Plath's narration in the novel unveils women's struggle within a critical point of view and it exposes the fatal errors of that very patriarchal society and how it attaches societal expectations over women. By unveiling these problematic dimensions, the readers of the novel can have a very significant comprehension of the novel. Thus, Sylvia Plath with *The Bell Jar*, narrates this cultural error of conformity of American Society regarding its hypocritical reality. As a matter of fact, a feminist approach towards the novel is indeed necessary to make an illuminative literary criticism. For the sake of this purpose *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone De Beauvoir along with other research perceptions of the field are

used by the author of this article to underscore the significant and destructive realities which are attached upon women in 1950s conformist society, in fact, such an attempt shows us paratexts of this gender based discriminative attitudes of the patriarchal order. Hence, understanding these layers shows the reader that the characters of the novel are inevitably representations of different aspects of this hypocrite ideology under different formulations. All in all, the aim of this paper showed us that that “*The Bell Jar*” by Sylvia Plath remains as a touch stone in 21st century when it comes to gender studies in terms of feminism, because the novel itself is in fact a criticism of male domination and its effects on women individuals. The novel itself challenges its society to question over these expected gendered roles and societal expectations which are expected by male dominated society.

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