The Presentation of Gender Roles in and outside Fiction, and the Rebellious Spirit of Women Artists in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own*[*]

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Abstract: This paper tries to portray the roles of men and women in and outside fiction as seen in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own*. In both works, Woolf described vividly how women were often kept in the unfortunate and inferior positions by men and the patriarchal system they made. However, women did not always accept the marginalization without reserve. I will show that women's rebellious and unconsenting spirit is represented especially by women artists in and outside fiction.

Key words: Gender roles, marginalization, rebellious spirit.

Virginia Woolf is an interesting novelist who can shed much light when she writes about women and their problems. She highlights the problems from many aspects ranging from familial, financial to intellectual life. A brief review of what some critics say of her two novels will show this. Herbet Marder has suggested that in *The Voyage Out* (VO) and *Night and Day* (ND) the heroines fear marriage (1968). The heroine's problem of VO is whether or not she can satisfy "her emotional and intellectual need within the framework of married life" (Marder, 1968, p. 21). The heroine in ND has to deal with many misunderstandings between herself and her husband with all the society's expectation and values

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implanted in him that is different from hers, namely "to devote herself to raising children and managing servants" (pp. 21-22). Commenting on Woolf's other work, Suzzete Henke says that "*Mrs. Dalloway* offers a scathing indictment of the British class system and a strong critique of patriarchy" (as cited in Marcuse, 1981, p. 125). It is too far from being adequate here to review the critics' opinion on Woolf's writings which cover so numerous facets of women's problems.

Women in Virginia Woolf's novels have problems in themselves or in their marriage life. It is futile of course to try to find who is to blame for their problems. However, it is interesting to note what Virginia Woolf has done in her works, one in her novel *To the Lighthouse* and one in her paper *A Room of One's Own* read to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtaa at Girton in October 1928 (as cited in Abrams, 2000, p. 2153, footnote). Woolf in her two works has shown that those problems women have are caused by the patriarchal system that hinders them from expressing and actualising themselves in one or some ways. I notice that the oppression to women within the patriarchal system is expressed within and without fiction, but in both works Woolf also shows that women can resist against any regulation that impede them by becoming an artist with a rebellious spirit.

THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER ROLES IN FICTION: *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

I start by analysing Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (TL). The presentation of gender roles that puts women on the marginalized position in this novel can be seen especially in the job distribution between male and female in the household. First of all, women (represented by Mrs. Ramsay) in TL are much presented as the "angel in the house." Virginia Woolf herself explained this phrase in *Professions for Women* (a paper read to the Women's Service League). A quotation from the text will clarify what "an angel in the house" looks like:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult *arts of family life* [emphasis added]. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others. (as cited in Abrams, 2000, p. 2215)

Although Mrs. Ramsay is not described to that extreme in TL, the idea of the "angel in the house" applies to her. It can be seen from how dutiful she is at handling the household matters. The following quotation from the novel will prove this, "For they were making the great expedition, she said, laughing. They were going to the town. 'Stamps, writingpaper, tobacco?' she suggested… As for her little bag, might he not carry that? No, no she said, she always carried *that* herself' (Woolf, 2000, pp. 14-15). This passage shows Mrs. Ramsay's daily activity of buying all household needs. Charles Tansley accompanies her, but the idea that a woman should carry the bag is always there though he might be of help at the moment. Other quotations will fortify the idea that she is an "angel in the house": "All she could do now was to admire the refrigerator, and turn the pages of the Stores list in the hope that she might come upon something like a rake, or a mowing-machine, which, with its prongs and its handles, would need the greatest skill and care in cutting out" (pp. 19-20). Mrs. Ramsay prepares the meals (by the help of Rose) and arranges the setting of the dining table and makes it aglow (pp. 43, 90-91, 105); she "opens bedroom windows, shuts doors" (p. 55); she knits stockings (pp. 31, 35, 43, 70-71) and is "dexterous with her needles" (p. 69); she tells stories to her children (pp. 62-63) and accompanies them to sleep (p. 125). As the "angel of the house", Mrs. Ramsay's only power is over the household matters. Her power can be seen from the scene at the dining table when she arranges people to meet her purpose or plan: "William, sit by me…Lily over there" (p. 90).

Secondly, Mrs. Ramsay's interests are represented typically different from those of men's. The sentence that Mrs. Ramsay often repeats in her mind "the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds" shows how realistic and anxious she is with all the household matters especially when they have eight children and with all the hardships of life, suffering, poverty, and the threat of death (pp. 66-67, 73). The next important matter for Mrs. Ramsay is marriage. She thinks that without marriage a woman cannot make the best of life, though she herself experiences the difficulties of a marriage life: "an unmarried woman (she lightly took her hand for a moment), an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (p. 56). She often cherishes the idea of people getting married: Lily Briscoe to William Bankes (pp. 78, 113), and Minta to Paul Rayley (p. 107).

Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay is also described as a mother and wife whose function is to create peace at home where she is the queen. Herbert

Marder mentions this kind of 'mother-priestess' role a woman may function at home:

> Ideally, as Virginia Woolf saw it, the home may at times take on the sanctity of a shrine in which the mother-priestess celebrates a communion, uniting the members of the family circle by means of a mystical life force. The mother must be in touch, like Mrs. Ramsay, both with the conventions of civilised life, and with the primal rhythm that underlies all things; she must be able, somehow, to bridge the gulf between the two. (pp. 45-46)

The 'civilised life' is the harmony of the family that Mrs. Ramsay is trying to create, while the 'primal rhythm' is the tension in the family (for example the hatred of James towards his father). Mrs. Ramsay always tries to be a comforter for her children when the joyful idea of going to the lighthouse is extinguished at once by Mr. Ramsay. It might be said that she becomes manipulative by giving a promise to her children, which is wrong of course according to the 'factuality' of Mr. Ramsay's observation and experience. But here the question of truth poses itself: How did Mr. Ramsay really know that the weather was going to be bad the following day: "How did he know? She asked. The wind often changed" (p. 37). There is always a gap between truth and fact. Before the day comes, factuality is still in question, but truth for Mrs. Ramsay is keeping the harmony in the family, creating comfort and avoiding disappointment in her children's heart: "'Yes, of course, if it's fine to-morrow,' said Mrs. Ramsay. 'But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added" (p. 7). The promise is not deceiving and is meant only to make her children happy because it is said in conditional sentence with "if", and if the condition is not fulfilled there is still another day: "'And even if it isn't fine to-morrow,' said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, 'it will be another day'" (p. 31). This quotation shows how Mrs. Ramsay tries to bridge the tension between her children, who are unaware of the hard fact of the possible bad weather in the following day, and their father. Here the role of women as represented by Mrs. Ramsay is of an agent of pacifier at best and of a subject that is pacified or must be kept silent, and when Mr. Ramsay reprimands her for giving false hope to the children, she must be able to sop his 'damn you' like a sponge (p. 37).

Male roles as represented by Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, and Michael Bankes on the other hand are more superior to women. First of all, male role as represented by Mr. Ramsay shows him as a tyrant. This can be seen clearly from the text in the novel: "'You have greatness', she continued, 'but Mr. Ramsay has none of it. He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant'" (p. 29). This description is done through Mrs. Ramsay's point of view. Another voice also supports the idea: "But what remained intolerable, she thought, sitting upright … was that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms…" (p. 185). This is the voice of Cam when she has not yet resolved her inner conflict in relation to her father. Still, another voice that is more extreme can be seen from the following quotation:

> He had always kept this old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart. Only now, as he grew older, and sat staring at his father in an impotent rage, it was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him—without his knowing it perhaps: that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you …and then made off, and there was he was again, an old man, very sad, reading his book…that he would fight, that he would track down and stamp out—tyranny, despotism, he called it—making people what they did not want to do, cutting off their right to speak. (pp. 199-200)

This is the voice of James, Mrs. Ramsay's son, who hates his father very much because of his despotic and oppressive treatment to his mother. The passage clearly shows that it is not necessarily his father, but any despotism is what he wants to fight to the death. And the despotism unfortunately has 'descended' on his father.

Secondly, the interests of men as represented by Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley and William Bankes also create polar situation from women. Men are interested much in politics while women are in domestic life:

> Probably, Mr.Bankes thought, as Tansley abused the government, there is a good deal in what he says. 'Tell me now…' he said. So they argued about politics, and Lily looked at the table-cloth; and Mrs. Ramsay, leaving the argument entirely in the hands of the two men, wondered why she was so bored by this talk. (p. 103)

Women get bored of politics talk because their interest is in realistic daily household matters in which they have power to make changes, while in the men's talk about politics, it is a mere talk and no necessary change is done.

Men's other interest is in the superlatives. Both Mrs. Ramsay and the children know what Charles Tansley and Mr. Ramsay like:

> They knew what he liked best—to be for ever walking up and down, up and down, with Mr. Ramsay, and saying who had won this, who had won that, who was a 'first-rate man' at Latin verses, who was 'brilliant but I think fundamentally unsound', who was undoubtedly the 'ablest fellow in Balliol'…That was what they talked about. (p. 11)

Men's world here is presented as a world full with competition while women's world is presented as a niche from the hostile world, the home. Thus, it is quite natural for men to talk about 'who is the best', the superlative things, while for women 'who is the most subservient.' This can also be seen from the attitude of Mr. Ramsay who demands of himself too highly for achievement:

> He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. … In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R…. How many men in a thousand million, he asked himself, reach Z after all? … 'One perhaps.' One in a generation. (pp. 39-41)

Mr. Ramsay has achieved a lot, but it is not enough, he wants to achieve more and more. The voice that he hears from other people might be his own voice demanding too much. That is one reason why he becomes so egotistical in his children's eyes. He cares so much to give 'some nonsense' talk about Locke, Hume, Berkeley (p. 51), about his books: "He brings the talk round himself and his books. He is intolerably egotistical" (p. 206), that he becomes harsh with his words and has no sympathy for others' feeling. He is so self-centred that makes James hate him very much.

Men are also portrayed as rational beings as opposed to women who are presented as more instinctual. Men are skilful at mathematics, at calculation of the square root of thousands, at history, philosophy, and other scientific subjects, which directly make women baffled:

> …her husband was saying about the square root of one thousand two hundred and fifty-three, which happened to be the number on his railway ticket. What did it all mean? To this day she had no notion. A square root? What was that? Her sons knew. She leant on them; on cubes and square roots; that was what they were talking about now; on Voltaire and Madame de Staël; on the character of Napoleon; on the French system of land tenure; on Lord Rosebery; on Creevey's Memoirs: she let it uphold her and sustain her, this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence… . (p. 115)

Here women are represented as incapable of doing those things that men can enjoy fully and freely. Writing and painting for instance are two areas that men are privileged to prove themselves capable of, while for women the vocations are pure impossibility. Though there is an element of satire in Mrs. Ramsay's thought, because those things do not really matter in her life and world practically, she still acknowledges the superiority of the male scientific mind. However, women do not always keep silent and consent to the given roles and presentations in the patriarchal system. This is seen in what Lily Briscoe does.

The female role that is represented by Lily Briscoe is different from those represented by Mrs. Ramsay. Here Lily is typically described as a woman artist. The artist in Lily Briscoe clearly shows a spirit of rebellion either to male society's values as represented by Charles Tansley and William Bankes that say "women can't write, women can't paint" or to Mrs. Ramsay's plan for her marriage (thus leaving no freedom in her). Charles Tansley is the one that says: "Women can't paint, women can't write…' (p. 54). This sentence is repeated again later by William Bankes: "But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, 'can't paint, can't write,' why should I help him to relieve himself?" (p. 99). Later, the voices of Charles Tansley and William Bankes are mixed up and after ten years Lily really tries to recall who says that sentence and finally her memory prevails her: "Charles Tansley used to say that, she remembered, women can't paint, can't write" (p. 174). But it does not really matter who says it because it is the male voice. Even in her attempt to paint again what she failed to do ten years ago, she also fails again now at the presence of a male figure: "She had taken the wrong brush in her agitation at Mr. Ramsay's presence" (p. 171). When Mr.

Ramsay goes to the lighthouse with James and Cam, finally she can finish her painting. She has proved that she can paint.

For Lily painting is both functioning as a bridge to the past (p. 188), to the moment of being, of intimacy, of friendship (p. 175) and liberating. Lily once tried ten years ago to solve the problem of the foreground of her picture, but she never finished it. Now, ten years later, when she visits the house again, her mind is refreshed by the remembrance of her picture that she never finishes (p. 161). Her refreshed memory brings back her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay and it becomes liberating now as she has successfully rebelled against Mrs. Ramsay's plan for her marriage with William Bankes: "She would feel a little triumphant, telling Mrs. Ramsay that the marriage had not been a success" (p. 189). The implication of the rebellion against Mrs. Ramsay, who has adopted the patriarchal values, is that Lily rejects the constructed meaning of the 'best of life' for women that Mrs. Ramsay thinks only possible in marriage.

THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER ROLES OUTSIDE FICTION: *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

A Room of One's Own (ROO) is an essay based on two papers read to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtaa at Girton in October 1928. It was based on a real experience of Virginia Woolf when she was asked to speak about women and fiction. She analysed why there were so few good women novelists, artists, or writers for so long a time. She retold her experience of being barred from entering the library and the grass field by a beadle (ironically, it happens at the place where she was invited to speak about women and fiction) "… ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction … Fellow and scholars only allowed on the grass! Ladies not admitted without a letter of introduction" (as cited in Abrams, 2000, pp. 2156, 2203). In her essay, Virginia Woolf traced the conditions and reasons that made it difficult for women to be artists or novelists. Women until her time were given quite limited roles and chances in the patriarchal society.

Different from the presentation of female roles in TL, women are presented as more unfortunate human beings in their attempts to be artists or novelists than the other gender in ROO. The presentation of women in ROO is focused on the reasons and conditions that make it difficult for

women to be artists or novelists. First of all, women could not be great artists or novelists because there was no freedom for them. They experienced great material constraints. Women were dependent financially on men. The patriarchal system did not allow women to possess what they could earn:

> …in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned…Every penny I [*representing any woman*] earn, they may have said, will be taken from me and disposed of according to my husband's wisdom. (as cited in Abrams, 2000, p. 2164)

The effect of the role provided for women like this is that they became subservient to men. Here women only became the property of men: "… in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband" (p. 2176). Only when women got "five hundred pounds a year" and "a room of her own" could they have the security, time, and privacy without interruption to write. Jane Austen is another historical fact of the position of a woman novelist who had to be "careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party" and she was thankful that "a hinge creaked, so that she might hide her manuscript before any one came in" (p. 2189). Otherwise, they had to bear

> …the poison and bitterness in those days bred in me [Virginia Woolf representing women]. To begin with, always to be doing work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, but it seemed necessary and the stakes were too great to run risks. (p. 2172)

From the quotation it is clear that women generally had to do jobs they did not like, and what makes things worse was they had to do it with subservient attitudes like slaves. Some occupations that were open to women before 1918, Woolf noted, were "addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten." These economical and social constraints surely bred poison and bitterness in women who might have more capacity than doing menial works and also hampered them in actualising themselves.

Another proof of social impediment is the case of pseudonyms or anonymity. Writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Marian Evans, and Amandine-Aurore-Lucie Dupin had to hide in their male pseudonyms Currer Bell, George Eliot, and George Sand respectively. Woolf also found that most often anonymous authors who wrote without signing their names were women (p. 2179). They had to do that because the authoritative patriarchal system only acknowledged men's writing as great, and the editors or publishers were generally males. Therefore, if the women wanted to get their works published, they used male names. This obstacle helped create the perception that "publicity in women is detestable" (p. 2179) and anonymity is the way out for the irresistible desire to write in some women.

The second material constraint is biological one. Women do not have much time to write for they have to spend much time for taking care of babies:

> First there are nine months before the baby is born. Then the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. After the baby is fed there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby. (p. 2164)

Surely women can have babies and time to write if they have "in twos or threes but not in tens and twelves" (p. 2213). In this case, women are given a role as baby caretaker so that most of their time is spent for this and other household jobs. Biologically men cannot do the reproduction as nature endows on women, therefore men psychologically might think that they can only 'reproduce' in their writing as an analogy of childbearing. This perception may lead to the idea that it is a woman's job to take care of the babies while writing is men's privilege. Thus, the chance for women to take the other roles (writing for instance) is very limited because of this biological constraint. The biological difference and the resulting different roles between men and women have put women in the disadvantageous situation.

Furthermore, the barriers for women to be artists or novelists are psychological and cultural or social ones. First of all, it is male superiority that makes women only "served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (as cited in Abrams, 2000, p. 2171). Thus, here women are portrayed as always inferior and only function to approve

men's superiority. The effect is that women lose all their self-confidence and without self-confidence people cannot express themselves in writing. The whole world is hostile to the idea of women who would like to make writing their career: "The world did not say to her as it said to them [men], Write if you choose; … The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?" (p. 2181). This is in line with Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's statement that women are left with either-or male standard of the images of women: either they may write and speak out their mind and they will be labelled as "active monsters" or they keep silent and become "the angel in the house" but risk madness (as cited in Leitch, 2001, p. 2033).

Women have the same genius of brain as men do, but if they are laughed at only at the posing of idea in making writing as their career, they cannot indeed start it out at all. The invented story about Shakespeare's sister who might also have the genius of his brother makes this clearer: "She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face" (as cited in Abrams, 2000, p. 2178).

Even worse, the male predominant world as represented by an invented actor-manager makes her commit suicide and pass into oblivion unrecognised by the world like her brother as can be seen in the following quotation:

> … at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so – who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? – killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle. (p. 2178)

This story portrays how women are always considered inferior and their potentials are limited by the roles provided by the patriarchal standard.

The roles that women can play, which limit the actualization of their potentials, derive from the consented difference of values between women and men set by male standard. The differentiation of values puts the first inferior to the latter:

> But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally this is so.

> Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are "important"; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes "trivial." And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (p. 2192)

This constructed meaning of the importance of values also helps create women's clumsiness and timidity to express themselves in writing. Thus, both daily matters and fiction are much measured by male values.

However, Virginia Woolf shows the rebellious spirit of a woman novelist, as Lily does in TL. When confronted and barred by the beadle from entering the grass field and the library, Virginia Woolf replied: "I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (p. 2193). Indeed, it is this state of free mind that enables Shakespeare to create his masterpieces.

The freedom of mind means also that when women write they should not think of sex. Women must be free from any constructed images given by the male standard. When one writes, he/she should not think of sex. Woolf agrees at Coleridge's statement that "a great mind is androgynous" (p. 2205). Woolf goes on saying, "a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine." Woolf defines the androgynous mind to be a mind that is "resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (pp. 2205-2206). She believes that a great writer like Shakespeare must have had an androgynous mind. When she browsed men's works, she found that it was delightful because it was "so direct, so straightforward" and it indicated "such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself" (p. 2206).

Furthermore, when women write, they should not be limited by any acknowledgments given by institutions or people on male standard. She convinces women:

> So long as you [women] write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of

> its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery. (p. 2210)

That is why Woolf is so concerned that women have £ 500 a year and a room of one's own so that women can be free from diverse constraints in the patriarchal social order. When women have enough money "to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corner and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream" (p. 2211), they are well-prepared for writing. At present, many obstacles and shackles that women faced in the past have gone as she notes that since 1866 there have been at least two colleges for women in England; after 1880, a married woman has had the right to possess her own property; and after 1919, women may vote. The point that is relevant to be emphasized in this essay is that women who want to write must have the rebellious spirit of the artists that resists any impediments and constraints that hinder them from speaking out their mind. She believes that:

> This poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you [women] and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. (p. 2214)

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it is clear that daily matters and fiction are much measured by male standards and values. The roles of women that are presented both in fiction as in TL and in real life events as in ROO are limited according to the images and values set by those standards. From the discussion, it can be concluded that women are put in the inferior and unfortunate position by men and the patriarchal system they make. This is in line with what Marder says:

> Virginia Woolf held that the minds of women differ radically from the minds of men. But the true nature of the difference was just beginning to become apparent; the coins which women were earning

> enabled them, for the first time, to live their own lives. Since they had been dependent on men for hundreds of years, their manners, their ideas, their very souls, had been modified by the constant pressure of masculine standards (p. 106).

However, Marder notes that the situation gradually changes when women have enabled themselves to be independent financially from men. Both analyses from *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own* prove male dominance in social condition and in fiction or art. Yet, there is always women's revolt against male tyrannical suppression in one way or another. Although it is not necessarily a revolt against men as is shown by James in TL, the rebellious spirit seeking for freedom for an artist's mind is prevalent in both TL as represented by Lily Briscoe and ROO as represented by Woolf herself.

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