



Ambiguous Lines: A critical reading of select sketches and verse in Imtiaz Dharker's 'Postcards from God' and 'Purdah'.

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I. INTRODUCTION

*“And so I scratch, scratch
Through the night, at this
Growing scab of black on white.
Everyone has the right
to infiltrate a piece of paper .
A page doesn't fight back And,
who knows, these lines
May scratch their way
Into your head”*

(Minority)

Imtiaz Dharker is a Scottish muslim poet, artist and filmmaker. She has a cultural experience that spans over three countries: Pakistan, the country of her birth, and Britain and India, her countries of adoption. She speaks of growing up in Glasgow where she had 'a fairly traditional Muslim upbringing.' It is from this life of constant change that the themes of Imtiaz Dharker's poetry are drawn: childhood, exile, journeying, home, religious strife, geographical and cultural displacement. Dharker's poetry takes birth from the eccentricity and uniqueness of residing both inside and outside a culture , within both the Islamic and the Hindu tradition, and eventually belonging to as much the traditional as the modern.

In this paper, an effort is made to read the lines of Imtiaz Dharker's verse and sketches and bring out the thus created ambiguity. According to Chandra K Narayan, "Imtiaz Dharker is almost alone among her peers in having a highly sophisticated sense of line – in poems and sketches. She is good at both. The drawings that accompany most of her poems are designed to better understand the poem .It urges us to read the sketches and scan the poems”.

Dharker draws black and white sketches. The sketches or the line drawn impregnates the written line with multiple contextual interpretations that inevitably vary with those paths that trace a certain line, a certain pattern, paradoxically. Dharker herself says that “everything starts with the image. Sometimes as the line of a poem, sometimes as something I see as a visual, a drawing. No that's not always true: sometimes a poem can start with an idea and that can in turn spark off a drawing.”

Ranjit hoskote calls a line as Imtiaz Dharker's sole weapon in a zone of assault and Dharker has used this weapon very craftily in both the mediums of art related to her. She has emphasized that art has a function in our lives and it should not be remote and esoteric. Art is not just something to store in a shelf, but something people use to enrich their world and their perceptions.

Right in her first publication, 'Purdah' (1989), Imtiaz Dharker powerfully spells out the socialization of women and their own acceptance of gendered cultural norms. Here, she unfolds the multiple facets of the women behind the veil. Purdah is an obligatory part of women's dress in Islam. Dharker finds different meanings of Purdah at different junctures and in varies contexts. As Virginia Woolf in her 'A Room of One's Own' says that “it is better to be locked out than to be locked in” , Dharker sensitizes women that ,by telling the women to be in Purdah, men not only lock them out of the patriarchal society and its functions but also lock them in the boundaries created for them. In her poem 'Purdah 1', the image created in the mind through verse is that of a young muslim girl who is asked by others to learn some shame. The girl is given a subjective position

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where society is acting upon her. Though Purdah is a place where body finds a place to hide, at the same time she compares the touch of Purdah on the girl's body to earth falling on a coffin. Purdah ,therefore brings with it a deathly silence. This death can be of the identity of the individual behind the Purdah, or it can also allude to the deathly silence with which a girl has to accept the social and traditional norms set for her. When someone is behind Purdah, people who were known earlier , "make different angles in the light, their eyes aslant". Moreover, Purdah makes the women carry "between the thighs , a sense of sin". This sin, on a primary level, is the sin of the conditions amid which a young girl grows in society. It can also be interpreted as a kind of burden that age old futile practices put on an individual or the religious, moral and social taboos, which a spirited young woman would like to break.

Initially , in the poem, the cloth that fans out against the skin , grows closer to the skin towards middle of the poem. Here, Dharker shows that how gradually women become accustomed to the veil and start accepting it as a part of their own being. When Purdah is seen as safety, we may also take it to symbolize a vantage point for women from where she can observe the world, be a part of it and yet remain hidden. Thus, there is an ambivalent acceptance of Purdah. This security found in Purdah is echoed in other poem by Dharker i.e. 'Going Home', where an adolescent girl asks her mother to put her in Purdah to avoid the gaze of men. She says "mummy put me in purdah, quick or he'll see".

Moreover, at the end of the poem, 'the doors keep opening inward and inward' to symbolize the depth of women. Also, opening of doors may refer to a revelation or perhaps a search for something. These meanings and readings of poem are enhanced with the sketch that accompnnaies the poem. The first and the most obvious ambiguity that arises is the fact that the woman here (in the sketch) is not in Purdah. Here, Dharker has shown what is hidden from the world. The question that comes to our mind is that, is this reality hidden from us? Does every woman feel the same pain that is shown on the face of the woman in sketch? If it's true , then why is Purdah called a safety? We notice a ghostly image of a woman .which reminds us of the 'coffin' and 'the deathly silence'. The eyes of the woman are dark. This is a common feature of almost all of Dharker's sketches. She either doesn't draw eyes or covers them to suggest that the vision held is grim and dark. There's no light or hope. This darkness may also symbolize the depth that is present in the individual.

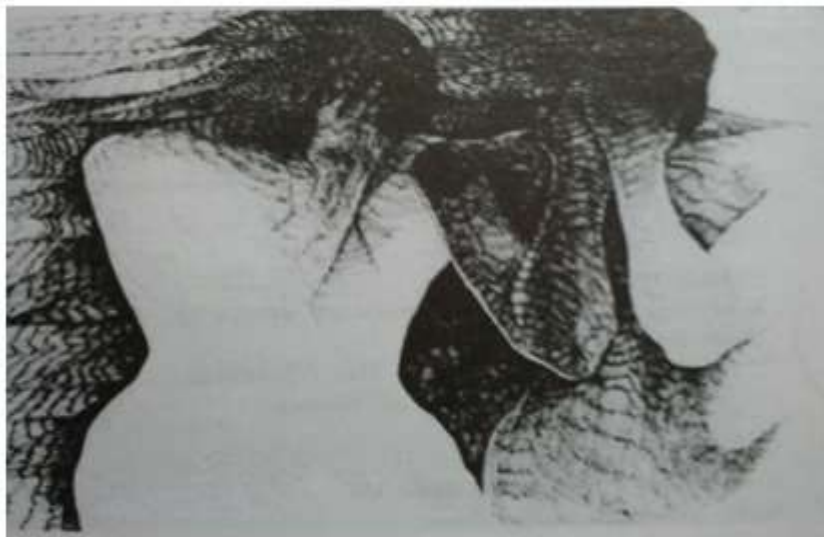


In 'Purdah 2', Dharker depicts muslim women in an alien social , cultural and political atmosphere. The poem forcefully expresses the serious humanistic and feministic concerns. The poem is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of women, even in an alien land. The sound of 'Allah -u-Akbar' comes as a reassurance and as a comfort even in a distant land. A group of twenty women hear 'the mechanical recitation from the hustling pages of holy Koran without understanding a word, its meaning or sense'. This is the shallowness of the traditional education. 'The words are nudged into head as a pure rhythm on tongue, unsoiled by sense'. The mood of the speaker is calm and poised throughout ,even though she talks about the degrading and dehumanizing effect of prevalent social, cultural and religious sanction. The poem further talks about the traditional marriages. All the girls are fated to live and die with no will or choice of their own. They are "unwilling virgins" who had been taught to bind 'their brightness tightly round, whatever they might wear , in Purdah of mind". This veil is not only a concealing garment but also a veil of mind which is much more dangerous and harmful. But, with the acceptance of these norms, there is also a will to fight back. In the lines , "they veiled their eyes, with heavy lids ,they hid their breasts, but not the fullness of their lips"

Women were living within the lines drawn for them by the society.



This is clearly visible in the sketch accompanying the poem, where the faces are outlined in straight lines. These faces have darkness all around them to symbolize the darkness that is present in the world for them. Here too, the faces are not in Purdah.



The second sketch with the poem shows two women who are hiding their faces. They may be the same women who were shown earlier. As they opened their eyes, stepped out of the lines drawn for them, they became fallen and defiled. It is therefore perhaps that they are hiding their faces. The sketch also shows movement in the darkness that is covering the faces of women. It forces us to think if this image is the reality and thus complete, or is it just a fleeting image in our minds? Moreover, the hands on faces can be read in two opposite ways. One to hide the face or identity because of shame and other could be an effort to remove the veil put on her identity to claim her autonomous existence. Here again, the reader is thrown into ambiguity as it can symbolize an existential crisis or can also be an assertion of existence.

Dharker also draws the mouth of her images as symbolizing volcanoes that are calm from outside but have fire and anger pent up inside. But at the same it forces us to think that what if these volcanoes burst? Will it be as destructive as the hot lava of volcanoes or will it be helpful in bringing a change in the world? Dharker thus leaves her reader wondering.

Where Dharker's 'Purdah' collection is majorly about women, her later collection i.e. 'Postcards From God,, published in 1994, is a more overt social critique. It was in this collection that Dharker's poetry negotiated with issues like fundamentalism , terrorism and violence in ways that are quite unconventional. This collection focused primarily on the Babri demolition and its aftermath. In a section entitled 'Bombay : the Name of God '' ,

Dharker highlights how people use the name of god or religion to fulfill their own vested interests. In the poem 'Name of God', the poet contrasts the common people's plea to god with the jargons used by extremists by comparing 'the still flame of an oil lamp' to the 'fire spread across the floor'.

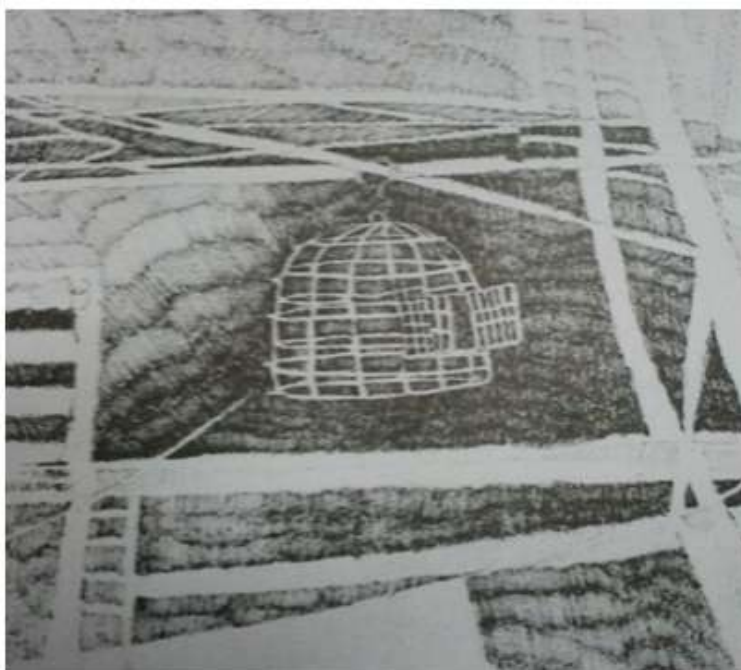
Dharker's god is no more than a tourist in this world, a mere visitor walking 'around battered streets /distinctly lost /looking for landmarks /from another promised parts.' **(Postcards from God 1)**

The fundamentalists are not true worshippers of the god. They hack out the name of god itself through the violence that they spread. As can be noticed in lines

"everywhere you scream my words
But you forget my name"

The god asks his devotees " did I create you In my image, Or did you create me In yours" **(Question 2)**

Moreover, the sketch helps us to understand the multiple meanings hidden behind the lines.



In the sketch , a disordered place is shown ,perhaps a back lane of a house or a small and private place for women to bathe, where they have a small bird in cage for their entertainment. The cage in the image is shown to be empty, with its door open. This can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be read as a sign of rebellion by the oppressed. When we trap a bird, its ability to fly freely is curbed. Moreover, the empty cage with open door may mean that the trap is set for another victim to be lured in. Further, if we concentrate on the cage, we realize that Dharker has not really drawn out a cage, she has carved it out by leaving the black lines incomplete. Thus implying that the darkness that prevails in the society, is creating a cage for the innocents. The wires of the cage are symbolic of the social taboos or other anti social elements which stand in darkness to trap others.

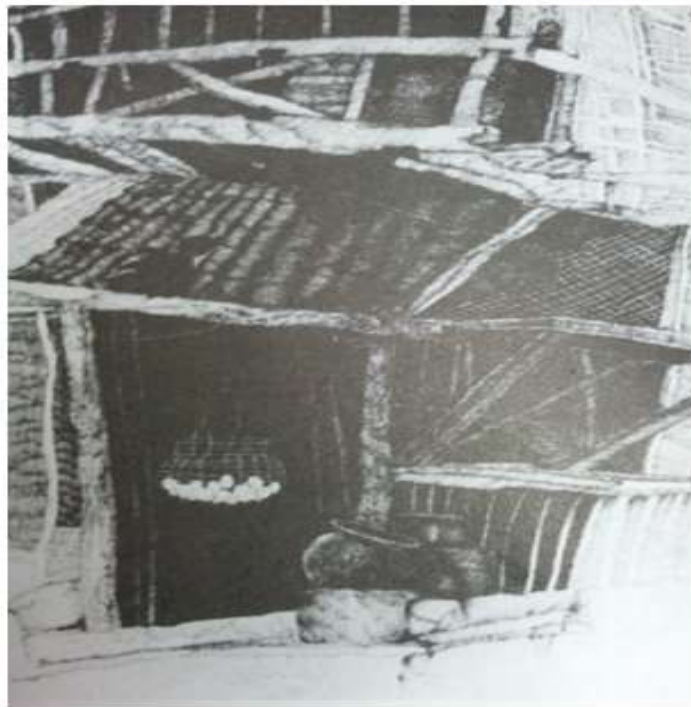
A bird is put into a cage not only to trap it but also to protect it from other outer harms. Similarly, a woman's confinement in house or Purdah is justified by society as an endeavour to protect her from any harm. Therefore, all the images of home, cage and Purdah converge into one thought and yet bring out divergent meanings.

In her poem 'Living space', Dharker again provides the reader and the viewer with the ambiguity that is a common feature of all her works. In the starting of the poem itself , Dharker says,

"there are just not enough
Straight lines. That
Is the problem
Nothing is flat
Or parallel. Beams
Balanced crookedly on supports
Thrust off the vertical.
Nails clutch at open seams.

The whole structure leans dangerously
Towards the miraculous.”

The image that etches out of these lines is haphazard. Everything seems to be falling out of place. There is complete absence of linearity as nothing is flat and beams balance crookedly. Whole structure is leaning dangerously perhaps towards something miraculous. These lines also hold true for the sketches and verses of Dharker , though the images drawn in both her art forms are confusing and ambiguous yet when we try to decipher them , the image that comes out is miraculous. What is worth noticing is that someone has squeezed a living space in this rough frame and has dared to place eggs amid this chaos. This living space in the chaotic environment may refer to the lives of people in Dharavi. In that slum, the living conditions of people are very harsh and problematic. They live amidst dirt and filth. Also these dangerously leaning structures may refer to the after effects of the communal riots that took place in Mumbai.



This poem accompanies a carefully etched drawing where a wire basket is shown with eggs in it. These eggs may be symbolic of the importance that the future generation holds. The future is thought of as provider of a ray of hope in the present chaos. And it is therefore that the poet writes:

“fragile curves of white
Hung out over the dark edge
Of a slanted universe,
Gathering the light
Into themselves
As if they were
The bright, thin walls of faith.”

Eggs have gathered the light into them. And have become walls of faith. Moreover, this image of eggs in a wire basket can also be read in a completely different way. These eggs may also tell that in the present devastation and chaos this is the only thing left. Also the eggs are open to be destroyed by the enemy. So is it that the last hope left is also about to get lost as the curves are fragile and walls of faith are thin?

Eunice de Souza writes about this poem: “The strongest poem in the book(*Postcards from gGod*), however, is ‘Living Space’, which catches exactly the ramshackle quality of life in this country, and the spirit of survival that so often and so mysteriously accompanies it” (1997, 49). Audre Lorde once described mothering as the “ability to make something out of anything” (1984: 174). This poem has the same message.

The next poem in study is *Seats of Power*”. The poem starts with the lines ,
“there is great shuffling, in the corridors of power”

This shuffling may refer to the ever changing and ambivalent thoughts and masks that people put up to rise to power and gain stature. Shuffling means that there is no stability, no certainty, and no belongingness. This is highly symbolic of the ambivalence that exists in today's society. There is a flurry of whispering. This shows that people are not talking clearly. They are hiding things and therefore their motives. Faces are prepared to dupe others and the innocents. The image drawn is typical of the conniving and ruthless politicians who use their seats of power in inappropriate ways.

The earlier mentioned shuffling suddenly turns to 'immobility of an old man'. This sudden change is highly ambiguous. The images of 'blade finding a flesh' and 'permission given for carnage to begin', clearly implies the death of innocents that took place in the riots that followed Babri demolition. It does not hint at those riots particularly but stands valid for all riots or massacres that took place in the past or take place now. Here, religion, caste or creed does not matter, what is important is that humanity is suffering a great loss. Moreover, the carnage literally means slaughter of great number of people, here ,it may not literally be the slaughter of people but a symbolic one, slaughter of feelings, emotions, innocence, dreams and duty to get seats of power.



In the sketch, we see a number of crows sitting on wires. Though birds are symbolic of mobility and shuffling, they are shown here as seated, against their normal nature. Moreover, crow is a scavenger, a bird that feeds on filth and dead remains of others. It destroys the eggs of other birds. It shows that it destroys the future itself. Also, crows are very particular about their territory. Here, crows may symbolize the people on seats of power in society.

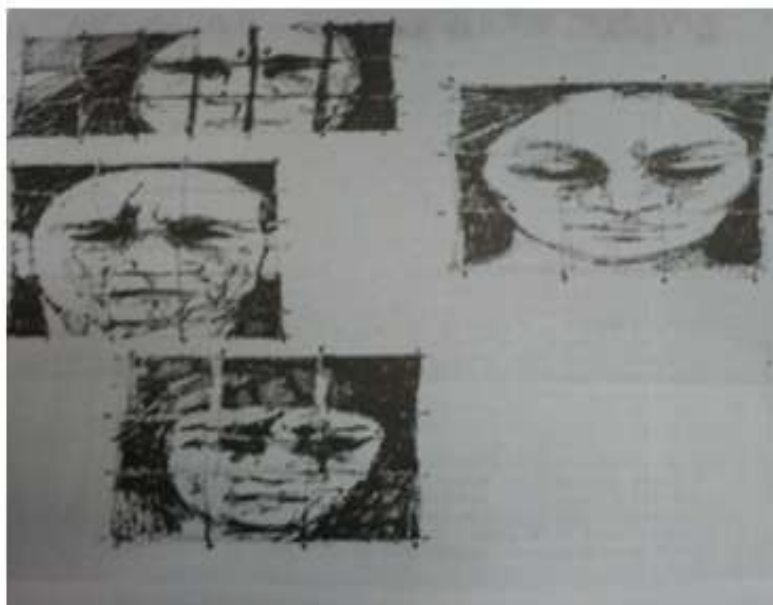
Also, we can notice that there is a broad black strand right in the middle of the sketch. It implies the division of the human society or perhaps any other unity. The image in the background is a complete whole. We can clearly establish the continuity of things behind the black strand. It shows that the human eye visualizes things as a whole. We try to imbue everything with humanity. We want to see it as a holistic entity. This division is also the archetypal division at the psychological level. Moreover, this may be a line of division between secularism and religious fanaticism.

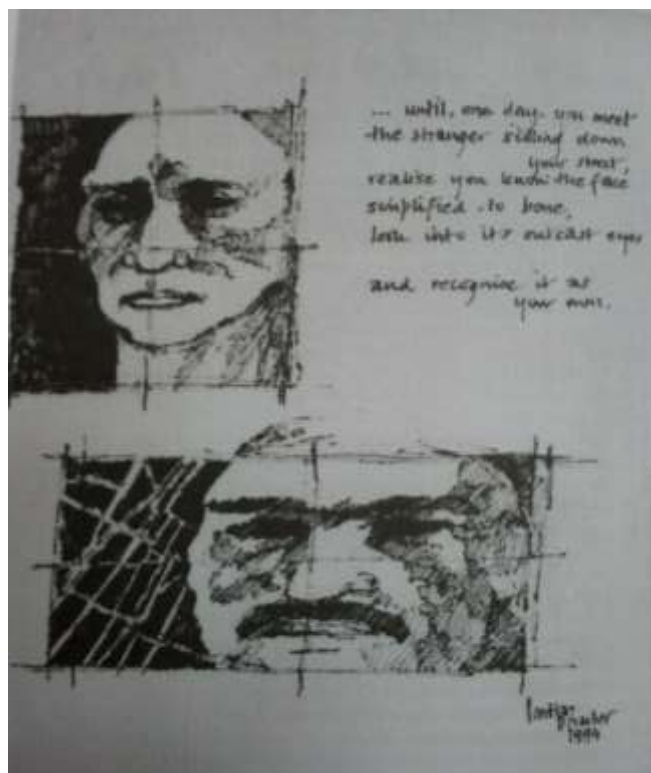
Dharker portrays the aftermath of these anti social activities in her poem "*Namesake*". In this poem, she compares the blessed angel, Adam to his 10 year old namesake in Dharavi. Dharavi is the biggest slum in Mumbai. Adam's namesake has never faced the angels; instead he has survived with the pigs that are an epitome of filth and dirt. The poem progresses to tell us the condition of that 10 year old boy and thus tell us about the fate of all the victims and survivors of the riots. Riots lead to utter devastation. It lands people in depths of poverty which force a child to lose his childhood. Women are left with no option but to sell their bodies. This darkness is clearly incorporated in the sketch where a boy is shown carrying a burden.



The rooms and windows which generally are symbolic of hope and light are filled with darkness here. The boy doesn't have a shadow, perhaps to show that there is no light source or hope available. There is nothing with which the little boy can claim affiliation. There is a total absence of any kind of support. The child is carrying a burden, may be the result of ruthless activities of others thus, he is lost into darkness. What is perplexing in the image is that we don't know whether the child is getting into darkness or is he stepping out of it. Is he also a victim of the gruesome activities or is he a rebel, who has decided to raise a voice against the atrocities.

The last poem in this study is "*Minority*". This poem may be read as a plea of those who belong to minority of any or all kinds. Those people feel like a foreigner everywhere, belonging only to the margins, yearning to come towards the centre. People who have admirable history, distance themselves from those in minority. All the images used for the portrayal of minority are chaotic that lead to utter confusion and lack of meaning throughout. Images used for them are of 'clumsily translated poem', 'food cooked in coconut milk instead of ghee or cream', 'unexpected aftertaste of neem' . Moreover, the 'language also starts to lose its meaning as it flips into an unfamiliar taste, words tumble'.





The sketches with the poem shows 6 faces in the dark. All the faces are very guilt ridden. The cause of this guilt is unknown and therefore ambiguous. Moreover, here too, the faces are devoid of eyes and perhaps identity too. As scientifically proven, eyes are the first organ of human body to establish identity. Eyes are a window to the soul and Dharker highlights the darkness felt by the souls by hiding the eyes. The faces have lines over them as if they are engaged faces pinned on the wall, castigated and excluded. The lines over the face may also mean that these faces are on the other side of the window, peeping in to belong to something since they don't possess anything and are bereft of all associations.

II. CONCLUSION

Imtiaz Dharker, in her poems and sketches, celebrates the power of art amid the debris of social and cultural institutions. Imtiaz Dharker speaks of “the mountain of things unsaid” (A Woman’s Place). It seems that Dharker speaks for all women and finds vicarious release within her poetic praxis for the violent feelings suppressed by women due to the repressive codes imposed upon them :

“I write, because I cannot bite, it is the way, the weak one’s fight” (I write)

Women poetry has been sidelined as personal, domestic, interiorized, narrowly concerned with women’s experiences and hence not serious or universal. But Dharker , through her poetry breaks these bondages and takes women poetry to a higher level. Dharker’s poetic vision is crisscrossed not only by her motivations and commitments, but also by paradoxes and ambivalences it constructs within the aesthetic. In her poetry, she refuses to name any religion or community as aggressor – aggrieved, thus implicating all and none, only preferring to stress the common humanity of victims. Human suffering is conveyed at the primal level. She frames communalism as a metaphor for the human capacity for violence and bestiality rather than clash of religions. Her use of lines creates ambiguity, but at the same time it thrusts the reader into shifting dynamics of life. Her use of straight lines, help the readers to establish the curvatures that exist in society and remain veiled. The readers are shaken out of their complacency by reading the world and people between the lines. Multiple contextual interpretations are evoked. The traced paths and patterns become ambiguous. It is therefore that Dharker herself writes

“It’s hard to decide, this time, Where to stop,
How to draw the line.”

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