

## A Marxist Reading of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

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### Abstract

*This work examines Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter from a Marxist perspective. It explores the radical and feminist tendencies on the stereotype of African women with the awareness that women are equal with men without prejudice to the interpretation of the theory of creation. Based on Marxist theoretical framework, our analysis shows that the oppression and exploitation of women is a process involving women themselves. The woman, in effect, continually reproduces the conditions of her subservience as Marx will add, through alienation, competition, rivalry and docility. Through alienation, women forfeit their rights to be the initiators and controllers of their historical processes. The study concludes that Marxist Feminist must practically engage in struggle against inequality and all manifestations of oppression and exploitation of women.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The dominant themes in African literature during the pre-and post-independent era were those of colonialism and colonial injustice, clash of cultures, post-independent disenchantment, and apartheid. But with the dynamic nature of events due to the decadence in African society, some radical writers and critics of African literature have been taking a critical look at events as they affect African society. The socio-political quirk of the African State is radically captured literally by these radical intellectuals. Similarly, the womenfolk are not left out in this course and the position and role of women especially in modern Africa in social, political, and administrative status.

The African Marxist or radical writers have diverse focus. While some are concerned with the relationship between man and his environment, others focus mainly on the socio-political and economic situation. In the same vein, the feminists opt for a case against the exploitation and oppression of women. This is precipitated by the fact that in Black Africa particularly, women have been stereotyped in diverse ways that without men, it is assumed that women have no thinking faculty, are sentimentally deranged, and emotionally weak. Women have traditionally been positioned on the fringe of male culture and have been persuaded to watch events from the sidelines.

Contemporary feminists are at revolution globally to re-address this stereotype. Therefore, they have expressed defiance in the face of male chauvinism and promoted some version of independence or "liberation" for common ideology. Mariama Bâ addresses these issues in *So Long a Letter* when she envisages on reconciliation of African consciousness with feminist aspiration which is depicted in the main character. For instance, Ramatoulaye,

who in spite of her western education and feminist sympathy, is able to remain faithful to both her religious and traditional ways of life without giving out her feminist aspiration.

## **2. RADICALISM IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Radical literature emanated as a result of the conscientizing efforts of radical writers due to the deterioration of the socio-political and economic situation of many post-independence African states. The decadence of these States and their maladministration spurs radical literature. Early writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, and Kofi Awonoor used their novels to create awareness on themes like culture conflicts or general conflict between the old and the new generations. But writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo (as in *Petals of Blood*), Festus Iyayi (as in *Violence*, Femi Osofisan (as in *The Chattering and the Song*), Alex La Guma (as in *A Walk at Night*) and many others believe that Africa's solutions to her problems can only be achieved through a radical break with the capitalist system that thrives on the unbridled exploitation of man and the resources of the respective countries. Therefore, radical literature becomes a veritable tool in the hands of these writers to reach out to the generality of the people with the socialist alternative to the whole state of affairs of the African society. The essence in the mind of radical writers is to advance the ideological goals of society by distinctly breaking down the barriers between fiction and reality.

Karl Marx's ideology (1972, 1975) has been regarded as the main influence on radical writers hence they are called Marxist writers. The gain from the objective enhances the pursuit and advancement in the cause of the oppressed. Whichever aforementioned writers' work chosen, all shows nothing but the ongoing class struggle in society. This agrees with the Marxist belief that the society perpetually undergoes revolutionary changes from primitive through ancient, feudal to the present capitalist mode of production.

The practitioners of this type of literature believe that literature helps to shape the world and imperatively a duty they owe to affect the world in a more positive way through literature which is liberally favored by their own ideological convictions. In this instance, where literature and its pronouncements fail, the revolutionary impetus becomes the final and unavoidable resort. Radical literature, therefore, emphasizes relevance to the society and it must be committed to the furtherance of class struggle, liberation, and ultimately social change in favor of the oppressed. The practitioners see society as a "battleground" where the few dominant and economically exploitative ones oppress the majority hardworking masses. There are important features of radical writing. These include the fact that the struggle for emancipation from the oppressive forces is seen as a collective enterprise. Also, there must be the reflection in the happenings of the day in their writing, at least, to enable the reader to detect that very nature of contradictions within society and reflect the views of the masses so that the poor in the society can find their voices. The language of most radical literature is usually simple, direct, and devoid of any mystifications and obscurantist ambiguities. The simplicity in language use is motivated by the fact that most radical writers are concerned with passing on their ideological message.

## **3. STEREOTYPE OF FEMINISM**

As a result of the marginalization of women generally, derogation of women to the state of second class citizens, the way men look at females as the other sex and the gender inferiority in matters of white collar jobs coupled with the outright cultural and religious bias over the female gender, feminist movement took a radical dimension.

Virginia Wolf in 1954 wrote a book *A Room of One's Own*. The feminist literary movement could be traced to this writing which decreed the case for female exploitation and oppression (Barret, 1980). It is assumed that radical feminist movement obviously started in the United States of America in the 1960s. This period paralleled the fight against oppression

when African-Americans were fighting against racial oppression and exploitation. Feminists question the authenticity of the creation theory which is based on patriarchy though agreeing on the issue of gender creation but frowns at the societal perpetuation and the differentiation between genders. Their gender is on men whose interests are on the sex of children and sex segregation especially in what to buy for them from their youth constitutes a prolonged misconception (Azodo, 2003). For example, toy cars and planes are bought for male children while their female counterparts are bought toy dolls. Feminists, therefore are of the view that gender is different from sex. In a way of fighting injustice against them, there has been a springing up of diverse brands of feminism which include Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Black Feminism, and Womanism. African Feminist writers are not lagging behind in this universal course.

In African literature, male writers dominate the scene, and in many of their works; female characters are portrayed in their traditional viewpoints and as an asset of human beings burdened with child-bearing and supporters of men. Even a woman who talks too much is deemed as someone who is uncouth. For example in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of The People*, the notion of African female characters are stereotypically presented as girlfriends who are meant to satisfy men's sexual appetite, or as housewives. In response to these stereotypes, Buchi Emecheta in her works strongly advocates women's emancipation. Her novels reflect the plights of the African women trapped in the traditional way of life. For instance, *In the Ditch*, *Second Class Citizen* and her other literary publications focus on domestic problems facing African women.

One may ask: can a man be a feminist? According to Michael Flood, "If we are to create a society based on fair, pleasurable and respectable relations between men and women, men have a crucial role to play. If men's behaviour and attitudes do not change, then gender equality or gender justice is simply impossible. Men are part of the problem, but they are also part of the solution".

Many men have vague support for the principle of gender equality and try to avoid the more obvious forms of sexist behaviour, at least when in women's company, but most men's involvement is sexism. And some are openly hostile to feminism— a few men resent the challenge to their traditional privileges represented by feminism, and most men have been fed a highly distorted and negative media stereotype of feminism. The truth is that feminism is hopeful about change and optimistic about the possibilities for women's and men's lives.

However, the works of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Sembene Ousmane express radical views about African women. Writing from the Marxist ideological standpoint, Ngugi's female characters are first and foremost conscious of their community. They also identify with the resistant moves aimed at eradicating oppression, whether within their respective societies or external. In *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi focuses on the role and significance of female characters creating four militant women, two of whom are of the old generation and the other two of the new generation. The new generation represents the present-day African ladies who, given the necessary orientation and socio-political will be of great assistance in fighting against neo-colonialism in Africa.

It is noteworthy that the involvement of men is crucial if gender equality is achievable. The earlier questions— can men be feminists—have received diverse responses. Some people say “yes”. Men just have to live up to the same standard as women who are feminists to support the equality of women and men. Others say “no”; men should not use this label. It is understood that some women are nervous about men's involvement in feminism and men's use of the label "feminist". Some men have tried to take over women's spaces, they have set themselves up as experts on women and they have arrogantly claimed to be better feminists than feminist women. To support the course of women, men should adopt the terms "pro-feminist" or anti-sexist".

It, therefore, can be argued that feminism is a good thing, not just for women, but for men too. Feminism offers the possibility of freedom from a way of life that has been isolating, violent, obsessively competitive, emotionally shut down and physically unhealthy. It demands that men let go of unfair privileges too, but that is a small price to pay for the promise of more trusting, honest, pleasurable, and fair relations with women. And with kids, too men and women are in this together and the reconstruction of gender requires male and female shared commitment and involvement. It follows, therefore, that the liberation of women must be embraced by men as well. There are liberated men who do not believe in the stereotyping of women but the equality of men and women as a gendered subjects.

#### **4. THE SETTING AND PLOT OF BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER***

Ba's *So Long a Letter*, which has its setting in Dakar, Senegal, is a reminiscence recount of the major character, Ramatoulaye. It reflects the life and position of women in Africa especially those whom religion and tradition have successfully enslaved. Ramatoulaye, in form of a letter to Aissatou, recounts woefully and bitterly tales of her woes as a widow. It started with an emotional survival over her husband's decision to marry a second wife. Incidentally, this young choice of his, named Binetou, is an age mate and best friend to his young daughter. Being inclined to Islamic religion, Ramatoulaye cannot resist her husband from taking on a second wife.

The novel looks at very pressing themes which include the abuse of customary burial ceremony especially in the Moslem set up (Cham, 1990). It opens with the death of Modou Fall and explains how the funeral was observed: "The uninterrupted procession of men and women who have learned of it the wails and tears all round me, confirm his death (P.3)". She recounts the ugly scenes about the procession where instead of the relatives of the deceased using the cause of death for reflections are busy turning it into an avenue for money extortion from those in attendance or an occasion to show off the latest materials in the market. Some even turn it to gossip centres while others gun for free meals. A relative of Modou Fall remarks that "death is just as beautiful as life has been" (P. 8). Furthermore, contrary to the expectation that every gift and money dropped by visitors and friends of the deceased after the funeral is even carted away by relatives of the deceased. Ramatoulaye laments, "Thus our family in-laws take away with them a wad of notes painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support" (P. 7).

The Islamic religion encourages polygamy and the setting of this novel is on a predominantly Moslem society (Cham, 1990). Although the characters like Mawdo Ba and Modou Fall are educated, the reactions of their wives to their second marriage are very surprising to them. The African tradition also allows a man to marry more than one wife but this novel brings out the fundamental issue of the role of women in society. The marriage had frictions. Mawdo Ba's marriage got broken because of the influence of Ba's mother due to the conflict of the class segregation, and Aissatou's decision to quit the marriage is a challenge to Islam and tradition. But Modou Fall's marriage to his young daughter's best friend, Binetou, reflects the decadence in tradition and the subsequent abandonment of his first wife, Ramatoulaye, and her twelve children. This second marriage brings separation between Modou Fall and his wife and the twelve children and the worst of it all is that the marriage to Binetou has been completed without her knowledge which proves the fact that women are really second-class citizens and an object for men satisfying their sexual desires.

Similarly, educated Africans as reflected in Mawdo Ba and Modou Fall are regarded as children of two worlds. This reflection is subsumed in the culture conflicts where an educated African is observing two cultures— tradition and western values. He is at home with his traditional African cultural values and at the same time trying to reflect the western cultures due to his education. This is also evidenced in Ramatoulaye, though influenced by her daughter to divorce her husband after his marriage, who refuses to go because of her religious inclinations. But we see Aissatou, who combine the traditional and western values to get the best for herself, divorce with Ba and her subsequent western education attainment

coupled with gift of Toyota 125 fiat to Ramatoulaye is an eye-opener that women can transcend the stereotype against them and do that which men can equally do.

In a nutshell, *So Long a Letter* is a perceptive portrait of a Moslem woman in a society in the transition of her grief, her courage, and her dignity. It is the form of an overview, which reflects on the grief, courage, and dignity of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. It is a study of the isolation of married woman who refuses to accept polygamy in a society that encourages it and testimony of and a tribute to the plight of those articulate women who live in a social milieu dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their right of place.

## **5. MARXISM AND THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN**

According to Trotsky (1970:45), "To alter the position of women at the root is possible only if all the conditions of social, family, and domestic existence are altered." The crisis of capitalism on a world scale falls with special severity on the shoulder of women and youth. Karl Marx (1972) pointed to the tendency for capitalism to make super-profits from the exploitation of women and children. He noted that:

The labour of women and children was therefore the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourer was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family" (Marx 1972: 394-5).

It could be observed that the advanced countries of capitalism, the changing mode of production, and the capitalists' constant attempt to increase the rate of profits have led to the ever-increasing employment of women and young people who are subjected to the worst kind of exploitation, working for low wages in bad conditions with few or no rights.

The capitalist system regards women merely as a convenient source of cheap labor and part of the reserve army of labour to be drawn on when there is a shortage of labor in certain areas of production and discarded when the need disappears. This is evident during war times, when women were drafted into factories to replace men who had been called up into the army and then sent back home when the war ended. But despite the talk about "women's world" and girl power and despite all the laws that are supposed to guarantee equality, women workers remain the most exploited and oppressed section of the proletariat (Marx, 1983, 1999).

In the past, women were conditioned by class society to be politically indifferent, unorganized, and above all passive, thereby providing a social base for reaction. But the situation is changing with the changing role of women in society. For example, in recent years when the bourgeoisie has largely lost its former mass social resources of reaction in the peasantry especially in U.S.A., Japan, and Western Europe, women no longer constitute a reserve of backwardness and reaction as in the past. Consequently, the crises of capitalism, with its constant attacks on women and the family will further radicalize over broader layers of women and push them in a revolutionary direction. Marxists, therefore, tap on this potential revolutionary stance of women. Anyone who witnesses a strike of women observes the tremendous determination, courage and drive. Marxist conceptors therefore, are encouraged to support every measure by women to join and participate in the unions with equal rights and equal responsibilities.

## 6. TENET OF MARXIST THEME IN LITERATURE

The tenet of Marxist theory (1983) is dependent on "historical materialism" which stipulates that in every human endeavour, the final analysis is occasioned by the material conditions of life—the need for food, security, and shelter which is neglected by the capitalists as they are in short supply thereby making it an object for competition for the contending classes in the society. This results enormously in the exploitation of the masses who generate the wealth and for the good of the wealthy while the poor masses languish in poverty because they lack capital and power.

The theory of Marxism in relation to literature is viewed from the sociological theory and it is interested in ascertaining the relationship between literature and society. In the case of a Marxist theory of literature, it depends on the transferring of ownership of wealth that is prevalent in a capitalist society and its consequences. Its effort is to expose the exploitation of the masses by the bourgeoisie and the social contradictions arising from it. The Marxist theory of literature, therefore, recommends the education of the masses and a general revolutionary didacticism that would then equip the masses to rise and fight for change (Marx & Engel 1984). The emphasis is that there is the need for unity and collectivism in the fight amongst the exploited and also the need to be organized to fight their class enemies. Furthermore, the mode of production of material life conditioned the social, political and intellectual life processes in general.

Using the materialist conception theory, Marx was able to indicate the way to an all-embracing and comprehensive study of the process of the rise, development, and decline of socio-economic system, people make their own history, but what determines the motive of people, i.e. what gives rise to the class of conflicting ideas and strivings? What is the sum total of all these clashes in the mass of human basis of all the man's historical activity? What is the law in relation to the development of the scientific study of history as a single process which, with all its immense variety and contradictories, is governed by definite laws? Therefore, to reflect on the ideals of Marxism, the main characters in Marxist work usually are the oppressed and exploited class who collectively revolutionized in order to ameliorate their conditions of life. The concept of representing and showing the life of a common person, which is imperative in Marxism, depicts the life of the majority of humanity. In the same vein, a typical Marxist work is composed in simplified language and style to render it as accessible to a large number of readerships as possible.

In literature, African literary writers of Marxist influence or orientation include Ngugi wa Thiongo, Niyi Osundare, Sembene Ousmane, Onyebuchi Nnorom, Buchi Emechata and Festus Iyayi. It is important to note that the theory of Marxism is aptly dogmatic because it prescribes how a work ought to be written and sees as the correct interpretation. Although Marxist literary artists tend to be differing in some respect from each other, they share a particular direction of thinking which is based on the principles of historical materialism.

## 7. THE STANCE OF MARXIST FEMINISM

The stance of the Marxist feminists is that they must energetically take up the cause of women, fighting against inequality and all manifestations of oppression—religious or traditional 'practices', discrimination, and injustice (Nnaemeka, 1994). This must be done from the class point of view. It must be understood that capitalism is the bane of oppression and the feminists must strive for the abrogation of it. Any tendency to play off women against men, or to divide and segregate women from the rest of the labour movement in the name of "women" liberation or anything else is thoroughly reactionary and must be energetically combated.

Marxist or Radical feminists should struggle for women to have control over their bodies though this may not be a call for the adoption of law on abortion but for women to

determine when and how pregnancy should be maintained. In the same vein, there should be eradication of women enslavement and battering by their husbands. This could be achieved through a great and wider campaign and enlightenment through the media-electronic and print. Furthermore, women should embrace education to help them understand and know their rights in society (Walter, 1998).

The problem of women should not be looked at only at the factory of office gate but extend to the home and society. Marxist feminists must fight for the abolition of all discriminatory legislation for the complete equality of women and men before the law, for the fullest rights to divorce and abortion, free access to contraception and health checks, for universal, free and good quality nurseries and childcare of all ages. Feminists must work out a program of transitional demands, setting out from the immediate and post pressing needs of women at all levels.

## 8. MARXIST FEMINIST EXAMINATION OF MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

There are three feminist issues reflected in *So Long a Letter*: abuse of customary burial ceremony, polygamy and culture conflict. The novel is written in a form of diary. It is basically a "letter" from the main character, Ramatoulaye, to her friend Aissatou. Though it is in form of a letter from a friend but the only feature that makes it appear like a letter are "Dear Aissatou" at the beginning and the signature at the end, that is Ramatoulaye. The "letter" neither goes back to discuss the childhood days of the women (Aissatou and Ramatoulaye) and back to the present and, at another time, delves into the future. There is narrative cohesion in this novel because the narrative technique does not really distract the reader from following the issues discussed in the novel. The issue of polygamy in a changing society and the main characters around the action enhance the understanding of cohesion.

However, since the novel is an autobiography, there are some disturbing questions that can arise like the omniscient, omnipresent, narrator-hero knows too much. How does Ramatoulaye know what goes on in the minds of the characters besides those she has spoken with or what she has learned from others? Her bitterness is directed at the man as the betrayer and victimizer. Also, the mother-in-law seems to make her biased in her narrative; Ramatoulaye's bias is noted in Ba's description of the female characters as she creates a hierarchy among them: Aissatou is superior to young Nabou; Nabou is superior to Binetou; Ramatoulaye is superior to all of them.

### 8.1 Abuse of Customary Burial Ceremony

Most of the action in this novel is represented in the Moslem setup. The action starts with the death of Modou Fall and the subsequent chapter explains how the funeral of Modou Fall was conducted. Under the Koranic injunctions, an occasion like this must depict the moment of solemn reflections by those in attendance and should also be an occasion where the soul of the deceased will be committed to serious prayer so that Allah could grant his soul comfort or rest in paradise. But on the contrary, such noble injunctions for such solemn occasion have been betrayed. Instead, the relatives of the dead turn it into an avenue for extorting money out of those in attendance, and for showing off of the latest materials in the market. Others use the occasion for gossip while to others, it is a place to get free meals. This assertion supports the remark by one of Modou Fall's friends that "death is just as beautiful as life has been" (p.8).

Unlike the expectations that the dependants of the dead would be catered for with whatever those in attendance could put down, a funeral such as this is even a set-up for the benefits of distant relatives. This is because the money and gifts received from those in attendance are taken away by relatives living the dependents of the dead without anything. No wonder Ramatoulaye laments: "these our family in-laws take away with them a wad of notes painstakingly topped and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support" (p.7). It is even reported that child naming ceremonies could be missed but never a funeral. To further explicate how money can be extorted from people on a funeral occasion, praise

singers are employed and it can be seen that there are much material and funeral benefits accruing to the relatives of the deceased. Maryama Ba critically examines the custom of using funeral ceremonies as an avenue for extortion of a widow, instead of a moment of reflection and prayers for the peaceful repose of the deceased's soul, as advocated by Islamic religion.

### **8.2 Polygamy**

One remarkable thing about the novel is the setting in a society that is predominantly Islamic. The Islamic religion permits a man to marry up to four wives provided he can take proper care of them and love them equally. The major characters are Modous, though educated. When we consider the marriage of Mado Ba and Modou Fall to their second wives ordinarily, it could not have caused any uproar but for the reactions of the first wife. Has Africa generally embraced polygamy? But the instances are on the role of women in society. Mawdo Ba married his second wife, Mabou, not because he loves her but because his mother wants her aristocratic blood to be maintained. Even the second marriage was concluded without the prior knowledge of the first wife, Aissatou, which led to her backing out of the marriage. This action by Aissatou is a challenge to Islam and tradition. Unlike Mawdo Ba's second marriage which is considered as a measure from his mother, Modou Fall's marriage to Binetou is basically the bourgeoisie's desire to acquire and accumulate wealth. Fall feels that he has acquired much wealth and can take additional responsibilities by marrying a second wife. After Fall's marriage to Binetou, he completely abandons his wife, Ramatoulaye, and their twelve children after 25 years of marriage. His second marriage metamorphoses to absolute separation from Ramatoulaye and the most pathetic even annoying is that she was ignorant of the plans until the marriage was completely conducted and to a friend of one of her daughter's mate. As a feminist and ardent proponent for women emancipation, Mariama Ba exposes how women are regarded by men in societies where religion and tradition cage women. From Ramatoulaye's characterization, we can see that women are regarded as a ball that can be kicked and passed on to others. To propel feminists, Ba created two characters that exhibit the core loyal and submissive African women and another with the mixture of western and African traditional cultural values in Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's marriage.

### **8.3 Culture Conflict**

The theme of culture is such an expression in most African writings and this is a result of educated African who can be said to be a child of two world i.e. two cultures. This means that every educated African is at home with their traditional cultural values and on the other hand, part of the western culture as a result of their education. Therefore, they tend to live up to the cultures and this throws them into cultural dilemma.

In *So Long a Letter*, this dilemma is expressed by the duo of Mawdo Ba and Modou Fall who were all educated and are well placed in their societies but they could not use their position or western education to critically evaluate their cultural values. Mawdo Ba could have assessed the benefits of getting married to a second wife. Unfortunately, he finds himself succumbing to the feudalistic set up in his family, simply because his mother insisted on him taking a second wife.

In the same vein, Mawdo Fall wants to live like an African by marrying more than one wife even without informing his first wife. Consequently, he wants to maintain his status as a member of the middle class in the society. But the two instances— being an African and maintaining his status as a member of the middle class— land him in a greater problem and eventually lead to his death. Furthermore, on cultural dilemma, Ramatoulaye, though influenced by her daughter to divorce her father after he had married Binetou, refused because it is against her religion. It is only Aissatou who made better use of both her traditional and western values and education. In a nutshell, this theme of culture conflict explicates that the marriage of the two cultural values results in culture conflict.

### **9. Concluding Remarks**

The contribution of this paper to knowledge can be located within its exposition, through Marxist reading, that the oppression and exploitation of women is a process involving women

themselves. The woman, in effect, continually reproduces the conditions of her subservience as Marx will add, through alienation, competition, rivalry and docility. Through alienation, women forfeit their rights to be the initiators and controllers of their historical processes. Ramatoulaye's total submission to her religious practices contributed to her enslavement. Aissatou's protest by rejecting polygamy results in her grief and isolation by her community. Their grief, courage and dignity are however the consequences of their positions within the power relations.

Finally, Marxists must struggle against all forms of injustice in the society. Every injustice against women should be denounced. The emancipation of women will, forever, be a utopia unless it goes in *pari pasu* with the struggle against certain cultural practices which inevitably uphold and perpetuate the enslavement of women. Marxist feminists must practically engage in struggle against inequality and all manifestations of oppression and exploitation of women.

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