
Marginalization, Silence and Suffering in *A Jury of Her Peers*: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Feminist literary texts highlight the injustices and discrimination committed by men in the patriarchal context. The research aims to analyze a short story by Glaspell (1917) A Jury of Her Peers from the point of view of Spivak's (1998) notion of the marginalization of women and their silence in a society dominated by men. The research illustrates the ways in which the female character, Mrs. Wright, is portrayed as the marginalized victim in the story. Drawing upon the Spivak's concept of Marginalization, propounded in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak", the research uses textual analysis method and finds out that Mrs. Wright tries to raise voice against the injustice meted out by the patriarchal system and to protest against the domestic, physical and psychological violence to which is she subjected badly, but she fails to do so in the male-dominated society. The feminist analysis of the selected text in the light of textual references, confirms Mrs. Wright as an endless marginalized female individual whose voice is unheard, not only by males but also by her peers. The short story shows that women are silent and marginalized victims in the patriarchal world. The prejudiced men compelled them to stay within the confines of their homes, marginalized and unheard. The present study suggests future researchers carry out a feminist analysis of other literary texts in the light of Spivak's notion of female marginalization and silence in distinct settings.

1. Introduction

It is assumed that in the dominant male society, men have obtained a superior position compared to women who are considered as insignificant and irrational individuals; therefore, they are limited to household chores. The same thing happened to female in the West, the United States and the other parts of the world, though their experiences are different (Feminism and Race in the United States, n.d.). Over a century ago, in the United States, women began to resist and raise their voices against the male-dominated society. They launched the feminist movement and protested against patriarchal society (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). In the US females' systematic suppression is traced back to British Law of Coverture. The British law of Coverture was introduced in the United States when she became a colony of Britain. The married women were deprived of legal rights and they were confined to domestic chores. It took nearly two centuries to abolish this law completely in 1966 (Kerber, 2000). They were called "feme covert" which means 'covered women', and were assigned passive, domestic and inferior legal status after marriage (Stretton & Kesselring, 2013). However, women significantly contested for their legal rights towards the end of the 19th century. The first wave of feminism was initiated in the US in the 1890s to contest for women's legal rights, such as the basic right to vote and to own private property and certain other legal rights (Zaher, 2002).

Glaspell (1917), an American literary feminist writer, writes literature during the first wave of feminism in which legal and social rights are contested. Glaspell challenges the social oppression and marginalization that women face during the period of the second wave of feminism that occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century. For instance, she writes a play "Trifles" (1916) that is based on the idea of social and legal marginalization. Glaspell (1917) writes the above-mentioned story in the time when females are suppressed and marginalized due to the British colonial common law Coverture and the patriarchal mindset of the society (Sydner, 2015). From the same play, the short story *A Jury of Her Peers* set in a patriarchal society in Tennessee focuses on the marginalization of women in patriarchal society in the United States. History offers a critique of the patriarchal system which suppresses women and deprives them of their fundamental rights of speech and confines them to domestic tasks. This study aims to determine the means by which Mrs. Wright can be described as a silent woman marginalized in light of Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization.

In Essay, UK (2013), a thesis is published in which Butler's (2010) theory of performativity is used to portray Mrs. Wright as a woman who resists the patriarchal suppression by killing her husband in *Trifles* (1916). However, any research study on Glaspell's (1917) short story *A Jury of Her Peers*, to the best of our knowledge, has not been carried out with reference to Spivak's notion of marginalization. Consequently, the researcher tries to understand how, even after having resisted and protested against domestic and social repression, Mrs. Wright's suffering is endless and her voice remained inaudible in *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917), with reference to Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization in a patriarchal context.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To explore the means by which the protagonist Mrs. Wright can be characterized as a victim of marginalization in the short story *A Jury of Her Peers* by Susan Glaspell (1917).
- To elucidate the reasons contributing to the endless silent suffering of the protagonist Mrs. Wright in *A Jury of Her Peers* by Susan Glaspell (1917).
- To figure out the role of Mrs. Wright's peers in her silent suffering.

2. Literature Review

Feminism seeks to confer an individual identity on women where they can enjoy equal social, economic and political rights (Zaidi & Sahibzada, 2019). Feminists protest against unjust legal, sexual, social and economic rights (Schneider, 1992) Feminism gives rise to various feminist theories in multiple disciplines i.e. Gender Studies, history, literature and law. The field of Gynocentrism emerged from the lives of women, their psychological and physical state of mind and their suffering illustrated by the women themselves. The theoretical foundation of Gynocentrism is laid down by Beauvoir (1949), Friedan (1963), Roger (1966), Ellman (1968) and Milet (1969). Feminists promote equality and legal rights, that is, the right to vote and the right to own private property. After fighting for female suffrage, the second wave of feminism (1960-1980) combats domestic violence and promotes women's rights to physical autonomy, sexual rights, the right to divorce and the right to a salary equal to that of men. The third wave feminism primarily discusses the diversity among the distinct ethnic, racial and gender-based groups (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006).

Glaspell, an American feminist, belongs to the era of the first wave of feminism. However, Glaspell not only contests for legal rights of females but also social rights. She writes a play "Trifles" (1916) and then a short story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917) about the same play. By the time Glaspell (1917) wrote the short story "A jury of peers", women in the United States were doubly marginalized by the British common law and the prejudiced patriarchal society. The aforementioned story takes place in Dickinson County, Tennessee. Tennessee became a British colony in 1763 and became independent in 1780. Females in Tennessee, like other British colonies, have been marginalized due to the British common law 'coverture' (Hooper, 1996). Although Glaspell (1917), in the short story *A Jury of Peers* does not directly depict a colonial framework, but deals with the repression of women which is in some way associated with the colonial law of the suppression of women.

In the context of the prevailing situation in the United States at that time, owing to the law of coverture, – which was imposed on the United States when it was colonized by Great Britain - married women were deprived of their rights legally, that is, owning property and signing contracts (Nancy & Tuana, 2011). Spivak (1988) is one of the most notable feminist Marxists to defend women's rights.); she claims that there is no concept of universality in feminism, as well as in Marxism since the plight of the inferior classes around the world, is different. Unlike, Gramsci (1973) who uses the term 'subaltern' for all of the subordinate classes other than women, Spivak proclaims that all neglected and silenced groups, including women from colonized lands, are subalterns (Spivak, 2003).

Spivak (1988) asserts that women of the postcolonial world have no self-representation and they are doubly marginalized by the colonial laws as well as the prejudiced native males in the postcolonial world. Following her notion of feminism not being a universal movement, Spivak (1985) criticizes the Western feminists, as they seem to have disregarded the fact that women, especially in the colonized laws around the world are confronted with forms of oppression different and serious. Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization is rarely studied in the context of the United States. Most of the studies are on the literary works set in the subcontinent or Africa. For instance, Olsson (2011) studied Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* in the light of Spivak's marginalization. The novel is set in the postcolonial time frame in India. Koene (2017) also analyzes marginalization and silencing of women in Allende's *Eva Luna* and *Cuentos de evaluna* with reference to Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization.

A number of researches have analyzed the short story *A Jury of Her Peers*. Ayan (2016) has carried out a feminist stylistic study of this short story (1917) in order to portray and justify the significant stylistic difference between the writing of men and women. Schotland (2009) has put forth the instances from the aforementioned short story to assert that Mrs. Wright's act of killing her husband is unethical and crime. This study criticizes the fact that Ms. Wright's peers are hiding evidence of the murder, which is unethical and ill legal. Zadeh (2013) carried out a deconstructive analysis of this short story (1917) and he also challenges the idea of binary opposition in which he asserts that the basic binary structure between men and women will remain there, no matter how many women are competing for their equal rights. He quotes various instances from the short story to support his notion of binary opposition. Essays, UK (2013) has published a thesis on Glaspell's play "Trifles" which possesses the same story as it is in *A Jury of Her Peers*. She uses Butler's (2010) theories of performance, resistance, and collectivity to portray Mrs. Wright as a woman who has carried out an act of murdering her husband, which goes against the gender roles assigned by society. Thus, she faces resistance from society, but with the collective help of her peers, she is able to transgress her passivity from the perspective of Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization. Since the United States also remains one of the colonies of the British Empire, Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization seems to apply in the US context as well. The USA since colonial law lasts longer than colonies. Therefore, it is applicable in the current study that is situated in the postcolonial environment since colonial law lasts longer than the colonies. Consequently, researchers find that their research deserves to analyze Mrs. Wright (1917) concerning the notion of marginalization of Spivak (1988) in a patriarchal context. The research aims to observe that the notion of marginalization of Spivak (1988) in the patriarchal context of the selected story does not directly refer to the suppression caused by the British common law. Thus, this study aims to determine the means by which Mrs. Wright can be described as a silent woman marginalized in the light of the notion of marginalization of Spivak (1988).

3. Research Methodology

Spivak's (1988) concept of marginalization given in "Theory of Subalternity" was used as a theoretical framework to understand the means by which Mrs. Wright can be considered as a marginalized. The qualitative and descriptive-analytical method is used to analyze the text. The research describes the problems mentioned by Spivak and, based on these descriptions, analyzes and interprets the content of the text to demonstrate Spivak's notion

in the text. Therefore, the analysis subdivision is based on the textual and the content analysis method.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The researcher aims to conduct a feminist textual analysis of Glaspell's (1917) short story *A Jury of Her Peers* in the light of Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization in a patriarchal setting. Spivak generally discusses double marginalization of women in a postcolonial setting i.e. subjugation by the patriarchal setup on one level and by the colonial masters (and laws) on another. The concept of marginalization of females has been selected as the theoretical framework from Spivak's "Theory of Subalternity" with the aim to analyze Mrs. Wright as a voiceless subaltern who is unable to achieve self-representation in the patriarchal society. The single marginalization idea of Spivak i.e. under a patriarchal system was chosen for the current research study since Glaspell's (1917) short story *A Jury of Her Peers* is written in the time when British common law *Coverture* is prevalent but the direct colonial setup is not depicted in the aforementioned short story.

The term 'subaltern' has been borrowed by Spivak (1988) from Gramsci (1973) to call someone as inferior, marginalized and voiceless. Spivak states about women as the marginalized misrepresented group which under the chauvinistic mindset are left unheard as the subjugated silent suffers. According to Spivak (1988), in the male-dominated society, women are misrepresented as feeble, irrational and only suitable for domestic and familial chores. The oppressed females are mistreated physically and psychologically by males, bearing a chauvinistic mindset. Furthermore, Spivak (1988) has criticized the entire prejudiced social system where males are put on a superior pedestal and they ultimately subjugate and silence females' agonizing voices. According to Spivak when females intend to raise voice in the male-dominated society, no heed is paid to them. Females are the subalterns who are silenced and demeaned, therefore, in a chauvinist setup without a strong sisterhood, females will continue to be degraded and unheard.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

A qualitative textual analysis and a deductive approach is used to interpret Glaspell's (1917) short story *A Jury of Her Peers* from a feminist perspective in the light of Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization.

4. Results and Discussion

This study has figured out the reasons that portray Mrs. Wright in Glaspell's (1917) short story *A Jury of Her Peers* as a victim of marginalization and silent suffering in the light of Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization. The current research study also has analyzed the concept of sisterhood in the patriarchal society with respect to the short story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917).

Glaspell is an American, feminist, playwright, novelist and a journalist etc. One of her notable work is the short story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917). It is a story of Minnie Wright who is suspected of killing her husband, Mr. Wright. He is found dead in the farmhouse by Mr. Hale with a rope around his neck. A group of three men i.e. the court attorney, George

Henderson, Mr. Hale and the local sheriff, Henry Peters and the two females i.e. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale visit a nearby farmhouse where a queer incident has taken place. The farmhouse owner, Mr. Wright is murdered a day before their visit and Mrs. Wright is kept in custody as a suspect for murdering her husband. All the three men scrutinize every corner of the farmhouse to look for evidence against the murder of Mr. Wright whereas the females stay together and look at the evidence and motives behind the murder in a different manner.

The male characters, depicted in the short story *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917), elucidate a sense of patriarchal hegemony and as a result the silent suffering of Minnie Wright. The author elucidates the setting of Mr. Wright's farmhouse as "It had always been a lonesome-looking place" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 1). The lonely, cold and dark farmhouse with seemingly desolated poplar trees in the aforementioned story implies the silence of the farmhouse. It is Mr. Hale who comes to know about the murder of Mr. Wright since he visits his farmhouse to inquire if Mr. Wright wants to install a telephone or not. Mr. Wright does not want to install a telephone in his house for Minnie Wright which implies that he desires Minnie to be silent and isolated with no connection with her peers. Mr. Hale while narrating the incident tells the court attorney "I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 2). It implies that even if she speaks, her voice is unheard and silenced. The same idea is given by Spivak (1988) about the females as marginalized subalterns in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Glaspell describes the chair on which Mrs. Wright is sitting after her husband has been murdered as "It was a dingy red, with wooden rungs up the back, and the middle rung was gone, and the chair sagged to one side" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 2). The broken middle rung of the rocker and with its one side sagged implies the abusive relationship between Mr. Wright and Mrs. Wright. Moreover, Minnie Wright ignorant of the cold weather implies that how terribly her physically and emotional senses are shattered that she does not even felt how it feels to sense something. It signifies the robotic, silent and desolated married life she spends for twenty years with Mr. Wright.

Mr. Hale inquiries from Mrs. Wright "why didn't she know who murdered him even when she was lying beside him in bed?" To which Mrs. Wright's replies "I didn't wake up" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 3) can be interpreted as if Mrs. Wright is hinting her unending marginalized silent suffering. She knows even if she has broken free from her abusive husband, the patriarchal society will not hear her hue and cry, therefore, she will continue to be a subaltern. Mr. Hale questioning her depicts the patriarchal setup where females are answerable. Hence, her suffering and loss of identity are bound to last forever in the prejudiced society.

Mrs. Wright fearlessly and bluntly informs Mr. Hale about her husband's murder as "He died of a rope around his neck" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 3) implies that Mrs. Wright faces so much suppression during her married life that finally she becomes an untamed woman who decides to raise her voice against the patriarchal society where it is considered a queer thing. It can also be construed as if she is aware that Mr. Hale being a male will be oblivious to her silent suffering and agony. Mr. Hale while narrating the incident of seeing Mr. Wright's murder is written by Glaspell (1917) as "His voice almost fell to a whisper" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 6). Mr. Hale's inability to narrate the incident of Mr. Wright's murder connotes that men find it difficult and strange to explicate an incident where females try to raise their voice or they try to act something other than their prescribed domestic chores.

The court's attorney, the sheriff, and Mr. Wright's neighbor, Mr. Hale, begin to search for evidence behind Mr. Wright's murder in the kitchen of the farmhouse, which is in a deplorable state. Sheriff, while looking for evidence in the kitchen, says "Nothing here but kitchen things" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 7). Kitchen proclaimed insignificant by the sheriff can be interpreted as a symbol of the banality of womenfolk. The beginning of his search for evidence against the murder implies that her silent suffering will remain unheard of by these biased chauvinist men. Spivak (1981) gives a similar idea that although women raise their voices; it is always left unattended and unheard in patriarchal society by the very prejudiced men.

Mrs. Peter seeing Mrs. Wright's broken fruit jar says "Oh, her fruit" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 5). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters take the messy kitchen as a representative of Minnie Wright's desolation and the difficult domestic routine. The court attorney finds a broken fruit pot in the kitchen, which he describes as "good mess". (Glaspell, 1917, p. 5). The degrading explanation of the fruit by the court lawyer can be interpreted as symbolic of the result obtained by Mrs. Wright after having quietly exercised household chores, faced psychological and physical violence and led a cold and unhappy married life of twenty years. The "last cherry" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 10) in Mrs. Wright's fruit jar signifies her femininity and passivity from which she tries to get out by murdering her husband, but to no avail due to patriarchal society and the sisters' silence leads her to remain an unheard and silent outcast. The last cherry implies Minnie's peers who by staying silence even after realizing the excruciating life she spends; restricts her to the female gender role which will result in her silent suffering in the jail. Mrs. Peter while seeing the last fruit and the broken jar of Mrs. Wright in the kitchen says "if I was you I wouldn't tell her fruit was gone" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 13). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters' fear to tell Minnie Wright that all her fruit are gone since they believe it will break her heart is understood that that all of the marginalized and silent life she has lived in vain since the macho mentality of the men who come to collect evidence is very prejudiced and cannot appreciate Minnie Wright raising her voice.

Mrs. Hale being a female, Mrs. Wright's old friend and her neighbor know that the abusive marriage of Mr. Wright and Mrs. Wright has taken away her ecstatic nature. Mrs. Hale recollects the times, twenty years ago, "when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons, and stood up there in the choir and sang" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 13). It signifies how the patriarchal setup ruins a lively young girl who loves singing and dressing up nicely. On the other hand, the court attorney asserts "I don't think anyone would call it cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the home-making instinct" (Glaspell, 1917, p. 12). It implies Spivak's (1988) notion of marginalization where she asserts that the prejudiced men demean and confine women to domestic chores. They hold them responsible for home-making qualities. Mrs. Hale mutters in reply "Well, I don't know as Wright had, either". In response, Mrs. Hale mutters that Mr. Wright was equally cause of the unhappy and gloomy house. The muttering of Mrs. Hale in front of the court attorney connotes the silence of Mrs. Wright's peers that ultimately make her an unheard subaltern which is asserted by Spivak (1988) in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Mrs. Hale also avoids telling about the disturbed marital relationship of Mr. Wright and Mrs. Wright in front of the men which also verifies the notion of silence of sisters in the patriarchal society, thus, making Mrs. Wright as a subaltern.

Mr. Henderson, Mr. Peters and Mr. Hale go upstairs to the room where Mr. Wright was murdered to find evidence. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters find a quilt on which Mrs. Wright has neatly put patches but then they figure out a queer patch on the quilt. Mrs. Peter while observing that queer patch says: “All the rest of them have been so nice and even—but—this one. Why, it looks as if she didn’t know what she was about” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 15). The strange patch sewed by Minnie signifies that after facing constant physical and psychological suppression and isolation, she is no more able to confine to the assigned passive gendered role by the patriarchal society. Hence, the strange patch implies Minnie’s attempt to transgress from her silent suffering as a female. Contrarily, it is shown in the text that Mrs. Hale tries to re-sew that irregular patch on the quilt. Glaspell (1917) describes Mrs. Hale while looking at the queer patch as “Holding this block made her feel queer as if the distracted thoughts of the woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 15). Mrs. Hale feeling queer depicts that Mrs. Wright’s peers have accepted their marginalized position and they are hopeless that the voice will not be unheard anyways.

Mrs. Peters sees a birdcage in the farmhouse “Here’s a birdcage. Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale?” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 17). The women at the same time cannot understand the purpose of a bird cage because they think it seems strange to think that Minnie had a bird since Mr. Wright appreciated silence. The broken cage signifies the silence, isolation and domestic violence that Minnie faces perhaps buying a canary to lessen her loneliness. Mrs. Hale recollects about Mrs. Wright’s personality before marriage when “She was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and – fluttery” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 15). Mrs. Hale remembers Minnie’s premarital life when she is pretty, shy, agitated and a girl with a very sweet voice, just like the Canary bird that has a very melodious voice. Mrs. Hale finds a nice box of Minnie’s belongings that she thinks she might have before getting married. However, when she opens it up, she sadly witnesses a dead canary inside it with a twisted neck. She painfully says “Look at it! Its neck—look at its neck! It’s all—other side to” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 17). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters stand motionless and speechless since now they are clearly able to figure out the motive behind Mr. Wright’s murder. It implies that Mr. Wright kills the canary dreadfully when it tries to sing. In other words, the canary can be considered a symbol of Mrs. Wright; it implies that when Mrs. Wright tried to speak up, Mr. Wright murders her voice so that she stays an inferior, marginalized and silent subaltern. Mrs. Wright, in an attempt to save her identity, death and existence, murders her husband in the same way that he kills the canary. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters after finding a clear evidence of the murder of Mr. Wright stand motionless and speechless. Mrs. Hale “slipped the box under the quilt pieces in the basket” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 19) in order to hide the evidence against Mrs. Wright. This instance in the short story can be construed as Mrs. Hale’s attempts to hide Minnie’s aim of transgress from her suppressed and silent feminine role in the patriarchal society. This attempt by Minnie’s peers to hide the evidence of her husband’s murder implies that they are confining her to a life on the margins of misery and silent suffering. This exemplifies that, due to the weak sisterhood, Minnie Wright, even after freeing herself from her abusive husband, will remain a subaltern. Even when the men come in, they try to hide the evidence which implies that not only the macho men, but the lack of sisterhood result into the endless suffering of Minnie Wright, where her hue and cry will be left unheard and unattended as it is claimed by Spivak (1988). Canary’s death may imply the painful ending that Minnie could face, as she could face her husband’s first-hand murder charges. The court attorney asserts: “It’s all

perfectly clear, except the reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing – something to show. Something to make a story about. A thing that would connect up with this clumsy way of doing it” (Glaspell, 1917, p. 16). This means that even if Minnie tries to resist patriarchal oppression, she will continue to suffer in silence from the prison of her abusive married life in the prison of patriarchal society, because the men who came to gather evidence are sure that Mrs. Wright murdered her husband, they're just looking for the reason she didn't settle for the assigned gender roles. It is taboo for women to make their voices heard or to act against men.

Minnie's lack of agency in a patriarchal society is clearly evident in the above-mentioned cases of the text where prejudiced male characters and her silent and indifferent companions confine her as a subordinate who must remain marginalized and the silent victim. No matter that she tries to raise her voice, her voice will be unheard of and neglected in the patriarchal world. Thus, Ms. Wright's character aptly illustrates the notion of marginalization of Spivak (1988) in the patriarchal context where subalterns cannot speak.

5. Conclusion

The research study aims to figure out the means by which the protagonist Mrs. Wright can be characterized as a victim of marginalization and silent endless suffering in *A Jury of Her Peers* in the light of Spivak's notion of marginalization. The feminist analysis of the selected sample in the light of textual references confirms Mrs. Wright as an endless marginalized female individual whose voice is unheard not only by males but also by her peers. There are many cases in the short story, for example, a broken cage, a dead bird, a broken fruit jar, and many other illustrations that portray Mrs. Wright as the outcast despite her husband's suspected murder. The male characters in the short story, searching the farmhouse for evidence of Mr. Wright's murder are highly prejudiced. They incessantly blame Mrs. Wright for every unpleasant thing they observe in the farmhouse. Mrs. Wright along with her peers is demeaned and called irrational figures.

Going forward, the study results show Ms. Wright as a strong woman who successfully challenges prescribed gender roles by killing her husband. However, the researchers in the current study concluded that even though she raises her voice against her physical and psychological repression by killing her husband, her voice is still unheard, as her peers hide the evidence behind the murder, that is, the dead canary with twisted neck. The painful evidence representing Ms. Wright's motive behind killing Mr. Wright is hidden by her sisters. The court attorney, the sheriff and Mr. Hale are highly prejudiced men bearing the chauvinist mindset.

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