

Novelistic Representation of Baghdad in the Contemporary Western Novel

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التمثيل الروائي لمدينة بغداد في الرواية الغربية المعاصرة

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10.58564/MABDAA.62.2.2023.381

المستخلص

لا تظهر بغداد كمدينة شرق أوسطية أو كفضاء مكاني فحسب، بل تبرز كشخصية مهمة في عدد لا يحصى من الروايات الغربية المعاصرة. وباعتباره بداية النص السردى وعتبته، فإن العنوان هو الشفرة التي تفك رموز الأحداث الرمزية في سياقها الدرامي وتتابعها السردية. هذه الدراسة عبارة عن بحث موضوعاته روايات غربية معاصرة ذات مكون فضاء مشترك: بغداد، على وجه التحديد: ملاك بغداد (٢٠٠٥) للكاتب بول ليو سولتيزر، بريد بغداد (٢٠٠٨) للكاتب خوسيه ميغيل باراس، حكاية من بغداد (٢٠١٣) لإثيل ستيفانا دروير، موعد في بغداد (١٩٥١) للكاتبة أجاثا كريستي، شظية على هامش بغداد (٢٠١١) وحديقة في بغداد (٢٠١٦) لإليزابيث حوريم. يعتبر العنوان بمثابة مركز انبعاث المعنى؛ والنواة التي تتكشف فيها البنى السردية، فهو الأداة التي يوجه بها تدفق المعنى في النص. ولذلك فإن البنى الدلالية المخفية للعنوان، واستخدامه العملي عبر تاريخ قراءاته المتعددة، وذكرى تحولاته في اللغة، وخلفيته، وإدراكه للمتلخي، ونظامه النحوي، هي محور هذه الدراسة. وللعنوان وظيفة أساسية في استخلاص البنية الرمزية للسرد وتحديد موضوعات الخطاب السردية. لمدينة بغداد حضور موضوعي في عنوان الروائي الغربي، مما يثير التساؤل لماذا شكلت بغداد فضاء خياليا في النص الروائي الغربي، خاصة وأن الروائي الغربي يخاطب من جهة قارئاً يشاركه الهوية التي تنتمي إلى نفس الوسط الثقافي، ومن ناحية أخرى يختلف عنه في الهوية والثقافة والفكر. الكلمات المفتاحية: بغداد، العنوان، الرواية الغربية، الثقافة، المكان

Abstract

As a Middle Eastern city, Baghdad appears as a setting and a formidable character in countless contemporary Western novels. As the beginning and threshold of the narrative text, the title is the code that deciphers the symbolic events in their dramatic context and narrative succession. This study is an analysis whose subjects are contemporary Western novels with a standard and shared space component: Baghdad, namely: Malāk Baġdād (2005) by Paul Leo Saultizer (*Angel of Baghdad*), Barīd Baġdād (2008) (*The Baghdad Post* by José Miguel Barras), Hikāya min Baġdād (٢٠١٣) (*A Tale of Baghdad*) by Ethel Stefana Drower, Maw'id fi Baġdād (1951) (*They Came to Baghdad* by Agatha Christie), Šarābnl 'alā Hāmiši Baġdād (2011) (*Shrapnel on the Margin of Baghdad*) and Ḥadiqah fi Baġdād (2016) (*A Garden in Baghdad*) by Elisabeth Horem. In this article, the title is regarded as the epicenter of meaning emission and the core in which the narrative structures are condensed, as it is the instrument by which the flow of meaning in the text is oriented. Therefore, the study focuses on the title's dormant semantic structures, its pragmatic usage throughout the history of its multiple readings, the memory of its transformations in language, its background, its perception of the imaginary, and its grammatical system. The title has a primordial function in extracting the symbolic structure of the narrative

and defining the themes of the narrative discourse. Baghdad has an extended and thematic presence in the titles of the Western novelist, which prompts the soul to wonder why Baghdad formed an imaginary space in the Western novelist's text, especially since the Western novelist addresses, on the one hand, a reader who shares his identity, one that belongs to the same cultural milieu, and on the other hand. This reader differs from him in identity, culture, and thought. **Keywords:** Baghdad, title, Western novel, culture, setting

1. Introduction

Inherent in the novel is its story world's holistic and comprehensive qualities on the formation, structure, expression, and symbolism level. This storyworld is undeniably vast, limitless, and borderless. Yet, every element contributes to its formation and composition, be it far or near, central or marginal, lucid or implicit, direct or indirect, highlighted or hidden, big or small, partial or whole. Thus, every sign must be read and interpreted no matter where it resides in the layers of the novel (Ašbhūn, 2009, p. 35).

This vast and borderless storyworld is born out of an equational grand structure whose two sides are the title and the text (Ḥamdāwī, 1997, p. 102). The book's title is like the name with which it is known and thanks to which it can circulate and be referred to (Fikry Alḡazār, 1998, p. 15). The title is the bridge between silence and speech and the starting point of the text (Al'idrisī, p. 61); it is the most significant factor in the construction of the text's poetics in the context of the complex, rich and diverse relationship between the threshold and the layers of the text's body, thanks to the symbolic function the title carries, and the way it reflects itself on the general meaning structure in the text (Šābir, 2015, p. 148). Thus, the text is linked to the title through an interactive and dialectic relationship and is the focus and central theme of the text. After all, what is a text but an extension of the title, an expansion by stretching and rewording of the title (Ḥamdāwī, 1997, p. 102).

Literary writing today, particularly the novel, is no longer deterministic to the point of presenting everything to the reader on a golden plate to follow easily. Instead, the reader has to adopt precise strategies, theoretical and tactical tricks, and applied concepts to access meaning ('Abās 2013: 87). The literary text has stripped off its traditional and classic robe of superficial features to wear a set of linguistic signs that can be positioned in its beginning (the title) to identify it and indicate its content as well as tempt the audience to enter its realm (Ālmatwī, 1999, p. 456).

Each linguistic process has formative elements: The sender, the addressee, the message, the context, and the communication. The sender/narrator directs a message to the addressee/reader; for the message to be productive, it requires a context that the reader can perceive. The message is the content or subjects the sender wants to convey to the addressee to influence him. Therefore, the message requires a common practice, wholly or partially shared between the sender and the addressee, that is, between the novelist and the reader or the one who deciphers the message, so that they can agree on a standard code that is embodied in the formulation and reformulation using assembly and deconstruction to allow the establishment and preservation of communication. This communication can only be achieved using conceptual rumination of semiotic symbols (Jakobson, 1988, p. 27).

Moreover, according to the aforementioned discursive definition of Jakobson, the title is a linguistic and semiotic sign that is often at the beginning of the text (Ḥamdāwī) and serves a delineating function. For instance, the title presents itself as the book's name, identity card, and description in the sense that it can provide hints about the content and structure of the book. When the title evokes the content, it is a thematic title; when it is limited to the formal description, it is a formal title. According to Genet, the thematic title sets what the text is about, while the formal one defines what is said in the text. The title's referential function touches on all the meanings that the text delivers in addition to its descriptive function, taking on the role of seduction, luring the readers into its realm, either through a form or through content (Jouve, 2012, p. 75).

If reading the novel is "deciphering a constructed imagined secret embedded in the narrative" (Grivel, 1973, p. 173), the title orients the reader through its description, endowing the text with new meanings in the light of which the novel's symbols can become more apparent. In short, the code allows us to decipher the emblematic events in their dramatic context and narrative succession. The title has the primordial function of extracting the symbolic structure of the narrative and defining the themes of the narrative discourse, illuminating the text's meanings in the process (Ḥamdāwī, 1997, p. 102). As we stand in front of a highly complex text such as the Western novel, whose deconstruction requires great skill and accuracy, it is necessary to take a thoughtful pause at the threshold, the title, and direct our focus towards its details.

2. Discussion

The title of José Miguel Barras's *The Baghdad Post* is a construct state made of two closely tied correlative words. Linking the "Post" to "Baghdad" serves a purpose of definition and identification as the utterance "Post" is indefinite outside of the construct state, devoid of any designation or identification, and remains open to multiple interpretations ranging from personal correspondence between two people to an official mail of a diplomatic nature.

With the assertion of the identity of "the post," we move from a general and absolute utterance toward a statement with a specific intent. As the fog of ambiguity is obliterated, the chains of possession appear, enclosing the post in Baghdad and revealing the belonging of the word to its definer, as the genitive construction asserts the fact of belonging (Hasan, pp. 3-16). Furthermore, when it comes to the connotative meaning, this genitive construction limited the meaning, moving it from its vague and shared state. On the one hand, the post was assigned to a specific Iraqi city, Baghdad, out of all the other cities. On the other hand, the utterance "post" is an indefinite noun that has been added to a definite noun that later became the address in which it is located. Baghdad is the capital of Iraq and is known to both the Eastern and Western worlds. Thus, the choice of the Western author of this particular construct state is

An implicit act of exclusion of everything else, including the common semantic structures that usually go with the word or that share a common semantic or structural source. After all, the act of selection is nothing but an act of exclusion that disbars all other structures and utterances from the linguistic field. Exclusion thus looms in the horizon of the reading, becoming its very background ('Abās, 2013, pp. 113-114).

Hence, the formulation *Baghdad's Post* removes ambiguity and indefiniteness from the post, moving it towards a particular meaning that manifests itself later through a mail correspondence between the distinguished Chilean painter Horiko and his wife's uncle, Jiki, who is a professor of literature, and who lived near the city of Prague. The painter married the professor's niece as a Czech student. He accompanied her to Baghdad after she had decided to pursue a teaching career at the Institute of Fine Arts. The letters dwell on Baghdad and Iraq in general and the adventures of the painter there. The meticulous descriptions cover the space, the political event under the rule of the leader Abd al-Karim Qasim, and the eve of 1958's coup d'état. In the novel's opening, we are directly faced with the murder or disappearance of the painter in Cairo. The Chilean government attempts to find the painter but in vain. Subsequently, the professor sends the letters to a Chilean newspaper for publication. The letters remained forgotten in the drawers until one of the editors decided to hand them to the Novelist José Barras, who historicized, through letters, the period of the 1973 coup d'état in which former president Salvador Allende was overthrown. In the novel, a seamless thread of parallelism is present, as though it was woven by mere chance, between the political events of Chile and the events narrated by the painter regarding the events in Iraq by the end of the 50s (Barras, 2008, pp. 9-13).

In most letters, Baghdad is pictured as an oriental city that has not yet left the Middle Ages (Bernhardsson, 2006). This representation is not so far from reality as most places the painter and most others visit are inhabited by people who wear the countenance of ancient times. Additionally, throughout the novel, one is compelled to believe that the author wants to see in Iraq what he would find in the peripheries of Chile, as he belongs to an excluded nation of what is left from the native tribes of the Americas who inhabited somewhat ancient-like places. Hence, throughout his journey, he was in search of lives that resembled the ones he had known, ones that had not yet been tarnished by modernity.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the details present in the novel do not represent reality and are constructed in a fashion that is not devoid of exaggerations. It is, after all, a novel that seeks to attract the attention and arouse the curiosity of a reader who is oblivious to that particular location. As one navigates the pages of the book, it becomes evident that the narrative attempts to decipher the Iraqi case, particularly the personality of Abd al-Karim Qasim, whom he described as any other burdened soldier with the shouting and clapping of the masses. The author also describes the communists as they faced secret assassinations and exterminations at the height of their glory. However, his description was not without scorn and ridicule as he projected a different and caricatured representation of this group who lived in their arcane world, haunted by the idea of secrecy (Daniels, 2015).

Furthermore, the novel reveals multiple dramatic and poignant scenes witnessed through the eyes of the painter in the Kurdistan region, accompanied by his guide, a Kurdish student from a Swiss mother. These instances include witnessing a young man drowning in the Tigris River, who had been found by fishermen serving Masgouf fish on the seashore. The young man was stabbed with a knife because he was a student activist. The artist saw in the young boy the image of Christ and viewed him as a painting from three distinct angles: the

angle of the aristocratic Iraqi restaurant on the riverside of the Tigris, the cliff on which the corpse rested, and the body of the young man lying on the table of the fishermen. This is one of the Iraqi stories being told today (Yildiz, 2004). However, what is actually of concern to us is the point of view that summarizes the whims of an artist who can capture the accuracy of the dialogue within the place he examines. Thus, since the goal of the linguist when adding the indefinite noun to the definite is to remove ambiguity from the structure, the novelist also describes a pattern of relationship that does not resemble the prevailing semantic interdependence but is characterized by specificity and uniqueness (Electorat, 2015).

The choice of the French author Paul-Loup Sulitzer to use the construct state *Baghdad's Angel* as a title for his work is not an innocent and spontaneous act but one that seeks to bring to the fore a particular message that both form and content work together to transmit. This construct state is also made of two closely tied correlative words: "angel" and "Baghdad", and it aims to limit and contain the utterance's meaning. "Angel" is an indefinite noun devoid of any specification that, on the denotative level, refers to a luminous divine creature that could manifest itself in different forms: It could be a girl as delicate as an angel or a person as powerful and almighty as an angel (Malouf, 2002, pp. 776-774).

The utterance "angel" can take on many meanings and semantic structures in various contexts. Still, by adding it to the definite and proper noun "Baghdad," the addition has illuminated the multiple other possibilities that could follow this utterance, rendered it chained to the location of Baghdad, and restricted it to a specific purpose announced by the horizon of meanings which the title of the novel opened.

In the novel "Michel Samara," the angel, or the miracle Iraqi young man as the author describes, was secretly managing the export of Iraqi pure oil, utilizing the education he received in finance at Harvard University and his relationship with oil buyers across Europe and the United States. Samara displayed knowledge and unparalleled skills to negotiate the best prices for black gold, known to be the mire of the Iraqi Republic, from which dozens of countries are supplied. In this position, he had great power and control from the financial income that the totalitarian regime in Baghdad secured for him. Saddam used to take him as a magician, and his only regret was that he was not his son. This young prodigy has been with Saddam since an early age, yet he began to doubt his mission ever since his father's dismissal, the brilliant chemistry professor Al-Bakr Samara. Nevertheless, as he perfected the art of commerce, he never forgot his father's education, who entrusted him with the truth of human values due to his pride (Loup Sulitzer, 2005, pp. 6-7).

Michel was very proud of his father, especially after knowing he refused to participate in deadly projects. However, he always remembered the deep depression that overcame his father when Saddam's army invaded the Kurdish villages right after the Gulf War. Undoubtedly, Michel noticed that his work could take a different turn because of these changes in the political climate, leading to the exclusion and oppression of a large number of innocent women and children whose frightening images were published by the press, as these events deserved to be mentioned among the most heinous crimes against humanity. Since that day, Michel Samara has been awaiting the regime's fall, as he secretly informed the court before the case was brought.

Consequently, and due to those tragic events, Michel Samara was in Baghdad in the spring of 2003, impatiently awaiting the arrival of the US army in the hope they would bring democracy to his country. Yet the reckless actions of the Americans and the suffering of many innocent and helpless victims obliterated his hopes and destroyed his dreams. After his successive deceptions, he became an activist who sought, with all his might, to teach George W. Bush an unforgettable lesson in ethics. The young man's struggle against the giant Goliath was a clash of good and evil. He fought with a Machiavellian vision with the help of a Muslim Australian lady, striking the core of Bush's oil interests (Loup Sulitzer, 2005, pp. 7-9).

The amalgamation of *Baghdad's Angel* takes us on a thrilling journey through which Sulitzer hoped to reveal the greed and selfishness of people seeking their interests, demonstrating to us through his carefully and meticulously chosen angel, Michel, that the human being is an asset whose value exceeds all the greed and personal interests of the universe. Thus, by adding the indefinite "angel" to the definite "Baghdad", the former seems to be a vague undefined utterance as it was before the addition, taking on an Iraqi, but most importantly, a human identity (Jarmakan, 2007).

Similar to the previously discussed titles, the linguistic forms that the other titles under scrutiny take raise a plethora of questions that open the door to multiple interpretations of their possible meanings. The titles *A Garden in Baghdad*, *a Story from Baghdad*, *Shrapnel on the Margin of Baghdad*, and *My Lost Love in Baghdad* are composed of two components: the first is an active component embodied in "Garden", "Story" "Shrapnel"

and "My Love", and the second is a spatial component, which is "in Baghdad", "from Baghdad" and "on the margin of Baghdad".

For the Garden is but nothing but a walled orchard (Malouf, 2002, p. 122), which brings to mind a reminiscence of a local public garden, the hanging gardens of Babylon, a children's garden, or even a zoo. As for the utterance, "tale" also brings to mind several meanings, such as stories told, fairy tales, symbolic tales, or folktales (Malouf, 2002, p. 146). Additionally, the term "Shrapnel" brings to mind images of small pieces, scattered fragments, explosives, etc. (Malouf, 2002, p. 400). These words, story, Garden, and shrapnel, are presented as indefinite words, leaving us with broader and multiple possibilities regarding their meaning. These words were then allocated to a specific space via a preposition, forming a phrase or semi-sentence with a specific identity and removing the initial ambiguity. That is to say; this form has chained the vague and multiple connotations of these words to a specific meaning, which the author orchestrated meticulously in the horizon of meaning in the text via a precise inductive and contemplative overview. The titles thus go in two directions: the first is known as "garden, story, shrapnel", to reach the second component, which is the space component "in Baghdad, from Baghdad, on the periphery of Baghdad" to become a reference to the space where the story shall settle.

The place: Baghdad; the time: the spring of 2003. One year of the life of a female author who found herself in the flaming hot city of Baghdad as she accompanied her husband, who works in the field of diplomacy. In her work *Shrapnel on the Margin of Baghdad*, Elisabeth Horem tries to capture the details of her time in Iraq with neutral language. After carefully examining the book's cover, it can be observed that "on the margin of Baghdad" is only a subtitle of the story, as if the writer insists on the impossibility of recognizing this city and entering its realm. She perceives the echoes of life in Iraq from the comfort of the Garden of her home. She tries to convey it faithfully in a book that swings between the carefully selected diaries and events and Baghdad's narrative documentation, constituting the novel's backbone (Charnley, 2007).

Through the third person pronoun "she", the novelist describes her day as she awaits her husband's return. As we moved forward in her day, the echo of external life crept through the radio, and the sounds of explosions shook her tightly closed windows. She also perceives the outside space through Farida, the maid, her husband Arām, and the security guards whose lives are all linked to hers by the bond of a common unknown destiny. All the characters were trapped in a state of siege, and to step outside was to walk into the Garden of death. Unfortunately, the nature of the work of her husband did not allow for full isolation, as she had to accompany him to official parties and attend the official event. She attends musical concerts, visits the ruins of Babylon and Taq Kasra, or has dinner with a luxurious Iraqi family. Upon exiting these inside spaces, she takes out her camera to capture moments through her lens and prints them as photographs that come to light in the small lab she had built in her house. She captures rooms, gardens, monuments she visits, the rooftop of her house during a sandstorm, and every other thing her eye lands on.

The photographs themselves seem to bear a neutral characteristic. The outside world enters the pages of the novel through a musical evening or the presence of friends and acquaintances for dinner. On such occasions, the camera explores the city through the guests' actions or an accurate recording of a passing conversation. Yet these lived details are mixed with the fictional imagination of the novelist, as Horem turns her lived experience into a tragedy tinged with strangeness and a deep sense of oppression. Her characters have difficulty adapting to the new space as if they were letting life, with its cruel will, lead them where it pleases (Horem, 2011, pp. 7-8).

Horem continues to write her diaries in Baghdad every morning in the Garden of her house with a new title, this time: *A Garden in Baghdad*. In this novel, she speaks with boldness and Western eyes as she releases the novelist imprisoned in Baghdad and lets her tell the story of Iraqi pain and suffering in the pure language of the senses. For instance, she tells us about Iraq's elections and the political sphere in light of the fundamental change that the country experienced in 2008 (Pultar, 2005, 45).

Horem conveys vivid images of Baghdad, which was then ruled by an occupier and was beset with violence. She also presents the details of daily life amongst a segment of rich Iraqis who might be the most educated and enlightened, and who suffered from tyranny and found their way into exodus, to become marginalized by the occupation, and find themselves overcome by a deep feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction with the violence that the country is witnessing. If not for the high security and protection she had, the readers would have been faced with a darker side of the life of diplomats in Baghdad, whose lives were perhaps in more danger than the masses during the American occupation (Horem, 2007).

The narrator of this novel is a Greek god who controls the place, making everything orbit around him. he is not omnipotent, but he plays his role in an astonishingly precise way. Horem is a writer who finds herself in Baghdad in hard times to witness the history and life in a different Eastern country. She is allowed to present her testimony from the heart of the event in which she took part throughout her stay in Baghdad, and she documented the events brilliantly as if she was telling a long story whose importance lies in the details. Elizabeth has left Baghdad several times, not to escape from it but to return to it with deep longing and nostalgia. The city and her Garden became her favorite places, so much so that she chose them as titles for her novel.

As for the novel *A Story from Baghdad*, the British writer and anthropologist Ethel Stefana Drower did not stray far from Horem's role in her Garden in Baghdad. Ethel tells us a story of Iraqi suffering after taking us back in time to the Ottoman reign that penetrated the structure of Iraqi society for nearly a century. The novelist excels in the art of storytelling as she tells us about the relationship of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish minorities within Iraqi society on the one hand and their tense relationship with the Turks on the other hand. Her novel also reveals the uneasy relationship between the Arabs and the Kurds, the ongoing conflicts between the two ethnicities that persist to this day, and the impact of the Ottoman presence on the life of the Iraqi people and their exclusion from their natural rights in day-to-day life (Drower, 1924).

3. Conclusion

To sum up, Umberto Eco views the title "as a foundation that must always ring and oscillate ideas in the mind of the reader" (Halifi, 1992, p. 90). Retrospectively contemplating what has been mentioned on the previous pages of this article, it is evident that all the titles refer to the narrative space to which they are directly linked: Baghdad. All the titles include the name of the location directly. Despite tackling real and sometimes tragic events, it is worth the attention that they all carry a romantic connotation (angel - Garden - my love - post-story). The titles also directly indicate the themes of the novel. Despite the different structures and their derivations and the variation of their connotation, the aim of the inclusion of the spatial element remains clear and precise. The form and content of the title have effectively summarized the narrative text, revealed the nature of its subjects, and further defined its epistemic field (Grivel, 1973, p. 177). The reader should not make a great effort to link the title to the text, as most realistic novels take a metaphorical, symbolic form from the places, events, and characters. In other words, the reader is faced, from the beginning, with a realistic title with a clear meaning, and in some way indicates the subject of the text that it introduces, as is the case in Baghdad, which some Western novelists chose as a landmark for their text.

The inclusion of this spatial element, Baghdad, compels us to wonder if the existing intertextuality between the texts in this study is a mere coincidence or if the novelist meant to conventionalize this image of Baghdad, especially since the writers are from different countries and ethnicities, races, religions and identities, despite all being part of the Western world.

These Western novels are directed to two types of readers: One who is familiar with the space in which the narrative is located and another who is wholly dissociated and oblivious to the narrative space. The latter is a Western reader who only knows Baghdad through the few Orientalist poems and paintings that made their way into his world. These orientalist works were often a product of an imagination that settled in their memory, clustering throughout history, thus forming an image of a strange and magical world, a world of *One Thousand and One Night*.

This is perhaps why some of these novelists settled in Baghdad. Consequently, many amateur and professional writers went to get acquainted with that persistent world in their minds to seize the imagination and embody its representations in Eastern reality. For example, we take the case of *A Tale of Baghdad*, written by the British novelist Ethel Stefana Drower, an anthropologist specializing in Mandaean and Yazidi studies. Her work in several countries in the Levant and Iraq helped her write a series of romantic novels that center on Eastern Arab reality. It has been a prevailing tradition since ancient times for young journalists to go to war to test their skills in the journalistic field and their ability to absorb and convey emotional pain, as is the case of the American novelist Michael Hastings, who has always dreamed of visiting the East and getting to know that ancient civilization that he read about in the literature and heard about in the tales of his grandparents. He had the chance to fulfill this desire during the war in Iraq in 2003, accompanied by the international coalition forces, which allowed him to document daily events while they were in Iraq. Thus, he got to know Baghdad on the ground and crystallized his observations in a wonderful narrative text. This is the case for many other authors,

including the Swiss novelist Elizabeth Horem, who accompanied her husband on a diplomatic mission post-2003 to write two distinguished novels.

Although Western novelists have trampled on the ground of Iraqi reality and touched on the details of life in it, orientalist stereotypes have persisted in the collective memory of the West since long ago and resumed their presence in the Western imaginary today. That is perhaps the direct cause of the convergence of the texts in the same spatial space of Baghdad.

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