

## The Duality of Voyeuristic and Phallogocentric Tokens in K.S. Maniam's "Mala"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the Notions of voyeuristic and phallogocentric tokens in K.S. Maniam's "Mala." In essence, the study tries to scrutinize the inherent relationship between males and females through psychic drives. These drives are mainly motivated by social milieus which control the behaviors of males and females. Therefore, males and females abide by the social manners that make them different from each other. Accordingly, my study will analyze the characters of Maniam's "Mala." It will specifically concentrate on female behaviors and how they are depicted in a patriarchal way. Furthermore, the analysis will tackle Maniam's notion of voyeuristic and phallogocentric ideas projected in the story. These ideas are associated with feminism and gender studies that try to bridge the gap between males and females. In this respect, my study will analyze the female protagonist Mala that tries to be equal to men in her male-dominated society. The protagonist embodies Maniam's critique of females and their inferiority to males. Moreover, the concepts of voyeurism and phallogocentrism will be applied to explore the protagonist's internal drives caused by traditional "feminist" domestic affairs.

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### 1. Introduction

The relationship between men and women takes many aspects. Women are seen and judged by men in different ways. They are subjects to perception and criticism of social communities where society determines the position of women and men. In patriarchal societies, for example, women are objects to negative judgment. They are positioned in the lowest rank of social appropriation of male and female characters. Women are perceived in the light of their inferiority. They are not determined to be equal to men (Mitchell 15). Men, on the other hand, are placed in a higher position to take place in society. They are judged according to their physical and manhood peculiarities. In general, men are more qualified in patriarchal societies than women. Yet, this unequal relationship takes other aspects according to the communities which attend to equality between men and women (Fromm 74).

Equality between men and women, there is little progress in terms of equality and gender attempt by which "women gain intersubjectivity" (Al-Fartoosi *et al.* 4466). The relationship between males and females became more inclusive to include not only the physical features but also the mental potential. Women, throughout history, proved to be equal to men (Horney 92). They became more able to do the same activities and actions outside the house. Based on this idea, women social position got out of the domestic limits. Women began to do different enterprises which were only limited to men. However, the male-mainstream, in social criteria, is still limited to the physical features which characterize men (Wright 49).

The purpose of these introductory statements is to expose the difference between men and women in terms of physical characteristics. In other words, the relationship between males and females is sometimes determined by the males' ability to subjugate females only by using their physical control (Bruehl 176). For this reason, this essay will focus on one of the males' physical features to judge females in K. S. Maniam's "Mala" (1985). This feature is the male gaze. Yet, my concentration will be specifically on the body, voyeurism, and phallogocentrism in the story. Before applying these concepts to the story, I will review a study on the story. Then, I will introduce the critical background of these concepts before following an in-depth textual interpretation of the story.

## **2. Literature Review**

For the rarity of research conducted on the story, I will only review one study regarding the feminist qualities in the story's plot. Peter Wicks tackles the Malaysian landscapes in Maniam's "Mala." Wicks discusses the conceptualization of social freedom in the story. Wicks claims that the story is abundant with social manners which expose and muckrake the social defects regarding women's treatment in society (20). Furthermore, Maniam's "Mala" is a feminist critique of the social limits imposed over females. These limits contradict the aspired "social freedom" in the Malaysian community (20).

Additionally, this possibility of gaining society's "freedom" could not be obtained by leaving women in a low position in society. Instead, this freedom will be impossible and illusory. To avoid this situation, according to Wicks, society should be able to provoke some humanistic agendas to obliterate using women for inferior affairs in society (20). Nevertheless, Wicks contends that society will not be easily able to prove equality between men and women in society unless serious steps should be taken to improve the female position. Providing equal opportunities between men and women is one of these vital steps to elevate the position of the female in society (20). In my study, I will not focus on the serious steps to improve the position of females in society. I will focus on the depiction of the female body, voyeurism, and phallogentricism in Maniam's "Mala." As such, the following section will introduce the critical background of these concepts. I will cite some psychoanalytic critics' opinions about these concepts.

## **3. Conceptual Framework**

### **3.1 The Female Body**

The body is one of the most critical concepts used to analyze women's physical features. Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo claim that "the body, notoriously and ubiquitously associated with the female" is a "locus of social praxis, as cultural context, as social construction... whose changing forms and meanings reflect historical conflict and change and on which the politics of gender are inscribed with special clarity" (4). Influenced by Michel Foucault, Bordo asserts that the representation of the female bodily appearance, as a cultural conceptualization and a social subject of discrimination between men and women, is also "a text of femininity," text to define the essence of being a female (13-20). Bordo, additionally, supports her study of "femininity text" by drawing upon hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa as different formulations and potentials of feminist mechanisms used by females to prove femininity.

Susan Suleiman and Jane Ussher argue that the integral interest in the female bodily appearance in its different and various manifestations in literature through all its aspects reflect the western fascination with female physical features (104-123). In the light of this argumentation, the female body is "beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous" and "a source of pleasure and nurturance, but also of destruction and evil" (2-1). Furthermore, "[t]he cultural significance of the female body is not ... only that offlesh-and-blood entity, but that of a *symbolicconstruct*" and the body's peculiarity "exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent. This is as true of our own discourse as of those we might seek to analyze or criticize" (Jaggar and Bordo2).

### **3.2 Voyeurism**

Laura Mulvey claims that the true embodiment of the feminist subjectivity is built on the rarity of feminist form since the female is the dormant subject of the male gaze; while the male can lead a life out of their unconscious limits and fears through language abilities (32-24). Mulvey contends that visual pleasures of cinematic representation of voyeurism are corresponding to contradictory processes. The first one is the objectification of the female subject within "direct scopophilic contact" and the viewer's observation which is vital and produces a sense of lasting impression of such perception (28).

Moreover, Mulvey argues that the reason behind females' conventional impression relates to the way men perceive them in a patriarchal environment. Mulvey further asserts that voyeurism "has an association with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt..., asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (29), fetishistic scopophilia, furthermore, "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (29).

## **4. Analysis and Discussion**

In Maniam's "Mala," the feminist conceptualization of feminist disposition is embodied in Mala who is the main protagonist of the story. She appears as an immature student living in a simple family: "When Malati left school, he came into full encounter with her family. Having dreamed and drifted through her education, she came to roost in her home. The neighbor woman soon branded her lazy and called her 'Mala', an abbreviation of the Malay word 'malas'. The neighbor repeated it with the relish of an insult the more she saw the girl idle and happy. She was stuck with the name when her family began calling her Mala. There was an ugly sound to it whenever they were angry with her" (67).

Mala's family is conservative and is serious about keeping her pure and committed to her family life: "That was often enough. For some reason, they felt offended if Mala hummed a tune in the bathroom or sat in the doorway reading a magazine. The father

was a thin, tall man who only straightened from his stoop to deliver some unctuous reprimand. His colleagues at work never knew this side of him, for he was always smiling. Mala's mother clattered through her housework with a solemnity that made the desecration of a temple seem like a prayer. Her two brothers, constantly running errands for their stout mother, looked at Mala with a sense of achievement" (67).

The family is so interested in taking care of Mala. This is the first phase of shaping her feminist identity: "Parental love pursued a twisted path here: it was expressed through a terrifying ritual of silence. Her indifference grated on a self-gratifying sense of diligence. The boys spent their afternoons desultorily digging at an unyielding plot of ground. Mala, watching them, noticed how the handles of the changeful flew away from them. There was a dull thud as the changeful bit the ground. Their bodies were covered with a lackluster glow. Mala's father clucked at the chickens; they squabbled restlessly, refusing to be housed for the night" (67-68).

To polish Mala's feminist identity, the family uses some kind of punishment if she does not comply with school life: "The punishment began the day they learned she had failed her final school examinations. There was no show of anger or of disappointment. They withdrew into the silence that froze her movements and her spirit. No talk passed between them. If they saw her, they turned their heads away. Meals were swallowed in utter silence, beds made in rustling quietly. Outside the house they resumed interrupted conversations with their neighbors as if nothing had happened" (68).

Mala's strict family life imposes on her a kind of psychological state. This state is the beginning of recognizing her feminist inferior position in the family and in society: "They only placed their fingers on their lips and rolled their eyes in the direction of the family niche. Here resided not only pictures of gods and goddesses but also photographs of a pantheon of dead relatives. Even on ordinary days, the sight of these photographs revolted her. Now they produced darkness in her mind. Not a day passed without their genuflecting before the staring, vacant eyes. Garlands, a week old, bordered the picture frames of these departed men and women. Mala had never helped the family string the flowers" (69).

In the course of the plot, Mala becomes more mature. She strengthens her feminist identity by being independent. She tries to do her own affairs without the help of any person: "Mala began her own rituals. Getting up before the others did, she took a cold bath and went out into the unfenced compound. The dawn air hit her then, causing a shiver to course through a body that had just risen from sleep. The skin on her face seemed to peel away and reveal a new self. She stood under the mango tree and watched the sunrise over the hills. As the land emerged from the darkness and mist she felt torn up and rushed toward the brightening clumps of trees and hill slopes. Perhaps to replace the stinging silence of the family there rose, beyond, a resonant clamour. She turned abruptly – a door had slammed inside – towards the house" (68).

Other people became interested in Mala's body. In psychoanalysis, the interest in a female body is an indication of voyeuristic mode. Now she feels happy because there is much care taken for her, especially her body: "They took turns placing kumkum and oil and holy ash on the part in Mala's hair. She was led to her room, where she barely succeeded in keeping down the bile that rose to her mouth. For the whole week, she hardly left her room, suffering a depression that left her convinced she really belonged to the dead. One evening she escaped to Susi's house, where she listened to Sanker who had come on a holiday from Kuala Lumpur" (73). By the time, this care lessens. She marries a man, Sanker, who assigns her to a career. This time she no longer cares for. She is asked to do a "male" work: "A different kind of word passed around this time. The neighbor woman was then at the peak of her career: no men came to Mala's house although it had been recurtained, redecorated, refurnished, and, in some other ways, restored. A fresh string of mango leaves hung over the front doorway" (73).

Before knowing Sanker, Mala was a subject of interest for suitors who come to betroth her. Again, this is a voyeuristic token of interest in her body:

"Weeks passed. The mango leaves had curled and turned brown when a man, accompanied by his son, called at the house. Mala's father hurriedly put on a shirt and ushered them in.

"Is there anyone else coming?' Mala's mother asked, noticing the absence of women.

The man looked around him unhurriedly and shook his head.

"Aren't we enough?' he said.

His son, clothed in tight pants, a broad belt, and tapering-collar shirt, examined the various articles in the room. he paused a long while at the collection of tapes, scratched his head as he read the titles and then turned, with a puzzled expression on his face, to Mala's father" (74).

Other suitors also come to marry Mala only for marriage interest, not for her human qualities: "The next suitor came alone. From the minute he stepped into the house he would not sit down. His face was pockmarked, his eyes red and his hair bristled like the

back of an unruly bull" (74). One of these suitors describes himself as the proper partner for her: "I'm a widower,' he said. 'I've three children. I've got a lot of money. The children need a mother and I want a woman. I know all about your girl. She needs someone like me to tame her'" (74).

Mala becomes fed up with the voyeuristic interest in her body, and begins thinking seriously of committing suicide: "Mala heard the negotiations and, humiliated, thought of suicide. The eyes of the ancestors seemed to stare at her. She saw herself pinned between glass and wood, withered flowers garlanding her memory – a monument to sacrifice for the good name of the family. In that cold, hazy hour between night and morning, she let herself be peeled and revealed. She lived again, fiercely, stubbornly, in the light that spread over the country, knowing, instinctively that there could be no greater darkness than despair" (75).

When Mala knows Sanker, she becomes more aware of men's behaviors and treatment of women: "There was certain breeziness about Sanker that she liked. She had only seen him briefly, but his confidence and sense of responsibility were evident. She put her thoughts away as she approached her house. Her mother stood talking with the neighbor woman and barely gave her a glance" (75).

Moreover, other people come also to marry Mala: "Then, Vasu, a relative of Mala's father, arrived accompanied by a group of people crammed into two cars. It was an impressive show and even the neighbor woman was silent. Perhaps she had met her match in Vasu. He had a reputation for lying, scrounging off on liquor, a habit of exaggerating, and possessed as well a sense of drama. He also had a son, of marriageable age, born out of wedlock. He got down from the car, smiling, and waited for the others to bring up the rear of the procession to Mala's house" (75-76). These people are interested in Mala for marriage. They do not want her to be a wife. They need her for marriage and work.

Mala's marriage has only one purpose. It is only for work: "The marriage, without any fanfare, was performed at the registry office. Mala's father gave his unwilling approval. No one else was present at the official occasion. As they traveled down to Kuala Lumpur in a second-hand car Sanker had recently acquired, Mala looked at the country flashing past her. All her mornings, after those baths, she thought, had not been useless. She was coming into her own at last. She couldn't suppress a sense of triumph" (76-77).

Then, she becomes a part of Sanker's life. Sanker, in turn, employs her for work: "They came to a busy row of shops, above which were flats. Sanker rented part of a flat he had slept until in his one-room office as a requirement of the businessman making his first million. The dust, the noise, and the traffic assailed Mala even as she mounted the steps, behind Sanker, to the rooms upstairs. They had to share the hall and the kitchen with a woman and her child. Only the bedroom provided some space for a marriage to breathe, grow and acquire some purpose" (77).

Mala's work-life makes her nostalgic for her previous life: "But, looking out of the dirty window, Mala saw what had once been jungled hill and remoteness had been cut level and made a home. She smiled at Lucy and the boy, about three, whose face was still covered with the remnants of his breakfast" (77). She is not satisfied with her new work life: "He opened the door to the bedroom, to an unmade, stained mattress and the barest of furniture. He ran down the steps and returned with some packages of food and hot tea in a plastic bag" (77).

Mala's life is confined to work. She is not allowed to live her life as an independent female. At this point, Sanker represents the male domination over her: "Sanker was at his office most of the day or out on assignments. Mala didn't know exactly what he was doing. He thrust some money into her hands at night, after they had made love, and told her to buy the things necessary for a home" (77). Sanker's domination makes her inferior to him. She only works for him: "Mala had adjusted a little to the situation. A meal was there if Sanker wanted it. The days he followed his business out of his office, she ate alone. Lucy had made it clear from the first day that she didn't want her son fed by any stranger. She was, however, pleasant about other matters. Mala derived fascination just watching Lucy's transformation in the evenings. She ceased to be the sloppy, flabby woman she was in the mornings. A smart dress emphasized her suddenly ample, firm breasts. The make-up gave her a newfound vitality. The boy had an old woman to look after him on some days. When there was no one, he cried and tired himself and lay curled on the cold terrazzo floor of the hall. It was from there that Lucy picked him up, grumbling, in the early hours of the morning" (78).

Additionally, Sanker stands for the male phallogentric presence in Mala's life: "The advice was unnecessary. Sanker had taken Mala to a doctor who put some metal inside her. After that Sanker ceased to be gentle in bed with her. She was reminded of the way her mother had punished her with water. The slapping, the bending down, and the humiliation had followed her into marriage. There was the lethargy too, the following morning" (78). She is only used for domestic and work affairs: "She cleaned the pots and the pans, saucers, and cups, sometimes more than once in the course of the day. She gave Sanker his tea when he ran up the stairs and burst into the hall. Dinner was soon prepared and then the waiting for her husband began. He swayed in some nights, reeking of liquor, mumbled something about 'contacts' and fumbled for her in the dark" (78).

Sanker controls everything in Mala's life, even the house furnishings: "He got a color TV for her, raking up the money from somewhere. Once she went down to the office to clean it. It was so bare that she wondered how business could be conducted in it at all. Lucy surprised her as well. There was something common between her and Sanker. Lucy never mentioned the work she was doing but when she stayed home, she displayed her fatigue as someone proud of having slogged away. She fed her boy something that made him sleep for hours. Lucy then sat on the floor, in a thin, loose dress, flipping through a pile of glossy magazines" (78-79).

Mala does not feel at ease as a female with Sanker: "Mala passed on the word. Sanker and Lucy came to an agreement and the sofa, armchair, and coffee tables arrived. Lucy spent whole mornings on the sofa, under the dust-blackened fan that was never switched off. One afternoon a man delivered a sound system Lucy had ordered. It was an expensive, complex set. From it came all kinds of music, but mainly Chinese songs that filled the flat with militant resonance. Lucy never allowed the boy near it. One she smacked his fingers for touching it and she wiped off the mark with a velvety, thick cloth. Mala had to distract him from his howling" (79).

Sanker's "phallogocentric" control over Mala belittles her feminist identity: "Sanker took her to an English film one night, sitting beside her with restless absorption. While she sighed in wonder, she watched with embarrassment the couple on the screen, half-naked, embrace then dance in a nightclub led on by a bare-breasted woman who wriggled sensuously, and finally make love with unashamed hunger" (79). Sanker's treatment of Mala makes her older as the wrinkles become appearing on her face: "As Lucy removed the make-up, Mala's face felt cool and then shrunken. She cried on returning to the flat after Sanker had her hair cut. The hairdresser had handed her the snipped hair in a bag that carried the salon's name and logo. She laid out the truncated length, once a part of her, which had reached down to her waist" (80). Sanker provides Mala with the work devices to be good at work "He bought her a second-hand typewriter and a manual on typing. Mala spent her mornings getting in practice. The process was typing her fingers flew all over the keys. She aimed for speed, but only achieved mistakes. A frustrating garble met her gaze during the first weeks" (81).

In this sense, Mala does not feel her feminist identity: "Though Mala was tired, her typing gradually showed some improvement. Sanker gruffly acknowledged her progress. She kept at it. The traffic roared past her flat. Lucy's boy bawled for attention. Lucy herself would prattle away from the sofa, but Mala heard none of this. She was glad that she didn't have the long hair that would fall over the machine. She had learned to write formal, pleasant letters and correct simple mistakes when Sanker announced that she could go down to the office" (81).

Now Mala returns to her feminist interest, like doing the make-up in order to live a feminist life: "Lucy bustled about Mala. She made Mala put on a dress, then take it off. She tried various tones of lipstick, eyebrow pencils, and make-up. Mala saw in the dresser mirror a girl stiff and frightened. Lucy had done good work – Mala hardly recognized herself. And she wanted to be that way. For a moment she recalled the dawns she had stood under the mango tree, up north. She had changed, she realized, but into someone not of her making" (82).

Furthermore, Sanker provides Mala with heavy work requirements to do his work: "Sanker ran a packaging business. He had the rates drawn up neatly on a card. The firm that provided the boxes had its phone number underlined in red and pinned on the wall facing the typewriter. Lorry owners' phone numbers were listed on a separate card. A little black book, indexed, contained clients' names. When Sanker sat at his table on the other side of the small office, he was a different man" (82). He asks her to do work more than before: "He briefed her on the work at the end of which he relapsed for a moment into the Sanker she knew. In bed that night he was affectionate to her.... Mala lay, consoled, on his heaving chest. When he talked about business a certain thickness entered his voice and he moved restlessly on the bed. She had to talk to him then, guessing at his ambitions, agreeing and sympathetically massaging him into sleep" (82).

By the time, she becomes familiar with her different life together with Sanker: "Mala had learned to adjust herself according to his criticisms. Always, he gave her an encouraging hug, just before they descended the steps to the office. Mala was careful to earn that affection. Though most of the time she could understand his ferocity or that distant expression on his face, she treasured these moments of nearness. They compensated for the silence of the family she had left behind and the scorn of that gossip, the neighbor woman.... Mala began to enjoy the activities of the day. Whenever she answered the phone she sensed the pleasant pause at the other end. She gave the rates, the kind of services available and took downtimes and dates if the client wanted to hear from the 'boss'. It was strange hearing Sanker referred to as 'boss'; he became someone important and unreachable in her life" (83).

The control over women is considered as a kind of hegemony (Abu Jweid 535). Similarly, Sanker's management of his office and house exemplifies the phallogocentric control over Mala: "The office changed its atmosphere in the few months that Mala attended to its secretarial demands. Sanker was out most of the time, hunting down that first major contract. He spoke to her over the phone from various parts of the city. He described an individual in detail and asked if the man had shown up at the office.... In

Sanker's absence, a few men called at the office. These were lorry drivers or packaging subagents. They sat on the oblong, backless settee Sanker had installed against the wall. They flicked cigarette ash in the potted plants on either side of the settee" (83). He, then, begins to take care of her. But he persuades her to take care of herself, not for her feminist life, but to appear elegant before the clients: "At night he persuaded her that she must learn to take care of herself when he was absent. He emphasized how important it was for her to be courteous to them" (84).

Sanker's presence in Mala's life becomes more apparent than before: "Sanker had stacked the folded-up cartons behind his desk. An almost empty filing cabinet stood behind Mala's desk. Labels of his company were pinned on the walls along with posters of various foreign scenic landscapes. Sometimes there were busy mornings. Men came and went. Mal typed invoices rang up lorry drivers and made entries into the office ledger. Sanker stayed in the office on those days... he paid more attention to her clothes and appearance during that daily inspection. She wore a tight dress he recommended. Even Lucy came out of her room on hearing Sanker talk excitedly. She whistled on seeing Mala.... The flowers, arranged in a boat-shaped container, gave the office a cold, formal color. Whenever the phone rang Sanker leaned forward quickly. At last, a nasal stream of broken English came over the line. Mala handed the phone to Sanker" (85).

Sanker's phallogentric control over Mala is represented in his utilization of her to do his office work: "He put down the phone and rushed out of the office. By the time the client arrived, Sanker had brought a smaller table from the adjoining room. a caterer delivered some savoury, covered dishes, three glasses, a bottle of whisky, and a jug of cold water. The man himself came soon after, a confident smile greeting them... Mala got used to refilling their glasses unobtrusively while they talked endlessly and the man swallowed the balls of meat or bits of steamed fish. He drank more than Sanker, but he didn't stumble on a single word. At last, he rose, smiled at Mala, and moved toward the door, which Sanker held open for him. Sanker took some time returning from seeing the man off" (85).

Sanker uses both Lucy and Mal for work. This is the peak of his phallogentric quality: "Lucy stopped at a boutique and looked at the dresses draped over the mannequins. The dummies had blue, vaguely staring eyes. As the two women peered through the pane of glass, a man entered the case and stripped a mannequin with brutish efficiency. There she stood, bare, imperturbable, while the man arranged the latest dress over her shoulders and between her cleftless thighs. When the man had finished, he twisted her arms into a new posture. The dummy had acquired a fashionableness which Lucy praised" (86).

Being so, Mala does not obtain her feminist independence as a housewife. She continues to be committed to Sanker's work. She could not get rid of Sanker's male domination. Such domination is the male phallogentric mastery over her: "Mala was tired, but she dragged on after Lucy. They sat, at last, in a low-ceilinged snack stall. The tables were small, neat pieces resting on a thick, stained carpet. Lucy picked a dirty well-thumbed menu and taught Mala how to choose her food. Mala went through the motions suffused by the steady, dull light and the cold that poured in via the air-conditioning vents. Mala recognized in the gestures of Lucy and in the pale smile of the special customer the day before the silent pressure of a force from which there was no escape" (86).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has concentrated on the feminist representations in Maniam's "Mala." The discussion has emphasized the feminist clues in the story which correspond to the fact that the female identity and character are destined to inferiority in the male-mainstream communities. The study tried to reveal the factors that led to the female inferior position in society. More specifically, the analysis has highlighted the characterization of the female protagonist, Mala, who is exploited for work at the hands of a male character, Sanker.

Thus, the findings of this study fall into two feminist categories. These categories comprise the voyeuristic and phallogentric representations of the female body in the selected story. On the one hand, Mala's body has been analyzed as a subject of interest for male suitors who come to marry her when she led a family life. This interest has been analyzed as the voyeuristic aspect of the story. However, she does not marry any suitor. Instead, she leads a labor life with Sanker who neglects her body and utilizes her only for work. On the other hand, Sanker's male domination over Mala's life has been studied as the male phallogentric presence. This is because phallogentrism refers to male superiority over males in society and communities. Therefore, voyeuristic and phallogentric features have been studied to argue the representations of the male and females physical discrepancies in Maniam's "Mala." The study is limited to the social implications of feminism. Thus, the selected work could be further analyzed by applying psychoanalysis and New Historicism.

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