

Re-Presenting the Rohingya Genocide through Literature: A Study of *Exodus: Between Genocide and Me* by Mayyu Ali as an Alternate History

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Abstract

The Rohingya genocide in Myanmar is an ongoing crisis of ethnic cleansing that has recently come into international recognition. The hostility displayed by the Myanmar government towards the Rohingyas is based on the narrative that the Rohingyas are illegal Bengali immigrants who arrived in the country during the colonial rule. However, the Rohingyas have completely refuted this narrative as a misrepresentation of their history. This paper intends to look at the role of literature in challenging the hegemonic discourse, through the analysis of *Exodus: Between Genocide and Me*, a collection of poetry, written by the Rohingya refugee writer, Mayyu Ali. The paper tries to read this collection as micro-narratives that provide an opportunity for the Rohingyas to re-present their version of the story as an alternate history and break the hegemony of the government narrative as the only history of Myanmar. The paper also aims to retrace the Rohingya version of history to understand the reasons behind the persecution of Rohingyas in the postcolonial Myanmar.

Keywords: Rohingya Genocide, Dominant Discourse, Micro-narratives, Alternate Histories, Ethnic Cleansing, Postcolonial Burma

Introduction

Myanmar has been on a mission to systematically target and exterminate the ethnic minority of Rohingya Muslims with the aim of making the country ethnically pure and homogeneous for the Buddhist majority. This expedition of ethnic cleansing soon turned into genocide with the Rohingyas being subjected to abject torture, violence and massacres. Myanmar has showcased itself as a nation that strives to uphold democratic rights and values under the leadership of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Hiding behind the veil of this image consciously constructed through stringent media regulations, the country has been stripping the Rohingyas of their basic human rights, citizenship rights and freedom of movement. Even to this date, “not a single person is known to have been punished by the Myanmar Judicial System” (Hasan 60) for the inhuman treatment of Rohingyas.

The reasons for the commencement of genocide are deeply rooted in the two major changes that happened in Myanmar: i) acceptance of Theravada Buddhism as the religion of the majority during the Pagan rule and ii) the British colonisation. In order to understand the sequence of events that led to the persecution of Rohingyas, it is necessary to retrace their version of history that is often left unspoken about to ensure that the hegemonic discourse remains to be accepted as the only history of Myanmar.

Numerous historians and research scholars have tried to reconstruct and document the past of the Rohingyas in their works. Prominent texts like *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* by Azeem Ibrahim, *Myanmar's Enemy Within* by Francis Wade or *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood of Rohingyas in Southern Asia* edited by Nasreen Chowdhury and Biswajit Mohanty have meticulously put together the version of Rohingya history and examined it through the theoretical framework. They have also tried to understand the complexity of the Rohingya genocide by scrutinising it from the political- economy perspective. However, these records are not the original voices of the Rohingyas; they are representations of the story of Rohingyas from the perspective of an outsider who does not know what it means to be a Rohingya. They reduce the Rohingyas to the status of subalterns, who have to be spoken for. Literature and art have helped to overcome these drawbacks and bring out the original voices of the Rohingyas that have been silenced or brushed aside by the Myanmar government as "sob stories and fiction" (Wade 14).

This paper is an attempt to read the Rohingya refugee writings in parallel with the scholarly interpretations of the Rohingya genocide to better understand the role of literature in challenging the dominant discourse. To achieve this, the paper has initially chalked out the historical, cultural and political factors that have resulted in the Rohingya genocide and then progressed on to analyse the collection of poetry *Exodus: Between Genocide and Me* as a re-presentation of the Rohingya history. Additionally, the paper has also sought out the alternate histories documented by the non Rohingya historians and scholars as a co-text to piece together the context of the Rohingya refugee writings and explore how they have complemented each other. The paper has adopted this methodology to make sure that it presents the most holistic picture of the humanitarian crisis faced by the Rohingya. It would also help to bring in objectivity while analysing the poems as micro narratives that break the hegemony of the government narrative.

Reconstructing the version of Rohingya history- The untold story of Arakan

In the book titled, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*, the British research professor Azeem Ibrahim tries to explain that contrary to the claims of the government, the Rohingyas are not aliens to the Arakan soil which is now a part of Myanmar; they had already reached this region as early as 3000 B C, much before the British annexation occurred (17). The region developed into a multicultural entity with the arrival of Islam in the seventh century via trade links to India and Arabia (Min 8). Around this time, the Burmese power consolidated in the central Irrawaddy region known as the Rakhine ethnic groups, crossed the mountains and settled in the Arakan region. This brought in more interaction between Myanmar and the Rohingyas (Ibrahim 21). The arrival of the Rakhines who were predominantly Buddhists created a change in Arakan because it marked the end of dominance of the Rohingyas in the Arakan region. While Myanmar witnessed the rampant spread of Theravada Buddhism which soon became the national religion followed by the majority, the history of Arakan stood separate and distinct as the region was formally independent of Myanmar up to the end of the eighteenth century (Gutman 18).

Following the arrival of the Rakhines, the Konbaung dynasty of central Myanmar tried to expand into the Arakan area in 1784, to ensure Buddhist purity for the Rakhines and cut down the rising Islamic ties which were considered 'dangerous' (Thwin 15). The underlying reason behind this expansion was the fact that the dynasty revered the Theravada Sasana. The Sasana taught them that the non- Buddhists were impure and hence unworthy of being treated as humans (Ibrahim 64). The Rohingyas were hence a threat to the purity of the Bamar Buddhist identity of the Rakhines. Therefore the Rohingyas had to be wiped out irrespective of the fact that Arakan has always been their homeland. It was during this expansion that Myanmar had a major clash with the British forces in India which had also been trying to gain control over the Arakan region. These tensions in turn resulted with Britain retaliating and conquering Arakan in 1826. It then went on to fight three Anglo

Burmese wars which culminated with the whole of Myanmar becoming a British colony by 1886 (Ibrahim 26). In 1937, Britain redrew the borders of Myanmar and merged Arakan into the Burmese territory (Ibrahim 27). The British conquest of Arakan can be considered as a major turning point when the histories of Myanmar and Arakan collided and fused into one.

The colossal colonial error that changed the fate of the Rohingya

The nationalists of Myanmar were highly critical of British rule and the fact that they gave the least reverence to Buddhism. This was because “Buddhism had become almost inseparably intertwined in Myanmar” (Walton). The nationalists equated religion to state power and believed that the tolerance of non-Buddhist religions would threaten the existence of both the state and the religion (Ibrahim pp 63- 64). The British had vested the Indians and Christian ethnic minorities with the decision making power in the civil services (Zin 52). The nationalists regarded this as a conscious attempt to dilute their superiority as the majority. They also resented the fact that the ethnic minorities like the Karens and Rohingyas supported the British during the Second World War when they were seeking help from the Japanese to weaken the British power and restore the Burmese culture to its previous glory. The Japanese forces who had invaded Myanmar, made matters worse when they constantly picked out and massacred the Rohingyas for their loyalty towards the British (Lee 58).

The Rohingyas were in support of the British because they were promised relative independence and a Muslim National Area. The British, however, failed to fulfill the promise after the defeat of the Japanese (Christie 166). This made the Rohingyas anxious about safeguarding their identity and religion. They then formed an army in 1947 and tried to incorporate northern Arakan to Bangladesh, known as East Pakistan at that time. In 1948, when Myanmar officially won independence from the colonial regime, they again tried to petition in the Constituent Assembly for the permission to integrate certain northern districts of Arakan to East Pakistan, now, Bangladesh. This resulted in the widespread notion that the Rohingyas could never be loyal to the nation of Myanmar because they did not belong to it racially and culturally (Yegar 62).

The failed promises of the British left the Rohingyas without a nation and a nationality. To cap it all, the British had created and distinguished ethnicity merely on the basis of religion (Paton 71). They had also failed to document the history and existence of the Rohingya Muslims in Arakan before the region became part of Myanmar (Ibrahim 25-26). This meant that the Rohingyas were clubbed together under the category of Muslim population in Myanmar which also included the Indian Muslims who had migrated during the colonial rule. This ambiguity in categorization became the major weapon for the Burmese government in questioning the ethnicity of the Rohingyas. Thus, the reasons for the identity crisis and persecution presently faced by the Rohingyas can be mainly attributed to the pitfalls committed by the colonial government.

At this point, it is also interesting to note that the Burmese Government that was against colonialism, ironically ended up resorting to the documents and tactics of divide and rule used by the colonial government. They managed to create ethnic conflicts and hide the other economic and social problems behind its veil. They also made no attempts to understand and record the history of Arakan before colonisation. This was done to ensure that the Rohingyas will have no formal documents to turn to, to prove that they rightfully belonged to Arakan, which had become a part of Myanmar after colonisation (Chowdhury and Mohanty 6). The government also renamed Arakan as Rakhine, in a conscious attempt to wipe out the pre colonial history of the region (Smith 25).

The role of literature in creating Alternate History

The Rohingyas resorted to literature and art to rewrite their history that was being wiped out by the hegemonic groups. The literary writings opened up a possibility for the Rohingya refugees to speak

directly to the world that was slowly waking up to notice this silent genocide in Myanmar. Also as stated by Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homeland*, “description is itself a political act”(14) which helped the Rohingyas speak about their mental agony and the fragmentation of identity that they continue to face. These writings challenged the grand narratives created and propagated by the Burmese government as the history of Myanmar.

Such writings also facilitated the re-presentation of Myanmar’s history from an alternate perspective, thereby communicating the idea that there is no single truth in this world; every event in this world is kaleidoscopic in nature because of differences in human experiences. Literary writings also provided a platform for the Rohingyas to re-present their history from a humanistic perspective; the Rohingyas were something more than mere survivors of genocide. Each Rohingya becomes a mirror that reflects the ebbing values and emotions of a society which is turning less humane with each passing day.

The collection of poems titled *Exodus: Between Genocide and Me*, written by a Rohingya refugee writer, Mayyu Ali, is one such work that acts as a collective representation of the injustice faced by the Rohingyas that have severely fractured their sense of self. The poems are based on actual survivor accounts and Mayyu Ali has used his knowledge of English language to ensure that these narratives reach a global audience. The poems use a first person narrative to convey the fact that the suffering of each individual survivor is actually the suffering of the entire community; being born as a Rohingya is synonymous to suffering.

The descriptions in this collection of poems can be referred to as an adaptation of what the famous critic Alok Rai terms as “pornography of violence”(365) in his work *Inventing Boundaries*. The anguish faced by the Rohingyas has been depicted in the rawest possible form through graphic descriptions. Each individual poem is a voice of a Rohingya survivor who recollects the horrors of the genocide. The poems take the structure of a conversation and give the readers a feeling of having a face to face interaction with the survivor. An exhaustive study of this literary work throws light on the ways in which the Rohingyas have become the most persecuted community in the postcolonial Myanmar. It would also help to understand the Rohingya genocide as an ongoing process that continues to splinter the basic human rights and the political and cultural status of an entire community. The collection also opens up the necessity to closely observe the process of building a postcolonial nation.

The post- independence phase was expected to bring in a change to the plight of the ethnic minorities in the country. However, it only worsened the legal position of these minorities, especially the Rohingyas and made them the scapegoats, yet again. When Myanmar attained the status of a unitary assembly-independent republic, the major parties namely the Union Solidarity and Development Party which is the political wing of the military and the National League for Democracy started gaining the upper hand in official decision making process. By this time, Theravada Buddhism had already acquired the status of being the national religion. The confluence of these events led to the political parties joining hands with the Buddhist majority and interlacing politics with religion. This was done to secure the supremacy of the Bamar Buddhists, which had been weakened during the colonial rule. They also strived to construct a notion of the best possible way to define the postcolonial nation of Myanmar which would be homogeneously Buddhist.

As stated by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, the idea of nation is a social construct of “an imagined political community- both inherently limited and sovereign”(6-7) and this social construct was created in Myanmar by defining and redefining the identities of its inhabitants in a way that would first help them to get rid of their identity as the colonial subjects and then appease to the powerful Buddhist majority. And this was

not a new tactic used by the Burmese government alone but by almost all the postcolonial countries where nationalism had become a “problem” because of the “distressing ethnic politics as well as the corrupt, fractious, and often brutal ways of governance” that the British had taught the colonised (Chatterjee 3-13).

After the construction of the idea called nation, the next step was to identify who could be regarded as a citizen and who should be seen as threats/outside to the nation. The construct of an identity for the other who cannot fit into a nation “is often done by antithesis- I am what you are not”(Wade, 105). The government created this antithesis by passing laws to specifically target the Rohingyas who were already deemed the racially different enemies of the Buddhists. The absence of an officially recorded precolonial history of the Rohingyas had already made them eligible only for a Foreign Registration Card after the imposition of Emergency Immigration Act in 1974 (Pugh 102). The 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law was passed to seal the deal and target the Rohingyas by entirely denying them any citizenship rights. The law stated that the Rohingyas had migrated during the colonial rule and to qualify as a citizen of Myanmar, the ethnic groups should have lived in Myanmar before 1823 (Pugh 108). With these laws in action, the regime now had an easily identifiable community that could be constructed and targeted as the dangerous other (Gutter 62).

In *Exodus*, the first poem ‘That’s Me, A Rohingya’ (1) explains how the nation building process of Myanmar skilfully targets the Rohingyas in every step of their lives and pinpoints them as the quintessential other who must be eliminated: they are denied a birth certificate which means that their birth is not even officially acknowledged as an addition to the population (2). This repudiates their citizenship rights and political membership. Their black skin is used to segregate and ensure “the bleakness of their future”(2) and the labels of being an “invader” and the “immigrant” (3) are used as a cover up by the government to deny basic human rights. With their identity being reduced to the status of being a stateless community, the Rohingyas face severe disorientation in their perception of the self. The line in the poem, “Even when I live in a country where I was born, I can’t name it as mine like you do/Without identity” (3) clearly speaks about the shattered sense of identity that haunts the Rohingyas because of the ways in which the government constantly threaten the very roots of their existence on the basis of well laid out plans.

The poem also bring out instances of discrimination faced by the Rohingyas particularly on the basis of their religion when it goes on to state that, “

.....When I choose religion,
I’m not faithful like you are
Restricted worship in demolished mosques
Just inhuman...(2)

These lines remind us that the Theravada Buddhist Sasana already regarded the non Buddhists as impure. The Rohingyas were different from the Buddhists on multiple levels. Additionally they were followers of Islam. This made the matters even worse because the world was witnessing a rise in Islamophobia. The Burmese government resorted to justifying the crimes against the Rohingyas by stating that they were Islamist fundamentalists whose aim was to spread terror.

The Repercussions of Religious Populism and Rising Islamophobia

Islamophobia or the hatred and prejudice towards Islam originated in the West, further spilling over

to the East. The concept gained a lot of attention with the publication of the Runnymede report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All: Report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia* in 1997 (Allen 3). The report pointed towards a major shift in racial politics which redefined the traditional modes of identification on the basis of “racial and ethnic signifiers” (Wade 21-22). The Runnymede report identified Islamophobia as a form of religious discrimination and defined it as “the practical consequences of having hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs” (p 4)

For long, Islamophobia was categorised only as a form of religious discrimination faced by the Muslims for what was considered as the conservative and strict rules that were followed by them. This was because Muslim identities were not phenotypic in nature for it to be considered as a form of racism (Adams). This classification facilitated the pursuit of racial politics that would otherwise become politically incorrect as seen in the case of Myanmar (Hasan 60). Denial of the existence of racial discrimination against Muslims also meant that even if Islamophobia exists in a country, it could only be considered as a criticism of the values propagated by the religion and not as the targeted oppression of the followers of the religion (Adams).

To understand that Islamophobia is not just religious discrimination, but also a form of modern racism which involves the construct of identities to make “life itself an object of power” (Viego 46), it becomes essential to know Foucault’s explanation about racism. In his work *Society Must be Defended*, he states that “racism is a biological struggle for the survival of the fittest species, in which the various species can be understood from the rationale of race”(254). This statement performed two functions: first, it created borders around the population of a nation to differentiate between what Foucault called “what must live and what must die”(254); secondly, this notion established the logic that preserving the population of a nation requires the death of the others who do not belong to this population. Now, when we look at how the religious identity of Muslims were used to construct them as the others who do not belong, it becomes clear that Islamophobia is also a form of modern racism where the term racism is not just used to describe discrimination on the basis of biological aspects but also on the basis of social and political constructs that enable the operation of power.

The spread of Islamophobia made it easier for the Burmese government to demonize the Rohingyas and subject them to further atrocities and torture. The poem ‘Torture’ (24) in the collection *Exodus*, explains how the Burmese government officials manage to spread Islamophobia by making the Rohingyas accept that they are terrorists. They torture the Rohingyas to make them approve the government’s narrative as the official truth. This was done so that these officials could justify their deeds of targeting and murdering the Rohingyas under the pretence of being the saviours of the nation. To put it in a nutshell, the government first constructs an identity for the Rohingyas and then tortures them to accept this identity making them believe that it is the only way they could be spared to stay alive. The poem goes on to explain how the government manufactures the dominant discourse:

...A confession of their version, A truth

for their ears,

A depiction that pleases their eyes (24)

To cap all these cruelties, the people in power then resorted to spreading a sensibility of what Hannah Arendt calls “religious populism” in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a concept

that she derives from the idea of 'Tribal Nationalism' (227). Religious Populism claims to safeguard the people of a nation by spreading the belief that the sovereignty would be confiscated by those who are not sensitive to the people's interests. This is done through three steps as depicted by Johannes Haryatmoko in his journal article 'The Pathology of Tribal Nationalism according to Hannah Arendt':

- i) Scapegoat pointing out of non indigenous inhabitants
- ii) Conflict radicalization
- iii) Excluding members of other religions through the creation of political myths that if they are allowed to co-exist within the nation, they will soon rise up and displace the majority and dilute the purity of the ethnicity of the nation. (p 74)

The Rohingyas could easily be targeted through all these steps and the Burmese government had now created enough reasons to prey on this community. The crimes committed against the Rohingyas soared and the paramount aim of the government became the extermination of this ethnic community and the creation of apurely Buddhist nation. The Burmese Buddhists were particularly Islamophobic because "Buddhism and Islam are similar to one another in the process of blurring the demarcation between the private and the public causing the personal and social life to be regulated by the guiding principles of religion" (Friedland 138). This meant that Islam had to be uprooted from the soils of Myanmar to prevent the dilution of the Buddhist purity due to Islamic influence which shared ideals with Buddhism. Thus, Myanmar became witness to widespread discrimination against the Rohingya and government sponsored massacres of these people in broad daylight.

Literature as the testament for the perpetration of violence

The atrocities committed against the Rohingyas do not just end with the infliction of excruciating physical pain. The perpetrators ensure that this ethnic group dies a slow and painful death with a wounded psyche. The Rohingyas are subjected to what Foucault terms as 'limit experience' in his work *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (31). Foucault defines 'limit experience' as "that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living"; it is the situation where an individual experiences severe dissociation with the self "in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such or that it is completely 'other' than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation" (qtd. in Cheryl Julia Lee 10). The brutality experienced by the Rohingyas cause a severe splinter in their self-image which makes it torturous for the Rohingya to live on even after escaping the genocide. This gets reflected in the refugee writings. They bear the testament to the callousness of the powerful in tormenting the Rohingyas.

Women endure the brunt of the genocide as often seen in the patriarchal world. Gang raped, used as sex slaves and then left to die, women suffer a severe fracture in their perception of the self. They experience a complete disintegration between the body and mind owing to excessive mental agony and physical torture. Women are the bearers of the progeny and hence they find their bodies transform into the site of violence. Through the crimes committed against women, the perpetrators of the genocide desire to make a very loud and clear suggestion that the Rohingya men are neither capable to protect their women nor the land that they claim to be theirs. This automatically makes them the inferior race that ought to perish.

In *Exodus*, poems like 'Genocide' (3), 'The World I Knew is Gone' (21), 'Forced by Many' (14) and 'Born to Suffer' (23) which are accounts of gang rape survivors, provide detailed accounts on the inhuman ordeals that women have had to face. The poems explain the agony of these survivors who had wished for a minute that they should have just died during the rape rather than stay alive and experience the absolute disjunct between their mind and body. In the poem 'The World I Knew is Gone' (21), the woman recollects and describes how she

felt like she had transformed into a phantom, staring from a distance at her own body getting raped multiple times. The intensity of mental and physical trauma experienced by this rape survivor is captured in the lines:

...I left my body there.

I can't recall how many times,

I was raped in a night.

The pains I endure are incurable...(21)

Even the newborn babies are not spared to ensure that the Rohingyas are completely eradicated from the territory of Myanmar. The poem 'Pitilessness' speaks about an incident that happened during a massacre in the NgarSarKyu where a newborn baby was kicked out of the cradle and crushed to death when there were no more bullets left in the perpetrator's gun to kill it(9). The poem 'Kind Killers'(5) explain how the Rohingya babies were thrown into bonfires lit specifically for the purpose. Women and men were shot to death, tortured and cut into pieces and buried alive just so that the social construct of the nation of Myanmar would acquire its true purpose of being racially pure. The villages of the Rohingyas were also burnt down to completely erase the existence of the Rohingyas on the Burmese soil (5).

The Rohingyas who managed to escape alive from Myanmar hoping for a better life realised that there was in fact nothing better that awaited them. The poem 'Living Dead' (7), 'No Place on Earth' (7), and 'Voyage' (14) are all accounts of survivors who managed to cross the Naf River to Bangladesh. These poems voice out the anguish of the survivors who have lost their loved ones and their identity. They have to constantly live a terrifying life with an uncertain future, being apprehensive about their chances of survival in this new country with no definitive change in their status as the illegal immigrants. The poem 'Trafficking' (22) throws light on incidents of human trafficking of the Rohingyas because they are refugees in several countries but not a citizen of any country. Even in the host land, the Rohingya refugees are exploited in numerous ways which make their life a hell. With no safe place to go to, no country to call theirs and no identity to hold on to other than being illegal immigrants, the Rohingyas continue to exist in a purgatorial limbo.

Exodus hence, becomes a literary medium that brings out the voice of the voiceless. It is also interesting to note that this collection includes a poem titled 'Mass grave' (14), which is an account of a Buddhist eye witness who was ready to speak out and contribute towards the collection. Though religion has been one of the major factors employed to uphold ethnic purity in the Burmese nation, this particular poem comes across as a ray of hope about a tinge of humanity still existing in a country divided by the agenda of ethnic cleansing. This poem also breaks the hegemonic narrative that all Buddhists are hostile to the Rohingya.

Conclusion

The Rohingya genocide can be seen as the by product of a once colonised Myanmar trying to deploy its pre-existent religious fascism to define its postcolonial identity. The British had failed to adequately separate the traditional structures that encourage the different ethnic groups of Myanmar to live together. This continued to create unrest and conflicts even after the exit of the colonisers. The past animosity among these ethnic groups mainly based on religious differences, called for the need to define the identity of those who can be rightfully called the loyal citizens of Myanmar. As already explained, the Rohingyas were denied of this identity because they were considered as

ethnically and racially different. Further, their religious beliefs were considered perilous to the pure Buddhist Bamar identity that Myanmar has always been keen on advocating since the pre-colonial times. The Rohingyas thus became subjected to human rights violations. Their identities as the citizens of nowhere continue to traumatise them on multiple levels.

Literary writings like the *Exodus: Between Genocide and Me* emerge from the experiences of the Rohingya refugees become the medium through which they can memorialise their culture and tradition which are being exterminated from the soils of Burma. These writings bring to light the world of the Rohingyas and the traumatising hardships that they have had to face ever since their homeland, Arakan became part of Myanmar. They become pathways to address the intensity of pain and anguish that have been etched into the collective memory of the Rohingya. These works also help them to reconstruct their identities which have been fragmented by the hegemonic groups. Such writings reflect the resilience of the Rohingya refugees, and their refusal to bend down and accept their fates as mere victims. They are survivors who deserve to speak out and remind the world that they too deserve a normal life like any other individual: race and ethnicity must never be greater than humanity. Literature ensures that their voices are heard.

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