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TAKING ON THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY: WOMEN'S SELF-DETERMINATION IN THOMAS HARDY'S *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*

AZADEH DAVOUDI FAR

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal-506009 AP India

AZADEH DAVOUDI FAR

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy closely witnessed the social institutions and problems of his society in the nineteenth century, and his novels frankly deal with various social institutions and honestly address social problems within the confines of his art. In Victorian England religious and social institutions such as church, family and marriage were deeply rooted in patriarchy. True to its nature patriarchy automatically limited women and privileges men. Victorian society, dominated as it was by patriarchal ideology, restricted women physically and mentally, and severely limited their economic opportunities as well. Therefore, women suffered from severe economic and social debilities. He reveals the injustice of the social codes of nineteenth-century Britain and their negative impact on the lives of the Victorians, especially on the working class women.

Far From the Madding Crowd was written when women evidently had an inferior status compared to men, and were severely limited in terms of their economic opportunities. Hardy felt compelled to challenge the social conventions of Victorian society in his novels, and by doing so he wished to redefine the role of women. Hardy portrays Bathsheba and Fanny in a sharp contrast to each other in patriarchal society. Bathsheba is represented as an independent and unconventional Victorian woman in comparison to Fanny who conforms to the stereotypical ideology of Victorian women. Hardy's intention is to show his rejection of society's attempts at fitting women into limited roles since he thought that women should be given a chance to break free from the traditional gender categories and forge identities of their own.

Key Words: Victorian Woman, Patriarchal, independent woman, submissive woman, social institutions

It is certainly not an exaggeration to say that Hardy owes his reputation as a novelist to the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874. The novel was the first of his Wessex novels. As he says in the Preface of this novel, the fictional country of Wessex is partly real and partly dream country (Hardy xxxvii). In this novel Hardy paints a colourful picture of English rural life in the nineteenth century with all its joys, suffering and injustice. Lois Bethe Schoenfeld neatly sums up by pointing out how Hardy has dealt with the realities of his day. His fiction can, in fact, be read as History. "Hardy's fiction is a product of the ideologies of his period, subject to a variety of influence, which we can then use to understand the history of the period, and what caused people to believe and behave the way they do" (83).

Far from the Madding Crowd was written at a time when the British women's rights movement had begun but was still burdened by the restrictive society. The 1870s feminists condemned women's

economical oppression and wished to be independent. They also protested against the loss of legal and political rights. What is further notable during this period was its emphasis on a new ideal for marriage. The women's rights activists revealed their dissatisfaction of traditional marriage and instead advocated marriages based on love, companionship, equality, and women's autonomy.

In the novel Hardy manifests these cultural tensions and attempts to depict the background of marriage and gender in the course of women's liberation. He thus challenges the conventional perception of marriage and gender and traditional ideas about social class. Like in his other novels his characters rebel against this society by making decisions that contradict the expectations of their society and lead them to an unconventional end.

Far from the Madding Crowd first appeared in serial form in *Cornhill Magazine* from January 1874 to December of the same year. The chapters were sent to Leslie Stephen, editor of *Cornhill Magazine*. As Hardy's editor, Stephen was extremely involved in the censorship of the novel. To fit his novel to the expectations of the Victorian readers, Stephan made some changes in Hardy's script. But his censorship changed the idea of what Hardy aimed to expose. In reaction to these censorship changes, Hardy wrote to Stephan:

> The truth is I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial. (Hardy 102)

Hardy was thus under the pressure of, the critics and the editors. Norman Page argues that "… the 'corrective skepticism' that we find in Hardy's early novels is attributable to his almost weekly confrontation over many years with the criticism in *The Saturday Review* of Victorian social evils, hypocrisy and sentimentality" (Page 104).

Critics complain Bathsheba disturbs the patriarchal social order. She remains one of the most controversial characters of Hardy's fictional world. Henry James says, "She was 'in consequential, wilful and mettlesome,' and we cannot say that we either understand or like her" (Morgan 120).

While in the nineteenth-century traditional fictional representation of strong heroines was rare and hardly enjoyed happy endings in their love stories, Hardy portrayed an independent and strong-willed woman, Bathsheba, who gains control of a farm. Although many people doubt her capacity, she changes their mind when the farm flourishes under her efficient management. Bathsheba's attitude towards her society differs from that of other Victorian women who generally had a fixed status. They were regarded as weaklings, fit only to obey men and follow the dictates of the patriarchal society.

In the Victorian Era the majority of women were treated as the property of their families or their husbands. A woman automatically became the property of her husband upon marriage. The orthodox Victorian society kept women shackled to home and confined them to a separate, restricted sphere of life. The laws too decreed that a married woman, with all her possessions, belonged to her husband. In return for a woman's promise to serve and obey her husband he promised to support and protect her. Women's will and strength were ignored and they were expected to be passive and play a subordinated role. Given the prevalence of this patriarchal ideology it was amazing to see a woman doing men's job.

There were very few jobs available for Victorian women. Unmarried women generally had low social and economic status. As they had hardly any access to education Victorian women were generally unemployed and were expected to learn the tasks involved in bringing up children and housekeeping. The patriarchal English society believed that women are weak by nature and their strength and weakness should be measured only in terms of the prevailing social norms. Shanley observes:

> The pressure on women to marry were enormous in the nineteenth-century England, …. A few fortunate middle-class women might be supported by a father, brother, or other relative, but for most middle-class as well as working-class

> women marriage was an economic necessity. Legal rules, social practices, and economic structures all worked together to induce a woman to marry, and then insured that once married she would be dependent upon and obedient to her husband. (10)

Such was the condition of women as Hardy witnessed in his society. As Shanley explains marriage was, in fact, a social trap by means of which a woman became dependent on her husband. As a realist he wanted to expose the various limitations placed on women by the patriarchal society to keep them in confinement. Hardy wrote his novels on the basis of his own opinion of women. He therefore allows them to act in non-traditional ways, so they are not considered ideal Victorian women. While in his time most women had to make do without autonomy of any kind, the women in his novels attempt to obtain true social equality and reject the longstanding belief that women are weak and need to depend on men to survive in this world.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy rejects the traditional concept of marriage. He closely witnessed the gender bias inherent in the Victorian society and culture. He was aware of the restrictions that limited women's opportunities. In this novel therefore he attempts to explore the restricted and disempowered status of women through the experiences of Bathsheba Everdene. He attacks the Victorian society that crashes women's desire to lead a free life. During the story she experiences gender bias that was the lot of all women at that time. Bathsheba's attitude towards life is a sign of her desire to step outside the boundaries of the traditional female role. She says, "I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I.... In short, I shall astonish you all" (Hardy 70).

Through her forceful words "I shall," Bathsheba shows her strength of will and her faith in the position of woman who is able to perform her duty in keeping with men's standards in her society. She shocks people by taking a decision to be "a farmer in her own person" (Hardy 75) with an aggressive confidence. Her decision is against the current standards of society, so people make her suffer by gossiping behind her.

In fact Hardy had always been interested in exploring social possibilities for women in all his novels. His heroines are all modelled on certain aspects of the new woman of the later years of the nineteenth century. All these heroines attack conventional social institutions of their patriarchal society. Bathsheba is not an exception to this rule. "A similar double bind confronts Bathsheba Everdene, in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), who discovers the stifling constrains that marriage represented for women" (Kastan 508). Even her own maid cannot accept some parts of the behaviour of Bathsheba. When Bathsheba asks Liddy her maid if she seems mannish, Liddy replies "Oh no, not mannish; but so almighty womanish that 'tis getting on that way sometimes" (Hardy 166). The maid believes that Bathsheba's desirability and powerful personality are almost a failing in the social milieu of which they are a part.

As it should be obvious by now the novel follows the vicissitudes of the independent young woman Bathsheba who is her own boss. Bathsheba is an orphan who lives with her aunt. Having inherited Weatherbury Farm from her uncle, she decides to manage it on her own without a bailiff. In spite of the assumptions of the day that "the female brain [is] not equal to the demands of commerce or the professions, and women, simply by virtue of their sex, had no business mingling with men in a man's world" (Altick 54), Bathsheba becomes the master of her own farm and begins to make her presence felt what has traditionally been basically men's world. This is evident in the scene in which Bathsheba enters the male-dominated Corn Exchange. Upon her entry every face "turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there" (Hardy 75). This passage makes it apparent that her behaviour is against the expectations of society and her appearance in such a place is unwelcome. In fact the community is still not ready to accept a woman in a man's world. Victorian society had little tolerance for anyone who acted in a way that was different from the beaten track. All had their own places; they were discouraged from being unique and from questioning the rules of society. But Bathsheba boldly questions the male-dominated rules governing women.

Here Hardy shows Bathsheba as the only female farmer in the Corn Exchange. She is strong willed for taking such a post and has enough confidence to stand tall in the crowd. In fact Bathsheba believes that a woman can be as strong and as intelligent as a man. She wants to prove that a woman does not need to depend on a man in this world, but can be independent and self-sufficient in all respects. She thus has a modern woman's views and her opinion mismatches her own society's values.

Another example of the stereotypical nature that Victorian men and society ascribed to women is that they believed that a woman's career would be to please a man. They saw women as merely sex objects who exist to give men pleasure and satisfaction. Only women were seen to have physical beauty and regarded as emotional beings unfit for education and higher pursuits. Bathsheba breaks these stereotypes. She is aware of her pretty face, but her beauty allows her to prove to her society that she is more than a stay-at-home woman. All she wants is to be seen as a free and independent human being. She says, "I shall never forgive God for making me a woman and dearly am I beginning to pay for the honour of owning a pretty face" (Hardy 165). Her objection to God demonstrates her rebellion against the ideologies which cause gender difference and give rights to men over women, even if these kinds of beliefs are derived from religious doctrines. Altick says,

> Bathsheba's attitude toward women such as herself differs from that of the typical real life Victorian woman, who seems to accept her (wrongly) fated status as the quintessential weakling of humanity … for example, that women should obey men—Bathsheba directly eschews this notion by accepting a position of extreme power (53-55).

Thus, where many Victorian women should give in to male-domination and act as passive identity, Bathsheba challenges standards and thinks for herself in a different way.

We can see Bathsheba as a woman who is neither the traditional woman nor the traditional housewife. In order to criticise his society Hardy depicts Bathsheba as an independent and intelligent woman who acts against the traditional masculine attitudes and ideologies. She has received considerable praise from modern readers for attempting to affirm her individuality in a society which was unprepared to accept her unconventional behaviour.

Confronted with her first marriage proposal, Bathsheba replies to Gabriel, "... I hate to be thought of as a man's property in that way, through possibly I shall be had some day" (Hardy 25). She refuses to be considered a man's property while many Victorian women easily accepted this unenviable position. And later she tells him: "Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband" (Hardy 26).

From the beginning of the story Hardy shows Bathsheba's characteristics as those that are traditionally associated with masculinity. After she becomes the landowner she attempts to make her business in Casterbridge; she dominates relationships, she relies on her capabilities and refuses to hire a male bailiff. She begins to get involved with men from the point of view of work and assumes the responsibility of all affairs on the farm. She also controls the finances even after she gets married to Troy. She views femininity as an obstacle to her progress in her society. Although her patriarchal society expects her to be an ideal woman and she herself feels signs of weakness, Bathsheba puts behind her this ideal which entails oppression and follows her own desires as an independent woman. Her masculinity and strong will reach their highest degree while responding to her maidservant Liddy. Hardy here projects a Bathsheba who blurs traditional gender expectations. Her pursuits seem stereotypically masculine. She shocks everyone in the village by being in the position of a man, as a landowner and the bailiff of her property and works with aggressive confidence. She knows the position of a woman in her society and with an Amazonian picture of herself in mind, she says, "I hope I am not a bold sort of maid – mannish?" (Hardy 166).

In her society the idea of a girl being independent was ridiculous. Women were expected to work and help at home and take care of other siblings, attend to the chores, or work on the farm. Hardy gives Bathsheba an opportunity to find her status in this patriarchal society which automatically limits women and privileges men. The only reason she inherited the farm is that there are no male heirs, so

no one can take the farm from her. Normally, if a married woman inherited a farm in Victorian Age, her husband would be the owner of her property. Otherwise she had to hire a bailiff for managing it. But Bathsheba acts unconventionally and becomes the master of her own property.

As an unconventional woman Bathsheba rejects the economic inequality inherent in marriage. She likes her privacy and declares, "I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding if I could be one without having a husband" (Hardy 26). She also rejects the conception of herself as a property to be purchased by a man. At the same time, she knows that she might surrender finally to society's will and expectation: "I hate to be thought men's property in that way – though possibly I shall be had some day" (Hardy 25). Here, Bathsheba's opinion corresponds with those of the late nineteenth-century feminists who criticized marriage as an unjust institution for it assumes a woman to be her husband's property.

> ... once a woman has accepted an offer of marriage all she has or expects to have becomes virtually the property of the man she has accepted as her husband and no gift or deed executed by her is held to be valid ..." (Thomson 87)

In the society in which marriage was mainly based on economical suppuration and love played a minor role, Bathsheba believes that marriage should be based on love and that a woman should not marry without love. In response to Gabriel's proposal for marriage, she says that she would not marry him because she does not love him. When she finds herself as the object of desire of Boldwood, she openly states that she has not fallen in love with him. She thus opposes the conventional idea of marriage.

Although Bathsheba's views on marriage seem idealistic and far from reality, as a free human being she has her right to decide her future life and society should not scorn her because of her opinions. Bathsheba marries Troy because she feels passion for him that blinds her to all his flaws. But Troy marries Bathsheba not for love but for her money and beauty. He soon begins to treat her as his property. In this respect the marriage can be considered a Victorian conventional marriage from Troy's perspective. But Bathsheba does not know Troy's intention in advance, that he had married her for her money. Still, because of her love for him she allows him to experience control over her.

Bathsheba's modern ideas prevented her from marriage for the man's sake, financial gain, security, or even reputation. In fact, women's financial dependence derives from patriarchal ideology. Hardy saw that, after marriage, all advantages seemed to be on the men's side and the penalties on the women's side. After marriage the man gave up nothing that he possessed before, but a married woman lost all her properties. Bathsheba refuses to be a mere slave of the man and in many scenes fights to preserve her independent self. She supports Troy financially and continues to run the farm with no help from him.

As the novel progresses Hardy refers to another social law of his society. The Victorian society dictated that women's sexual behaviour should be controlled and sex outside marriage should be forbidden, so that women had far less sexual freedom. A woman who became pregnant out of wedlock would be an outcast. The woman in question would definitely face sever social and economical hardships.

Hardy incorporates another heroine Fanny Robbin into *Far From the Madding Crowd*, who serves as a contrast to Bathsheba. He describes her as "a steady girl" (Hardy 69). Fanny Robbin is deceived by the promises of Troy to marry her and becomes pregnant outside marriage. She pathetically pleads with Troy that in the society "[t]here are bad women about, and they think me one" (Hardy 74). Hardy faults in this scene the social attitudes towards women's sexual oppression in the Victorian Era and society's harsh judgment about those who were deceived by irresponsible men like Troy. Ingham has an interesting view about the effects of social inequality of Victorian Era on the rustic working class presented in Hardy's fiction.

> Hardy's preoccupation is with the damaging effect of social inequality, exploitation, and the imposition of rigidly authoritarian moral views upon individuals. … His only generic treatment of them is to be found in the highly stylized groups of rustics commenting chorus-like on the events

which befall central characters. (Ingham 107)

Fanny is a poor, helpless girl. She is an orphan who becomes a maid servant. She is first introduced in Weatherbury churchyard where she has come after escaping from her job as a housemaid. Gabriel sees her as a weak and vulnerable woman and shows his generosity by offering her a shilling. She happily accepts his kindness. She has spent all of her life as a dependant on others. Boldwood puts her to school and provides her an opportunity to educate herself, and later he also arranges her employment in Everdene's farm where girls like her are put to domestic work. In the novel Fanny represents the poor Victorian working class girls who suffered at the cruel hands of the society and became easy victims of the injustice inherent in the class division. She is also a representative of those young girls of Victorian Age who were seduced and made mothers by upper class men. Nobody felt sympathy for them; rather they themselves were blamed because of what happened to them.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Fanny is shown as a foil to Bathsheba. She acts as a striking contrast to the independent, educated middle class figure of Bathsheba. Throughout the nineteenth century, domestic service was the most common form of employment for the working class people. It was the only job with the possibility of a little interaction outside home but without the opportunity for promotion. It nevertheless allowed working-class daughters to contribute to the income of their family.

Fanny loves Troy. She walks a long way from Caster bridge to barrack to demonstrate her love to him but instead of responding with love and sympathy he feels that his reputation is damaged and therefore tells her, "Well, you have to get some proper clothes" (Hardy 74). Here we are told that in her society if the couple's bond has not been officially recognized, it would not be acceptable. The legally married couples felt greater responsibility to each other than those who were not officially married. Marriage degenerated to the level of a mere ritual, and was attested by a piece of paper issued by the church. Troy and Fanny are sexually united, but not in social and religious terms; so an irresponsible man like Troy does not feel any responsibility towards Fanny even in her unenviable condition. Although Fanny has no choice other than pursuing marriage, Troy makes no effort to organize the ceremony. He is not at all serious about formalizing their relationship in the church.

Consequently, Fanny has to conceal her pregnancy and return to Casterbridge. Realising how her low social status would have affected Troy's status as a soldier, she leaves him. She can demand that he should take care of her and the unborn baby, but she still respects his choice to marry Bathsheba. Hardy thus portrays her as a generous and innocent girl and criticizes the society allows a selfish person like Troy to judge Fanny on the basis of her appearance and refuse to recognize her innate merits. Through Fanny, Hardy exposes the foolishness and superficiality of the Victorian upper class men and their cruelty towards the lower class people, especially the vulnerable young woman.

Victorian publishers always demanded that the authors should not mention the physical aspects of sexual love in their works. If an author treated a woman of easy virtue in his work, she should be murdered or she should commit suicide. Illegitimate babies should die at birth or as soon as possible thereafter. As we see in this novel Fanny, who has a baby outside marriage, dies and her baby follows suit.

By means of the character of Fanny Hardy wants to highlight Troy's true character and his attitude towards Bathsheba. Because of his high status in the community, and afraid of social censor Troy postpones his marriage to Fanny. He thinks that her poverty and her low social status might damage his reputation. For instance, when he is walking into the church, where he intended to marry Fanny, he feels greatly embarrassed because there are a few people including a group of young girls watching him. So he leaves the place knowing well that Fanny is in an unenviable condition. He marries Bathsheba just for her money and quite predictably their relationship ends in a serious crisis.

After Troy is killed by Bold wood Bathsheba marries Gabriel towards the end of the novel. By means of this marriage Hardy shows how society obliges people to marry only the members of similar social class. Luckily for them, they find themselves true soul-mates and companions.

> He [Gabriel] accompanied her up the hill.... Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship – *camaraderie* – usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom super-added to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death – that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (Hardy 333)

The scene is important from the point of view of the feminist movement that was gaining momentum at the time of the publication of the novel. In a society where men and women were not even allowed to talk about love before marriage, in this novel Hardy offers a love relationship that shows Gabriel and Bathsheba continuing with the past and entertaining hope for the future. The couple's view of each other is in some way related to the women's right movement during the late nineteenth century which eventually revolutionized sexual relations between men and women. By depicting Bathsheba as a woman free from sexual slavery imposed by her society, Hardy supports her right to bodily autonomy.

Bathsheba is in a position of power because she has the choice to decide when and whom she would marry and how her courtship would go. While many Victorian women normally gave themselves up to male domination, Bathsheba challenges the standards of her society. Such autonomy is reinforced when she selects Gabriel, one of the three eligible bachelors, marries him. Gabriel and Bathsheba seem to be happy with each other, and their relationship and gender dynamics seem healthy and relatively equal. The relationship is perhaps the best example of feminism and equality. Hardy allows Bathsheba a happy ending. He projects her as a modern woman whose husband has "learnt to say 'my wife' in a wonderful naterel [natural] way" (Hardy 338). Through their marriage one of the major themes of the novel becomes clear that true love always endures and wins. Gabriel too keeps his word to love Bathsheba till the end of his life.

Both Fanny and Bathsheba are deceived by Troy. Fanny is seduced by him and she becomes an unmarried mother. But Troy leaves her to protect his status in society. She comes from a lower class family, so she is not in the position to legally pursue her right, like many Victorian working-class innocent girls who were seduced by upper-class men and then abandoned. Rose says, "The woman was seen invariably as the victim of men's wiles, and Victorian fiction dwells repeatedly on the theme of the remorseful 'Magdalen' as an object to be pitied ..." (20). As already pointed out Troy marries Bathsheba so that she would be the owner of her property. Not surprisingly they have an unstable marriage utterly lacking in love and respect for each other.

Apart from giving Bathsheba a strong individuality Hardy realistically depicts her by investing her with the typical qualities that he found in Victorian women- vices and virtues. In the first chapter she is introduced as vain. She checks her smile by looking into the mirror to see how attractive she is to men. Her vanity is her weakness and it puts her in emotionally risky situations.

For attracting Boldwood's attention to her, like most other young women of her time, she sends an anonymous Valentine's card to him. Here Hardy wants to show that the human pride and vanity can often lead the downfall of an individual. Bathsheba's selfishness and vanity cause the downfall of Boldwood and bring about the tragic end of his life.

Troy knows Bathsheba's vanity only too well. He flatters her and praises her beauty and finally succeeds in trapping her in a loveless marriage. She enjoys his response to her beauty unaware of the fact that it is fake. Gabriel also understands her vanity through the conversation between two labours on the farm. Bathsheba's vanity is thus noticed by the people around her.

Thus, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy challenges and questions some social conventions

and customs of Victorians especially their views concerning women. He does not depict women as weaklings, but shows their strength in conducting the business of life. He also realistically treats and exposes the injustice of the restrictive roles the working-class women are made to play, although sometimes his honesty renders things bitter and heart-rending in the novel. Hardy's handling of the English language plays an important role in this connection. Regarding Hardy's language, Ronald Draper rightly says that it is "... born of a conviction that the truth must be told, even if it cannot always be told attractively" (116).

By means of the character of Bathsheba, Hardy exposes the injustice inherent in the Victorian society, especially in the way it treated women. Being opposed to the social institutions of Victorian Age, Bathsheba rebels against the restrictive male-dominated social codes. Fanny Robbin represents the working-class women who fall easy victims of social and moral codes and class-division of the time. By this incorporating several strands of the Victorian society into *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy not only holds a faithful mirror up to the realities of the day but also demonstrates how the lives of the characters are affected, often adversely, by them. Their lives are dictated and directed by these realities and social mores. The characters also yield, for the sake of survival in an unfriendly social environment, to the prevailing cultural practices. Attempting to break free from them often leads to disastrous consequences as evidenced by the character of Bathsheba. Still Hardy invests his heroine with steel will and strong determination to take on the society and prove in the final analysis how unkind of it is towards women and other vulnerable sections. Even if his characters do not wholly succeed Hardy's greatness lies in exposing the hollowness of the Victorian society. Lois Bethe Schoenfeld neatly sums up by pointing out how Hardy has dealt with the realities of his day. His fiction can, in fact, be read as History.

> Hardy's fiction is a product of the ideologies of his period, subject to a variety of influence, which we can then use to understand the history of the period, and what caused people to believe and behave the way they do. (Schoenfeld 83)

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