

## Migratory Experiences in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels: *An American Brat and Ice-Candy-Man*

A.M. Jamila Kani, M.A., M.Phil.

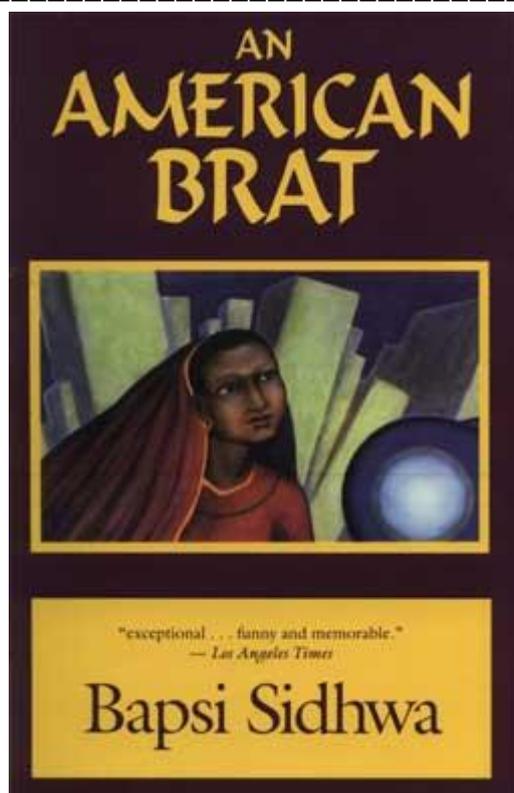
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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:10 October 2013

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### Immigrant and Expatriate

The terms 'immigrant' and 'expatriate' in general refer to persons who live outside their own country either by choice or otherwise. The 'immigrant' willingly transforms her/him to fit in and absorb the best in the host culture. The immigrant experience therefore becomes a transformative process of the 'self' and its relation to society. The 'expatriate' on the other hand is more a reluctant entrant into the new culture and finds it hard to let go a familiar way of life.

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## ***American Brat***

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* deals with the metamorphosis of an expatriate. Feroza desires to be an immigrant and refuses to return to Pakistan after living four years in America.

The novel *An American Brat* unveils the experiences of Feroza, a Pakistani girl, belonging to the Parsee community, shifted to the United States by her family to make her modern in approach and outlook. Furthermore, the experience of diaspora can be seen both as empowering, as well as disempowering for the women of color in the novel.

Sidhwa introduces her protagonist Feroza's identity from multiple geographical spatial locations of Pakistan and America. These locations often demand contrasting codes of conduct resulting in often hybrid and conflictual tendencies among the individuals in diaspora.

### **The Story**

The story line of *An American Brat* is simple and lucid. The novel unfolds the mental, psychological, social and cultural conflicts that the shy conservative Pakistani girl Feroza confronts during the process of her migration to America. It describes how she gets uprooted from her 'mother culture' and is forcibly transplanted in the alien American culture. Feroza is presented as a timid girl at the beginning of the novel and as the narration progresses, Feroza's movement to America shapes her into a bold and confident woman. Later on, she begins to live her life independently. Her transformation in America does not occur in a single night but takes several years.

The narrow-mindedness of Feroza becomes a problem for her parents – Zareen and Cyrus. She becomes more orthodox than her mother Zareen, though there is a big generation gap. Feroza's mother Zareen is perturbed that her daughter has adopted a Parsi-like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook, thereby, making her a misfit in her community. On the other hand, Cyrus Ginwalla, the father, is worried about another kind of loss of identity. He fears that his susceptible young daughter would fall in love and marry a non-Parsi-boy. He thinks that the only solution to this problem is to send Feroza for a holiday to the U.S.A. He thinks that travel will broaden her outlook and get this puritanical rubbish out of her head. Feroza is sent to America. Throughout her journey, Feroza behaves as instructed by the elders back in Pakistan but as soon as she reaches America she begins to change.

Feroza is subjected to a rather inhumane treatment by the custom officials. The unsmiling officers seemed to doubt anything she said. They confronted her with a barrage of questions on how long she would stay; where she would stay; who would support her; how old was her uncle; what did he do; was he a US citizen; resident or visitor. Feroza's answers do not seem satisfactory to the hostile officer and she is directed to go in for a secondary inspection after collecting her luggage. Feroza tries to cope with the different life-style of the Americans and the modern technology used by them. She is quite unfamiliar with the moving staircase and the escalator, which one finds in abundance in even the small stores in the USA. An elderly American couple helps her to cross this hurdle. The man takes the duty-free packages from her hand and the woman takes hold of Feroza's arm to help her get on and off the escalator.

## **Impressions of New Arrivals**

Bapsi Sidhwa describes vividly the impressions a new arrival has of the modern America. She chronicles not only the glitz and glamour but also the ugliness and squalor of the USA.

Soon after uncle Manek and Feroza come out of the Kennedy airport, the next day Feroza's tour of New York starts. Feroza's initiation to USA is complete when she sees the ugly side of New York too. On Eighth Avenue, she walks past small dark video parlours flashing loud advertising, interspersed by grubby pawnshops, cheap hotel and bars.

Later, Manek directs Feroza's attention to male prostitutes, elegant transvestites – the pimps and miniskirt prostitutes. However, she finds it hard to accept the poverty and stench of filth in USA. Feroza had been accustomed to the odour of filth, the reek of poverty: sweat, urine, open drains, rotting carrion, vegetables and the other debris. These sights and smells in Pakistan had developed a tolerance for them.

Manek's initial struggles to cope with the US culture help him to guide his niece, Feroza to face with ease the problems, which he faced. He considers his experiences as lessons to teach Feroza about the US. Gradually Feroza succumbs to America's charms and decides to stay on as a student. Manek wants her to join a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho, a small town, which he thought would ease her assimilation into the American way of life.

The college was ready to offer a stipend. Her parents also permitted her to study in America. Jo is her new room-mate, who arranges for her requirements and instructs her on all matters. Jo takes "charge of Feroza's life" (**AB 151**) and becomes her friend, philosopher and

guide. She soon picks up Jo's manner of speaking. Jo and Feroza then join the University of Denver for the hotel management course.

Now, Feroza feels independent and slowly changes her behavior. Here she discovers the joys and tribulations of American campus life. She faces several challenges continuously which make her to understand the changes within her. Her friendship with Jo helps her to learn the American way of life. Feroza completely adapts an American lifestyle. She acts, talks and dresses like an American girl. She learns to drive, drink, dance and use the American slang. The shy and conservative Feroza turns into a confident and self-assertive girl.

### **A Climax**

Feroza's transformation reaches its climax when she meets David Press to buy his second-hand car. So far her growth and expansion was in relation to her intellect and her mind. It was David who initiated and took "her across the uncharted terrain of her emotions" (**AB 251**). She not only accompanies him to the bar and takes drinks but also dances not knowing when exactly her heart was won.

Feroza, who had at one point placed emphasis on religion and culture can now, think only about David and wishes to marry him, a non- Parsee. One day, as she sneaked back into her room at three o'clock in the morning with her shoes in her hand, she wondered if she was the same girl who had lived in Lahore and gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart. She was fully aware of all the changes in her life. Feroza feels David is everything for her and their love cannot be changed forever. She accordingly writes about her love for David to her parents.

## **A Parsi Marrying a Non-Parsi?**

Feroza's decision to marry David Press, a Jew, disturbs her mother very much. So she sets out to America to dissuade her rebellious daughter from marrying a non-Parsi.

Zareen tries to explain to Feroza that by marrying David, she would cut herself off from her family and religion. She would never be allowed to enter the Parsi places of worship and never be allowed to attend the funeral rites of her mother or father. Zareen is fully determined to divert Feroza. She suggests to Feroza that she should forget about men and concentrate on her studies. She makes every possible effort to change her daughter Feroza's mind. She wants Feroza to change her decision to marry David Press. When Feroza does not agree to her wish, Zareen rages: "I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it's done to you – you have become an American Brat" (AB 279).

## **Fulfilling Traditional Obligations Leading to Break-up**

When Zareen insists on fulfilling her traditional obligations by giving fabulous gifts to David's relatives and making the marriage a big affair, David feels compelled to defend his position. Zareen pretends to agree to the marriage but insists on the rituals and ceremonies which repel David. She explains to David the Parsi wedding rituals and customs. By doing so, she demonstrates to David how different their cultures are, and slowly drives a wedge between him and Feroza. When Zareen performs a ritual to cast out the spell of the evil eye that she feels afflicts Feroza, David recoils in horror. David becomes conscious of the dissimilarities in the two cultures then he leaves Denver.

## **Life with Freedom**

Initially Feroza feels depressed over her break-up with David Press, but gradually she recovers and is strengthened in her resolve to continue in America. She has experienced freedom in America and refuses to live without it now. When her relationship with David comes to an end, she goes back to her friends but at the same time she emerges as an independent woman. Her past experiences enable her to think about her life seriously and to decide about her future with confidence. The migrant Feroza has adjusted herself well to a different culture and “there would be no going back for her” (AB 317).

## **Focus on the Theme of Expatriate Experience**

Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the theme of expatriate experiences in Feroza's initiation to the U.S.A. Her check-up at the customs, incredibility at the lights and shopping at New York have been portrayed imaginatively in the novel. Her innocence as well as ignorance comes to light when she gets lost on the fire stair at the YMCA, in a museum at Boston and her confusion when confronted by a sex maniac at the YMCA bathroom. She slowly is drawn to an American life Style. Bapsi Sidhwa aptly delineates when Feroza wants to marry David Press. The novelist has handled this contentious issue with great maturity. Feroza life which blooms in unexpected ways falls apart just as unexpectedly due to the break with David. But she realizes that her healing can take place only in America and that there was no going back to Pakistan for her.

## **Immigrant Psyche**

Immigrant Psyche shows the interaction of traditional culture within the culture of an adopted alien land and brings about a transformation in the a composite one made up of

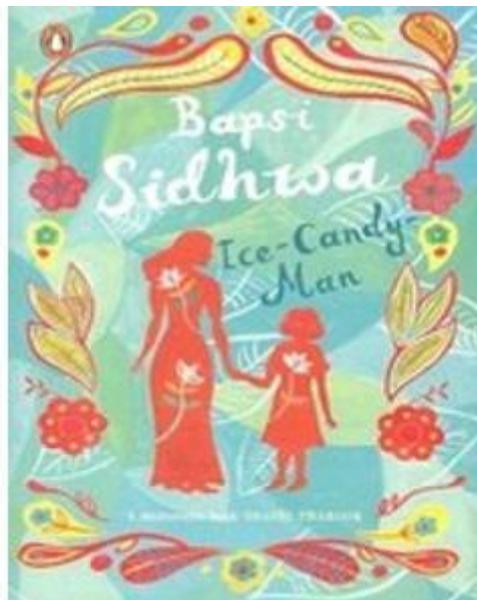
**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

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collectiveness, multiple journeys, still points and border crossings. Experiences are shaped by economic positions, personal skills and political relationships between country of origin and of adoption. Migration that leads to separation may be seen as rebirth, rebirth in a new place / city / country marked by a new culture, different flora and fauna, new adjustments and so on. If migration is reincarnation, it takes the memory back to the earlier birth as the migrants have to build a new world and also die in hope and dread.

### **Horror of Partition**



The Partition of India in 1947 was accompanied by the migration of nearly ten million people between the newly defined borders of India and Pakistan. When India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, the sub-continent was divided into separate nations: India, and Pakistan. To carry out this political solution to long-standing religious conflict, millions were forced to move, and this mass migration soon turned into slaughter. Those who survived also suffered – becoming refugees, losing fortunes and homes, succumbing to hunger and disease. Countless women were raped, then punished anew when

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their husbands and families rejected them as polluted. Much of the bloodshed and anguish took place on the Punjabi plains in northern India. Lahore, a major city in Punjab, once known as “the Paris of India” was given to Pakistan. The city’s strategic position turned it into a massive refugee camp and the site of some of the worst partition violence.

### **Bapsi Sidhwa and Her Lahore in *Ice-Candy-Man***

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in undivided India and was brought up in Lahore, Pakistan. She was a precocious polio-ridden child with an uncanny knack for life around her. As a young girl, she witnessed the bloody partition of India and its aftermaths in 1947, in which seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted in the largest, most horrible and shocking exchange of population. Her home city Lahore became a border city in Pakistan and it was flooded with thousands of war refugees. Most of them were victims of rape and torture and thus experienced diaspora. Due to lasting shame and their husbands damaged pride, many victims were not permitted into their homes after having recovered. Bapsi Sidhwa has recaptured that decisive moment in the history of the two nations in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. This novel has vividly captured the events leading to partition and migration.

### **Story from the Point of a Young Parsee Zoroastrian Girl**

The story is told from the point of a young Parsee Zoroastrian girl. Sidhwa, herself admits that her novel has certain autobiographical elements. For instance, the child protagonist Lenny is reminiscent of Sidhwa’s own childhood. Like Lenny, Sidhwa too was, at the time of partition, a polio ridden eight year old girl, living in Lahore. Lenny is an eight-year-old girl, who comes from an affluent Parsee family of Lahore. She is lame in one leg

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due to an early attack of polio. She is taken care of by the Hindu Ayah, Shanta who is eighteen years old. She is Lenny's trusted advisor.

### **Hindu Ayah**

Ayah is always surrounded by Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Parsee admirers. The men from all these communities are always unified around her. This hints at a Hindu-Sikh-Muslim communal harmony that was prevalent in the pre-independent days. They behaved as if they were blood relations. Ayah's admirers include the Ice Candy Man, a masseur, a gardener, a restaurant owner, a zoo attendant, a knife-sharpening Pathan, Sharbat Khan and several more. The evil news of the impending partition however disturbs the communal harmony and the same people begin to look at each other with suspicion. The rumblings of communal discord soon reach Lahore.

### **Lenny**

Lenny's heart ails to see the violence because in pre-partition days, she has enjoyed the company of Ayah's friends from different religions including, Masseur Hari, Sharbat Khan, Chinaman, the Pathan, Sher Singh, Ice-candy-man and others. They argue in the queen's garden about the impossibility of violence against each other. Slowly everything changes in Lahore but about Ayah Lenny says, "Only the group around Ayah remains unchanged, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee are as always, unified around her" (**ICM 97**). Lenny never imagined that the group around Ayah would change or break. But Lenny senses that the news of partition seemed to bring about a subtle change and unease. Lenny's fear proves to be true when violence changes all the friendly ambience of Lahore. Ayah's friends do not gather in the garden or in the wrestler's restaurant. Their visits become rare, instead, they sit in front of Lenny's house and gossip.

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## **Communal Riots and Massacre**

The vortex of violence that follows sucks up Ayah and her Muslim admirer Ice-candy-man just as it rips apart other lives. All the characters in the novel bring home the horror of what they survive. As men lose their senses and indulge in raping, killing and looting, women reveal their strengths, building links across the divided communities, sheltering survivors, and insisting on continuity. The dispirited effects of communal frenzy after the partition were horrible. All the three communities suffered irrevocably. People were forced to vacate their homes, land and property.

Lenny has very kind and compassionate sentiments towards Ayah. Only Ayah, among all Lenny's friends stays behind in Lahore. She doesn't go because Masseur had assured her of safety there. However, after Masseur is murdered and his body is found in a sack, the Ayah is shocked. When a mob approaches Lenny's house and demand for the Hindu Ayah, the Parsee family is shocked. The Ayah senses danger to her life and hides herself in the house of Lenny. The Muslim Iman Din, however, tries to save the Hindus from the mob but in vain.

## **Ice Candy Man**

The Ice-candy-man plays mischief and deceives Lenny by assuring her of saving the life of her Ayah. Lenny innocently reveals the hiding place of the Ayah. Lenny follows the path of truth she has learned without knowing the consequences of her revelation. The Muslim mob drags Ayah out mercilessly. Ice-candy-man, further, abducts Ayah and takes her to Hira Mandi. Lenny is hurt and considers herself as a traitor of Ayah. Women rise as saviours to the victims of partition. The Godmother Rodabai goes out of her way to rescue Ayah Shanta. The meeting between Ice-candy-man and Godmother shocks Lenny. Ayah had been kept in a brothel of Hira Mandi. The Ice-candy-man forcibly marries Ayah and changes

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her name to Mumtaz. Now Shanta, changes into Mumtaz. Lenny wishes to save Ayah from the monster Ice-candy-man. In spite of the communal victims, Sidhwa also depicts women's suffering as common to all communities.

The brutally murdered dead bodies of the Muslims in the train from Gurudaspur completely transform the kind and loving Ice-candy-man into a violent and frenzied person. His anger to revenge the Hindus results in his abducting Ayah and prostituting her body. His love for Ayah fails to influence him and hold him away from the evil in him. He does not feel anything incorrect in exploiting the innocence of Lenny. He also forgets his friendship with Sher Singh and exposes him to Muslim attackers.

Even though Ice-candy-man marries Ayah, it is a callous marriage because he kills Ayah's soul. Hence, his confession in front of Godmother does not create any sympathy. But Ayah cannot forget her sexual and mental torture. Masseur's murder has already taken away the energy out of her life. After Ayah's rehabilitation, Ice-candy-man waits for her outside the camp. He sings songs and becomes a dejected lover calling out for his beloved. In a final, sentence Sidhwa writes that the "Ice-candy-man too, disappears across the Wagah border into India" (**ICM 278**).

On the personal level, Ice-candy-man fails as a human being in the eyes of Ayah. On the social level, too, he fails to survive because he does nothing fruitful either for his community or the others. Ayah's abduction or his involvement in violence does not change his status or that of others. He does not possess any human values and he has no love for truth in his life.

## **The Plight of Women**

The novel closes with Ayah's departure from Lahore, followed by a "harmless" Ice-candy-man. Ayah is the innocent victim, her identity brutally stripped from her, and Ice-candy-man is the abject tormentor, and they separately cross over the newly created border – the long cut imagined by Ayah – two throbbing symbols of the loss and trauma ingrained in the fabric of the two nations born from Partition. Ayah stands as a reminder of those thousands of women who were claimed back by a patriarchal father-state that set out to re-establish its honour by recovering and rehabilitating its women abused by the rival community. But neither nation, nor community, nor family were ready to welcome them back and grant them their former status; like spoils of war they were in the proper place, no matter that they were homeless.

Ayah sharply and intelligently uses the opportunity of requesting Godmother to relieve her from the clutches of Ice-candy-man and thus on the personal level she succeeds in continuing her survival in Amritsar.

## **Focus on the Self**

The way a novel ends is a statement on the self – on its ability or inability to survive, especially when the self is a woman. Ayah struggles to survive in spite of her prolonged exploitation. We are not sure whether Ayah's family will accept her but she will survive with courage because she says, "whether they want me or not, I will go" (**ICM 262**). Ayah is symbolic of the earth that is looted, raped and humiliated. As the earth continues to exist, Ayah too continues her existence.

## **Conflict of Identities**

Bapsi Sidhwa describes the horrors and aftermath of Partition in a very touching manner. The crimes and memories of the Partition leave a permanent scar on the psyche of the people. Partition of India is truly the worst phase in Indian history. The novel precisely captures that decisive moment in history when one day everybody is themselves and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and identities that existed side by side get sharpened like swords against each other.

*Ice-Candy-Man* thus reflects the emigrant consciousness of a whole community of humankind. After partition, Lahore enters Pakistan, while Gurudaspur and Amritsar remain in India. Thus the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is a Partition novel dealing with the migrant consciousness. Bapsi Sidhwa gives visibility to the hidden tragedy of thousands of women on whose flesh the notions of honour and shame – shared by families, communities, nations and strictly connected to female purity-were contended. Ayah represents the fate of most women who suffered rape and abduction and, in the aftermath, found themselves deprived of their identity and of a place in society.

## **Feroza and Ayah**

Migration is one of life's essential rhythms and the losses it incurs are made good with gains in self-knowledge. Feroza Ginwalla in *An American Brat* emigration and transformation into what her stay-at-home family sees as the brat of the title. The journey is risky, and arrival both provisional and tentative. Although Feroza will never be entirely at home in the country she has left, neither does she wish to be totally absorbed into American culture. With maturity has come in equilibrium in which the hybridity of the migrant is a cause for celebration, not regret. Feroza's self-discovery leads to her commitment to the

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public sphere, and she is changed woman vastly different from the innocent girl of the novel's beginning, now eager to exercise the infinite options that America offers her.

Feroza is found to be very conservative in all her behaviours and so her mother forces her to go to America. At first Feroza strives hard to adjust with the life style of America. Feroza slowly but steadily adapts to the immigrant life in America. And completely transforms herself into an audacious American girl. Feroza refuses to go back to her old conservative life at Pakistan. She has tasted the fruits of freedom and does not wish to be bound by the traditional ways of her community. She wants very much to live a free life of bird. She attains her self-hood and maturity. Her mother may consider her an American Brat but she too knows that Feroza is now capable of being herself. From the innocent naïve child, she has now become a confident young woman. The immigrant life at America has taught her how to make her own decisions. She has dug out her self-identity through her immigrant experience. Sidhwa portrays a positive picture of a sense of loss, but this sense of displacement is repositioned and repossessed with Feroza providing her credentials, her beliefs, and her Self-awareness.

Ayah Shanta in *Ice-Candy-Man* highlights female sexuality, something that is celebrated as well as exploited by men. A major part of the novel revolves around her character. Eighteen years old and a Hindu, she is entrusted with the duty of looking after Lenny. Possessing a charming and beautiful personality, she is Lenny's experienced and trusted advisor. The communal riots in Lahore bring about a change in her life.

As a prey of male violent possession, Ayah's raped and humiliated body turns into the symbolic representation of the gendered violence unleashed during the traumatic events of Partition. The outbursts of violence, the feelings of revenge and suspicion, the departures or

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conversions of Hindu, Muslims and Sikh friends make of her a cowering, fearful being. As a result, she considers leaving Lahore to reach her relatives in Amritsar. The traumatic events Ayah has experienced have changed her life.

Due to the Partition of India and Pakistan many people were uprooted from their native lands. Bapsi Sidhwa has not only depicted the sufferings of Ayah but also she has portrayed the mayhem of all the women during this Partition. Due to Partition's forceful shifts, even close friends turn out to be vigorous foes. Finally, Ayah migrates to Amritsar with a hope that she may get a better life there.

Due to the change of ghetto both Feroza and Ayah realise the value of their own self and are able to make their own decisions regarding their own life. Feroza is sure that she can manage her life in America without the support of her parents. Ayah is not sure of getting a better life in Amritsar but she has finally got the guts to face the consequences of her own decision. Thus, Sidhwa's works cover a larger range of topics, from history to contemporary reality.

### **Focus on Transformation**

The present study of Bapsi Sidhwa's fictional writings demonstrates that she has addressed all issues associated with transformation of oneself. With her evolving creative vision, the canvas of her thematic content enlarges and the complexity of cultural assimilation acquires a new dimension. The study of Bapsi Sidhwa's writings provides still more areas to be probed and explored. It permits future research scope for a comparative study of her novels dealing with Migration and Expatriation.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **13:10 October 2013**

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