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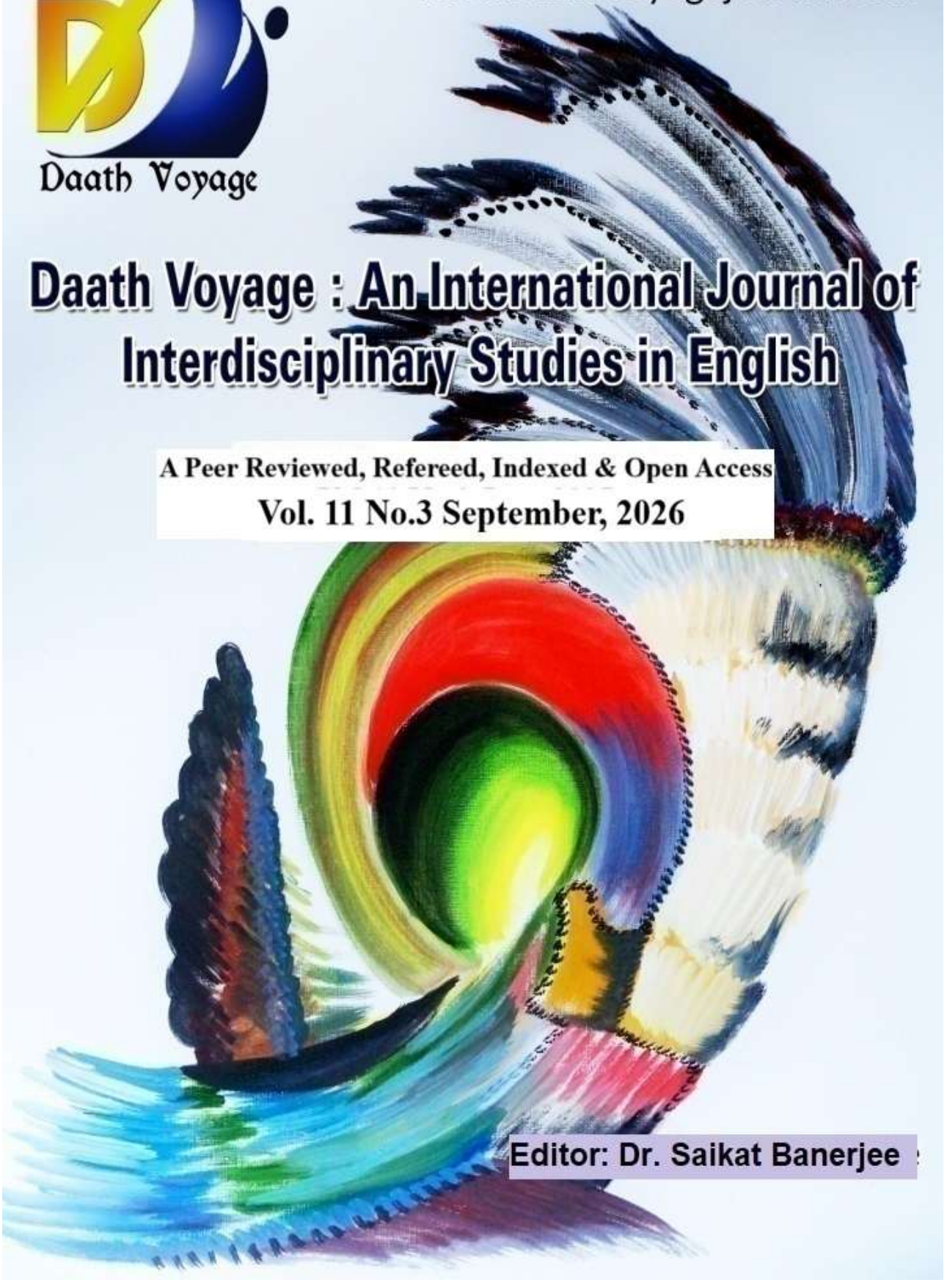

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Politics of Identity and Archetypes: A study of Ashwin Sanghi's Chanakya's Chant

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Abstract: What is 'Identity'? Does identity mean one's name, lineage or profession? These questions have been part of the literary and psychological debates over the past many years. More often than not, identity is viewed as a social construct, with a stereotypical lens. However, identity can change with the performative and collective role it needs to play. Stories present characters with multiple identities; individuals need to adapt with the varied roles to navigate the social, political and cultural realities. In doing so, they make and break archetypes giving way to a discussion on the politics and poetics of identity. Ashwin, Sanghi a post-colonial, mytho-fiction writer attempts to explore the themes of identity and archetypes in a subtle way in his book Chanakya's Chant (2010). With stories running in parallel across geographies and centuries, Sanghi situates identity within layered narratives. This paper attempts to draw attention to Jungian theories of identity and archetypes to explain the moral ambiguity of characters. Moreover, the study also aims to analyse Stuart Hall's notion of identity in relation to masked persona of the main characters of the fiction. This research tries to argue that identity is not inherent or innate, rather a by-product of collective memory, situations and multiple personas that differ from reader to reader, across cultures.

Key words: Identity, archetypes, persona, dynamic, memory, culture.

Introduction

'Identity' has been viewed as a polysemous concept in sociology and cultural studies with multiple meanings attached to it. Studies over centuries show identity as fluid, shaped by norms, roles and even

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expectations. This enables a society to recognize identity more so as layered, with each layer depicting a unique experience and an amalgamation of perceptions. According to Erik Erikson, a German American psychoanalyst, "Identity provides a sense of continuity within the self and in interaction with others ("self-sameness"), as well as a frame to differentiate between self and others ("uniqueness") which allows the individual to function autonomously from others"

In simple words, Erikson meant that individuals construct their sense of self (ego identity) by navigating social, cultural, and personal crises throughout life. The major aspect of this task happens in the adolescence (age 12 to 18), and helps them synthesise their 'self' through the past, present and future. Erikson also propagated the term **identity crisis** as a normative, necessary turning point rather than a pathology. It represents a period of intense, active exploration where teenagers test boundaries, question authority, and try on different social roles.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall, the master of cultural studies discusses identity as a process of 'becoming', rather than just 'being'. Hall posits that, identities are 'the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past'

Ashwin Sanghi, a post-colonial Indian writer introduces the subject of identity and archetypes in his fiction Chanakya's Chant (2010). As the name suggests, the protagonist is the wise, old Chanakya also known as Vishnugupt. The very fact that he is known by multiple names, in different realms shows how identity can have a deeper meaning. The name Chanakya is based on his father's name, Chanak (identity gained from parents); the name Kautilya, derived from his *gotra* (clan) name, *Kutila* (identity gained from lineage) and the name Vishnugupt, his birth name (identity gained by birth).

To understand the concept of identity better, it is suggested to divide it into three different categories: social, political and cultural.

Ashwin Sanghi diligently carves his two main protagonists, centuries apart to highlight that 'identity' can be fluid, archetypal and cyclical in nature. Chanakya and his modern-day counterpart reflect each other, reshaping identities in different socio -cultural contexts.

Social Identity

Sanghi starts the story with the backdrop of the Mauryan empire with Chanakya as the mentor and Chandragupt Maurya as his disciple. With the intention of overthrowing the brutal King Dhanananda and taking revenge for his father's death, Chanakya starts a mission of reuniting Bharat. A guru, a sage, a wise

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man shows his 'other' self as the story unfolds. His political machinations, and shrewd plans, although for good reasons present a completely different version of the Guru. His legacy is carried forward by Pandit Ganga Sagar Misra of Kanpur, in modern day India. The Pandit mirrors Chanakya in his political strategies; deceit and vested interest being dominant characteristics of their doings. Misra promotes his protégé Chandni to become to PM of the country, just as Chanakya had backed his disciple Chandragupt Maurya to rule the country then.

Their deeds become difficult to comprehend because of their ambiguous moral nature. Though their actions are unjust (at times), the final goal is desirable and justified. This could be associated with Nietzsche's 'will to power', an irrational force that allows a human being not only to survive, but also grow, overcome limitations and reshape political/ social landscapes.

Consequentially, it shows an interplay between the conscious and unconscious as given by the famous philosopher Carl Jung. As Jung says in his essay, 'That which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is.' Jung saw human beings guided by aims and aspirations and to achieve a unity, a person must be largely aware of wisdom available in one's personal and collective unconscious.

In Chanakya's Chant, both Chanakya and Pandit Misra are responsible for passive murders, deceit, violation of privacy, espionage, corruption etc. . Their actions are justified for the greater good of the nation/ society or for the benefit of near and dear ones. However, both fall into the stereotype of being morally by virtue of their profession and designation. In due course, they lose their true identity and the persona becomes their true self.

Social Identity

Typically, the term social identity refers to how one is known in the society, in a group or in a community. In many cases, a stereotypical appearance is what the society expects when imagining a certain personality. In case of Chanakya, Sanghi introduces him as a 'hideous looking man' and 'his features were slightly crooked' (Sanghi 2) The appearance thus shows not a pleasing personality with an aura of wisdom, but rather his vile machinations. This was the 'mask' the sage would put on, as Jung would say, which would not be the true self. However, wisdom was synonymous to Chanakya. Hence, Sanghi continues the description to bring out the other side of the protagonist.

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He (Chanakya) rarely smiled because smiling exposed his crooked teeth. He had been born with a full set of teeth—the mark of a ruler, but a clairvoyant yogi had predicted that the boy would be even more powerful than a mere king—he would be the most powerful kingmaker of his time. (Sanghi 3)

Chanakya's personality resonates with Jungian theory of Identity and Archetypes. As Jung states,

> "The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual."Chanakya's true nature remains concealed throughout the story. Ironically enough, Sanghi introduces Chanakya while listening to Vishakha, the poison maiden's narrative of how King Paurus was killed. He did not show the slightest emotion or exuberance as he received her detailed report of the assassination. The wily old Brahmin knew that it never paid to let others perceive what one's true feelings were. (Sanghi 3)

As a Brahman, the society would not expect Chanakya to have involvement in such misdeeds and crime activities. Thus, for a social identity, Chanakya is only a Guru; a guru who promotes education, follows discipline and encourages his disciples to follow the right path. Sanghi, here hints at the concept of social identity, being layered, which a Stuart Hall addresses as 'fluid' and not 'fixed.

Even for Pandit Ganga Sagar Misra, Sanghi creates a fluid character, emphasizing the volatility of identity.

He (Gangasagar) had aristocratic features, a broad forehead, and an aquiline nose. His short stature, however, was misleading-like Napoleon's. (Sanghi 12)

It definitely is not a coincidence that both Chanakya and Ganga Sagar have some features that give them a reason to rule. Certainly, Sanghi has carved his characters in a way that explains Hall's concept of identity as a 'transforming' process of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. The gurus would not have a royal aura, would not have foul play as part of their operations, would not show avarice for power; however, the social identity is different from their 'real' self.

Carl Jung, the famous psychologist talks about the 'persona' in his Essays on Analytical Psychology. In common parlance, persona would mean a mask that performers in theatre would wear during olden days. However, in In Carl Jung's model of the psyche, the persona lies between our ego and society. According to this model, the ego lies at the centre of consciousness, truly responsible for our sense of identity throughout life while the persona is the social mask we put on. All humans wear different masks

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in different situations or settings. Jund posits this to be a way of adapting to the demands of society, also enabling an important way of shaping our social role, that allows social interactions and dealings.

As Jung writes, "The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual." In his book Chanakya's Chant, Sanghi allows his characters to wear the persona, a veil that lets them compromise the individual consciousness and thus meet the demands of the society. Chanakya and Misra live a dual life, thus highlighting the tension between the real and the 'other', persona and the shadow, unable to identify themselves in a single manner.

Once, Jeevasiddhi and Maurya are amazed to see Chanakya's knowledge in matters of treasure and wealth. Clearly, an old guru is expected to talk about the higher pursuits of 'gyan', intellect, wisdom, renunciation, rather than gold. To clarify his stance and give an identity to himself, Chanakya answers, 'What should a man strive for? *Kama*-love, *dharma*-duty, *artha*-wealth, and *moksha*-salvation. I'm a teacher- but a teacher of *arthashastra*, the science of wealth. The source of livelihood of men is wealth, and the science of the means of attaining and protecting it is politics.' (Sanghi 95). This statement looks to be a deliberate attempt at showing the duality of identities and the tension, as discussed earlier. Sanghi lets his readers gauge the old man and his various identities; integrates the element of Jungian shadow showing how even materialistic aspirations and politics of power are important for survival.

However, Carl Jung warns his readers of the dangers of 'over identification'. This happens when the individual starts believing in the mask to be his/her real self. It could lead to inner conflicts, thus resulting in suppression of real emotions, feelings and desires. Jung writes, "The danger is that [people] become identical with their personas—the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice". Chanakya, towards the end of the story, falls prey to over identification. His love for his sweetheart Suvasini takes back seat, the front being led by his persona of being the agent that could unite Bharat. Chanakya says to Suhasini,

'I may have loved you, my sweet Suvasini, but I loved Bharat much more. I'm duty bound to protect it in whatever way that I can (Sanghi 426). He speaks of his 'greater duty' stating, 'my wisdom and experience must not fade in my lifetime' (Sanghi 427). Sanghi, deftly shows Chanakya taking up the role of the wise man towards the end. Chanakya wishes to 'write it all, My Arthashstra- my own invention- the science of

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wealth' (Sanghi 428). In doing so, he forgets his love life, his normal self and his true identity with the name Vishnugupt.

Cultural Identity

A part of a person's identity that gives him the sense of belongingness in a group, culture, community or even traditions is cultural identity. In simple words, it is shaped by ancestry, ethnicity, religion and social norms. This aspect of identity is always enhanced with generations. It expands with ages, widens with times and hence can be understood as dynamic.

In Chanakya's Chant, Sanghi offers a contrast of culture and mannerisms. When Chandni is in Miss Feversham's finishing school in London, she is made to realise how 'unladylike' she is. Being ladylike was desirous of English culture and Chandni had rather never heard of it. As Miss Feversham observes Chandni, she says,

> 'You're taking up a lot of space. And look at those angles when you stand up……When you walk you must lead with the solar plexus, situated somewhere around the bottom of your bra. Hold your head up and keep your neck elongated!' (Sanghi 99)

Chandni's forced assimilation into colonial identity raises concerns of an attempt to erase the indigenous self. A certain culture demands certain mannerisms, and to be part of it, one has to 'become'. This resonated with Hall's theory of identity growing from 'being' to 'becoming'. Hall states in his famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,

> '……..identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.' (394)

However, Chandni, a commoner from India, manages to surpass the male dominated stereotypes and emerge as a motivated and ambitious leader who later rises to the highest designation of Prime Minister. Interestingly, it's a male mentor pushing his female prodigy to climb the ladder of success in a patriarchal society. This is another example of breaking stereotypes, hence giving voice to the colonized.

At another instance, nationality is synonymous to identity. Geoffrey effortlessly addresses Chandni as 'Paki', only hinting towards her Asian race. Cultural identity, then becomes vulnerable to oppressive forces and external hostility. As Stuart Hall advocates, in his view of identity being shaped by difference, rupture and transformation. Hall states that "far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power." Sadly, Chandni's efforts of

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displaying the perfect 'English lady like' characteristics go down the bridge, with Geoffrey's racial labelling of her nationality.

Caught between the English etiquettes and her Indian roots, Chandni enters the 'Third Space', a term coined by Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is always negotiated in colonial and post -colonial discoveries. He mentions in his books, 'It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves' (Bhabha,38). However, the 'third space', lets one identify as a cross- cultural hybrid, rather than a combination of binary opposites, although being contradictory and ambivalent. Chandni embodies the archetypal hero figure, paving her way to success, while she battles her path being a woman; we can say that cultural identities are always transforming and expanding.

Sanghi's writings characterized by interdisciplinary narratives and a reclamation of old culture. often become a tool of gaining cultural identity, not necessarily hinting towards the subaltern voice. (Singal, 84)

Archetypes

The word 'archetype' originates from Greek *archétypon* ("first-molded"), and means the ideal example or primordial image. In literature, Jungian archetypes play an important role to understand the universal patterns of characters. They provide the backbone for story- telling, preserve the cultural memory by retaining myths and old narratives and also enable a psychological understanding of characters and their actions.

Ashwin Sanghi, diligently unravels the 'other self' of his characters, categorising them into Jungian archetypes. Jung in his essay on archetypes mentions the universal figures such as the Mentor, the Hero, the Shadow, and the Trickster. In Chanakya's Chant, Chanakya and Pandit Misra resonate with Jung's Mentor. They both act as an anchor to their respective disciples, guide them towards the right path and offer them the right knowledge to attain success.

Chandragupt Maurya and Chandni, embody the hero archetype. They are shown as relentless, aggressive, perseverant, kind and competitive, all of which would be key components of a hero.

Chanakya and Pandit Misra also embody the Shadow and Trickster archetype. With their ruthless methods to gain power and their hidden personas, the two wise men go on to unravel a new means of statecraft.

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Their darker impulses, not known to everyone and their strong ambitions reflect on Machiavelli's idea that power is maintained by pragmatism rather than morality.

Chanakya loved anger. It was a wonderfully energetic emotion and could be used very productively if channelled in the right direction. (Sanghi 98). This reflects a mixture of emotions in Chanakya, an atypical hero with both virtues and vices, not a conventional embodiment. Sanghi shows the trickster archetype as someone who is against any authority. It is by hideous means that the trickster urges his audience to questions the norms, to go beyond boundaries and stand for one's rights. In the book Chanakya's Chant, both Chanakya and Misra are on a journey of correction. They promote their prodigies for the good, though the means of correction can be trickery and deception.

Sanghi also decolonises the western discourse of viewing the country in a framework of mysticism, culture and conventions only. Overtly though, the characters stand for breaking the archetypes relying on western ideologies. Chanakya builds a science of his own, which is the foundation of any learning in economics, the Arthashastra. This could be understood as the Fanonian discourse of decolonization. Frantz Fanon, a famous psychiatrist writes about how European philosophies often claim to be "universal" truths and are forced upon the people. He posited that traditional European "humanism" was only designed to benefit the white colonizers and thus maintain the white supremacy. To decolonize knowledge, Fanon stated that we must discard the Eurocentric standards and build our own understanding of the science, politics and other worlds affairs, thus giving voice to the marginalized. Sanghi's attempt at showing the importance of Chanakya's knowledge and expertise in economics could be a means to bring to limelight Indian epistemologies and at the same time, deny the dependence on western education. Like Chanakya, Misra exhibits actions that are completely foundational and not derived from the colonisers, and lastly, Chandni breaks the glass ceiling embodying the Indian female who is self -reliant, educated and bold enough to challenge male archetypes rooted in the west. This kind of representation becomes a means to decolonise the said norms and place the indigenous mythological narratives in the ancient and modern politics independently.

Conclusion

Ashwin Sanghi, a meticulous writer tries to weave together ancient archetypes and identities in a contemporary novel. Chanakya's Chant constantly draws parallel between the past and the present, the ancient and the modern, the traditional and the contemporary. The dual timelines share a collective

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memory of identity and reveal how identity is a social construct, always volatile and always in flux. The concept of identity cannot be studied as a discrete characteristic of a person; it is rather a complete framework of various strings that are pulled and designed according to times, geography and social structures. Sanghi highlights the struggles of identity and over identification, echoing theories of Jung and Hall. Different aspects of identity, thus happen to be changing with culture, memory and societal expectations. The story attempts to present identity as a cyclical concept; it resurfaces across history and underscores the politics of archetypes in every age; Sanghi's characters become an epitome of breaking western stereotypes, thus giving voice to the marginalized.

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