

Saudi Novel and Short Story: History, Realities and Prospects

الرواية والقصة القصيرة السعودية: التاريخ والواقع والأفاق

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الملخص

تركز هذه الدراسة على العمل الروائي السعودي، الرواية والقصة القصيرة، التي أثرت الأدب السعودي وساهمت في تشكيل مسار الأدب السعودي الحديث. دراسة هذه الأشكال الأدبية تقدم للقارئ معرفة عن دور الرواية والقصة القصيرة في تطوير معرفة الناس وتشكيل وعيهم الجماعي. المملكة العربية السعودية، الدولة الحديثة وسابقا نجد والحجاز، لديها ثقافة غنية ومتنوعة تمتد لثلاثة عصور مختلفة: ما قبل الإسلام، ما بعد الإسلام والعصر الحديث إلا أن الرواية والقصة القصيرة المكتوبة ظلتا غائبتين عن المشهد الأدبي حتى عام 1940 عندما تفاعل الطلاب السعوديون المبتعثون للدراسة في الخارج في الجامعات العربية في مصر ولبنان مع الكتاب في تلك الدول وشعروا بالحاجة إلى إعطاء الرواية والقصص الشفهية المتاحة إطارا كتابيا. في هذه الدراسة، يتناول الباحث تاريخ الرواية والقصة القصيرة السعودية خلال مراحل مختلفة من تطورها. أحد أهم المحاور التي تركز عليه هذه الدراسة هو الحواجز والمعوقات الاجتماعية والثقافية التي تعيق الكتاب سوى الرجال أو النساء وكيفية التغلب على هذه المعوقات. ومن بين العوائق التي تم التطرق إليها في هذه الدراسة: (1) العوامل الاجتماعية والثقافية، (2) إشراك المرأة في أغلب جوانب الحياة. ستفتح هذه الدراسة مجالاً خصبا لدراسة تطور الرواية السعودية الحديثة والقصة القصيرة، وستساعد الباحثين وطلاب الأدب على التعرف على تاريخ الرواية والقصة القصيرة السعودية والعوامل التي ساهمت في تنميتها لأن أي دراسة في تاريخ هذه الكتابات دون مناقشة هذه العوامل المؤثرة ستكون دراسة غير مكتملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الرواية والقصة القصيرة، السعودية، الروائيين، المجتمع، عوامل.

Abstract

This paper focuses on Saudi fiction, novel and short story, which has enriched Saudi literature and contributed in forming the course of modern Saudi literature. The study of this genre tells us the role of novel and short story in enlightening the people and forming their collective memory. Modern state of Saudi Arabia, earlier Najd and Hijaz, has a rich culture spanning three eras: pre-Islam, post-Islam and modern Saudi Arabia. However, written novel and short story remained non-existent till 1940s when Saudi scholars interacted with Arab universities in Egypt and Lebanon and felt the need for giving a physical manifestation to the available oral fiction. In this study, the author traces the history of Saudi short story and novel through the different stages of their development. The primary focus of the paper is to identify the social and cultural barriers that men and women writers faced and overcame. Among many, the identified barriers are: (i) the social and cultural factors and (ii) the female inclusion. This study initiates a much-needed area of investigation on the development of modern Saudi novel and short story and motivates scholars and students of literature to familiarize themselves further with the history of Saudi fiction and the factors that contributed to its development because an account of national writing without discussing these factors would be incomplete.

Keywords

Novel and short story, Saudi Arabia, novelists, factors, society.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is an Arab country with a long and diverse history. Islam is the main religion of the country and Arabic is the official language of all government offices. Saudi Arabian literature, spoken or written, represents a voluminous part of the national culture. Saudi Arabia occupies an important part in the region due to several economic, political and religious considerations; a fact that explains the diversity of themes and issues in its literature. These factors helped Saudi literature flourish and focus on national and regional issues. They also gave momentum to Saudi literature to investigate its peculiarities and influence the different literary genres in other Arabic-speaking countries. For centuries, Najd and Hijaz, the two major components of modern Saudi Arabia and its most important social and cultural components had long been a "commercial centre since the middle first millennium" (1). They had been serving as "crossroads for the spread of species between Africa and south-western Asia during the Miocene period" (1 p7). This old contact with the different regions resulted in literary influence in the two sides, mostly in story as it is stated in this excerpt: "merchants were part of a far-reaching trade network that extended to south Asia, the Mediterranean and Egypt...They served as a vital link between India and the Far East on one side, and Byzantium and the Mediterranean lands on the other" (2). These old interactions are, therefore, of a prime importance as they contributed to the exchange of genres and resulted in cultural diversity of nations.

Methodology, Aims and Research Questions

This study of the history of Saudi novel and short story makes reference to many writers whose contributions enriched Saudi literature in general. Based on various examples from Saudi writings, this study will use the analytical approach to various issues in texts as well as issues related to writers. It progresses through explaining how folk stories pass down from generation to another, how they function significantly as a vehicle to transmit nation's experience and how such genre is developed to have a written form. This study investigates the history and development of Saudi narratives, the influence of Arab writers on Saudi writers and the difficulties which faced Saudi short story writers and novelists. It also elaborates to find answers to questions related to history of Saudi fiction, how Saudi short story and novel took their written forms and the hindrances that have been facing Saudi writers.

The Oral Stage

The pre-unification era in the history of Saudi fiction, elements of oral fiction deliver their messages in different forms such as tales, legends, myths, fictional adventure and the short story with its many versions

like oral story "*Qissah*" and oral short story "*Ugsusah*". What happens to oral fiction forms when they pass from generation to another in the course of time and in the different regions within the country? These forms offer the motivation of story retelling and help the people in society express the aspirations of their society. According to the founders of oral studies, an area of literary studies called folklore, oral fiction is "the learning of the people" (3 p6), "the wisdom of the people, the people's knowledge" (4 p3), or more clearly, "the lore, erudition, knowledge or teaching of a folk" (5 p55). These primitive literary forms introduce the new generation to the heritage and help it experience the main values of the old generation. Though, oral stories are usually subject to modification due to the long ethnocentric and androcentric journey of retelling, they tend to be more malleable when they travel within the same society. Ben-Amos (1971), an eminent folklorist and professor of oral literature at the University of Pennsylvania, refers to three types of relations between the social context and oral story; "possession, representation, and creation or re-creation" which give the ability of survival to folklore. According to him folklore is an "old wine in new bottles" or a "new wine in old bottle" (3 p5).

The unification of the two regions, Hejaz and Nejd, into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, not only unified the cultures of the two geographical parts of the Arabian peninsula which had long been two separate entities, but also resulted in a literature of different themes and characteristics. Further, the event of merging two cultures flowered in building modern 'national identity' as a major common theme in most of the literary texts written in the period that followed the unification. Ranging from oral poetry, short story versions to novel, this research will mainly focus on the past and present of Saudi novel and short story; an anthology of the most common literary forms in modern Saudi literature. Whether exploring the new social structure or focusing on the new reality in the newly produced literary works of the unified country, building 'national identity' remains a constant theme in most literary genres. These literary forms led "literary historians of the period to refer to them with admiration and appreciation and to describe them as milestones in modern Saudi literature" (6 p9).

This study divides Saudi literature into two chronological stages. The first stage, the pre-oil discovery era, marked the rise of religious reforms which started with historic cooperation between Sheik Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab, the eminent religious reformer and Imam Mohammed bin Saud, the founder of the first Saudi state. The second stage began with the historic struggle of King Abdul-Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud to recover his ancestors' crown between 1921-1925 and the establishment of modern Saudi state: "there was not only a marked revival in the old inherited genres such as poetry, but also an innovative audacity and a desire to experiment with the new genres" (6 p3). This second era is the modern stage in the history

of Saudi literature which provides a clear context for understanding the present volumes of literary forms.

Novel: History, Formation and Transformation

On December 26, 2007 Benjamin Lytal writes in *The New York Sun* that modern Saudi fiction has "proven that Saudi Arabia is, for the novel, a fertile ground" in which we observe "[t]he close juxtaposition of ancient and modern in Saudi Arabia" (2007). The writer continues: "Saudi Arabia has experienced the kind of bourgeois population density that makes for great novels only recently" (7). Saudi novel as a literary genre remained absent from literary realm till 1950s when Saudi diplomats, scholars and writers of short story, *Qissah*, travelled to different countries and got exposed to this genre. Among all literary genres, novel has dominated modern Saudi literary scene and taken the position of short story that remained in an unchallenged supremacy position for centuries. In spite of the short history of this genre in a conservative society, Saudi novelists succeed in taking novel to a significant position representing issues ranging from local issues such as unemployment, corruption and religiosity to international issues such as racism and the western attitudes toward Arabs:

... the number of Saudi novels written and published in the twentieth century is more than 200...the Arabic reading public and the critics start to recognize, read and follow the works of Saudi novelists like Abdurrahman Munif, Hamid Daminhuri, Ibrahim Al-Nasir, Hamza Boqari, Abdulaziz Al-Mishri, Gazi Al-Gosaibi, Turki Al-Hamad, Abdo Khal, Yousef Al-Mohaimeed, Leila Al-Johani, Rajaa Alem and Rajaa AlSanea...The authors struggle to break the walls confining them and to open windows to the world of creativity and universality (8 p55).

The exposure to the world of regional literature especially the Egyptian and the Lebanese novels helps the authors achieve creativity and universality by broadening their subject matter and themes. Prominent Saudi novelists of this first generation have struggled to maintain the balance between their social and culture bonds that hinder their openness and the new consciousness they acquired abroad. Therefore, their interest in taking this genre to advanced level is achieved through displaying some regional prevalent cultural concerns, innovative approaches and thematic elements. Creation of universality in 'human discourse', according to Aristotle, the founding father of literary theory, is an important target of literary work. Aristotle defines universality as "whatever belongs 'to all' and 'in itself' and as itself" in which texts are "signs of mental experience" and "these experiences are likeness of -

actual things - are also the same" (9 p47). Similarly, the German philosopher Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831), who developed modern European idealism, articulates many dualisms, for instance, 'mind and nature,' 'subject and object' and 'needs and means'. Hegel emphasizes the universality of human needs reflected in literary creation:

When needs and means become abstract in quality, abstraction is also a character of the reciprocal relation of individuals to one another. This abstract character, universality, is the character of being recognized and is the moment which makes things concrete, i.e. social, the isolated and abstract needs and their ways and means of satisfaction. (10 p78).

Ghazi Al Gosaibi, a well-noted diplomat and novelist, is one of the founders of Saudi novel. He was one of the best-selling writers in the Middle East who published more than 60 novels. In an article titled "*Ghazi al-Gosaibi obituary*" which was published in *The Guardian* on 24 August 2010, Al Gosaibi is described as a man who "was popular in the west" and who wrote on "highly symbolic issue" and "attacked Islamist militants in his many books of non-fiction, his novels and poetry" (11). He is featured by *The Majalla* as the "Godfather of renovation" (12 p29). In most of his novels, Al Gosaibi stands close to common man and "openly denounces the Western-educated Arab elites who feel superior to the simple man rather than using their training to improve the situation in their home countries" (13). His novels focus on issues of the Arab states, love, Arab alienation and taboos. The magnum opus of his work is his novel *Freedom Apartment* (1994) which is translated into many languages including English by Kegan-Paul and Leslie McLoughlin in 1996. *Freedom Apartment* is coloured by Al Gosaibi's experience in Egypt where he earned his degree in law from the University of Cairo in 1961. It reflects the influence of Egyptian novel on his themes at that specific period.

Women Novelists

While discussing Saudi women's novel, it is important to refer to the role of women's education abroad which developed not only literary figures, but also provided social critique and support for women's rights of entry into workforce. The impact on Saudi students living in Egypt and Lebanon has been immense in the literary advancement of Saudi novel and resulted in a significant contribution to the genre. Women novelists' contribution accounts for substantial amounts of issues that have facilitated the formation of new literary generation of women novelists like Raja'a Alem who lived in Paris, Huda al-Rashid who was born in Cairo and got her education in Beirut and Amal Shata who graduated from Cairo University. This first generation introduces their unique themes which are not the target of men novelist: "they did not limit their narratives to reform and social change, but focused on writing as a task that offered the creative and liberating spaces" (14 p400).

Saudi female writers did not limit themselves to the common social and cultural issues explored by male writers, but introduced a provocative representation of women's unemployment, household, gender and sexuality. In their writing, they criticize issues related to the status and plight of women in society:

...the woman in these novels does not choose the conflictual and agitated relationship with the man, the adventurous youth, the dominating father, or the oppressive husband, but on the contrary...she has a new consciousness about herself and her rights, and she acts accordingly (14 p402).

Alem's narrative is also a challenging cultural phenomenon against masculinity and gender discrimination. It enriches the female life with the concepts of resistance, equality and social justice: "The narrative voice in Alem's fiction is one which resists social authority...Her narrative discourse seeks to resist female marginalization and viewing woman as an invisible shadow" (15 p67). Some critics regard Saudi female novel of the period 1980-2000 as being that "of the revolt of novel" in which female novelists "broke the taboos of sex, religion and society during that time, addressing these themes without reservation" (16 p283). In these novels, the issue of empowerment of woman has been highly important for writers who struggle to demolish obstacles standing in the way of female emancipation and participation. According to Fatima Alotaibi: "...Alem's females are authoritative voices, contrary to the archetype in female narration. When they appear weak, they utilize their weakness to impose their strength later on" (16 p67). Within a broader feminist framework, Saudi feminists manage to single out the major issues considered by the western feminists as the potent symbols of woman's subjugation in Islamic society and succeed in establishing themselves as an important part of a modernizing class.

Rajaa Alem represents the spirit of the first generation of female novelists and is known for her rational thinking in dealing with the restrictive social and cultural bonds in her society. Alem was born in Mecca and got her degree in English literature. She lives in Paris. Alem has published more than fifteen novels in Arabic, English and German. She is the first Saudi woman to receive the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction for her novel *The Doves' Necklace* in 2011. Alem defines herself a woman who belongs "to a stream of thinking rather than a piece of land, to a current that runs everywhere. My country is all over the globe...I felt I belonged, not to the ceremonies performed by thousands of bodies but to a spirit that was reaching out to me alone" (17). Alem always seeks to achieve both genuine universal representation in which human concerns overcome artificial barriers in society and universality of the author in which she escapes cultural bonds and language barriers. According to her, one of her techniques toward universality is the use of widely read language:

I find myself looking for new ways to communicate, for other languages, and English was the first one that came to hand...'Coming out' in another language is a way of shedding inhibitions. All the things that made me feel ashamed lost their morbid grip on me and became acceptable. I've never read any of my books published in Arabic; it makes me feel completely naked. Reading them in another language, though, I feel alive in a poetic way (17).

From the early 2000s Saudi literature witnessed a noted surge in women's novel. Further, a significant concern is seen among the western publishers whose interest in Saudi women's novel does not only go beyond literary consideration but also goes to reach the socio-political context of the texts: "Publishers are keen to get their hands on Saudi writing: if there is a single society that contemporary US readers see as encapsulating the mystery of the "Islamic Orient," it is Saudi Arabia (18 p. 160). Rajaa Alsanea *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), Samar al-Muqrin's *Nisa' al-Munkar* (2008) and Warda Abd al-Malik's *Al-Awba* (2008) are examples of this spirit. One of the common themes in these works is the critique of social traditions from a similar individualized perspective of female life. Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al-Riyadh*) is an example of post 9/11 spirit of Saudi novel. According to many critics of Saudi novel, *Girls of Riyadh* is an orientalist text in which the author takes the role of the orientalist to examine the orientals. Its success is attributed to the narrative techniques through which the author provides an insight into the closed world of women in Saudi Arabia resulting in a striking literary output:

Male doctors taught female medical students and male students were allowed to examine female patients, but it was not allowed for male and female students to share a classroom or a lounge. Contact with the opposite sex would never go beyond some coincidental and transit encounter in breaks (19 p65).

On July 23, 2007 Andrew Hammond writes in *REUTERS* that "Saudi Arabia has seen a literary explosion in the last two years after the success of "Girls of Riyadh", a taboo-breaking novel that this month went on sale worldwide in English" (19). According to him, Saudi novel of this period has "become a window to the Arab world" which provides texts navigating "a minefield of rules and taboos on sex, marriage and social caste" (19 p2). Saudi novel, according to critics, is a true account of the world of Saudi women: her private life, her relation with man, her search for love and her conflict with the social barriers: "Apparently, all men were the same. It was like God had given them different faces just so that women would be able to tell them apart" (19 p120). Alsanea's use of emails as a narrative technique serves her purpose of enabling women to confront men and reject their miserable life. It is through fifty emails, the whole narration in the novel, female characters manage to give a rigorous protest against patriarchy, accuse the male of subjugation and reject marginalization.

One of the fundamental aspects of *Girls of Riyadh* is also a critique of the social life of the idle women living in a globalized world and interacting with its media, technology and neoliberal market. The main characters are four young girls Gamrah, Mashaal, Lameer, and Sadeem living a luxurious life and travelling between Riyadh, London, Chicago, and San Francisco searching for latest fashions. Characters' behavior represents a conflict between the secularist and the religious perspectives in a different conflictual attire; it is introduced as a conflict between modernity and tradition and between the old and the new interpretations religion. These conflicts are seen as a dispute between the secularist way of life and religiosity of individual as well as the collective life of women.

Short story

In pre-modern state, "unrecorded traditions like oral poetry, tales, music, dance, magic, legends, myths, omens, superstitions, fictional adventure" were the dominant forms of literature for centuries (20). In addition to the communicative role of these unrecorded forms of literature in the nomadic society, these literary elements played an important role in entertaining the society, refining the people's psyches, providing spiritual edification and broadening knowledge; they remained unchallenged by written prose for centuries. The unification of the two regions of Najd and Hijaz into one state in 1932 has not only unified two desperate ethnic groups which remained unproductive for centuries but has also led to the development of human and growth of literature. Among the literary genres that flourished in the unified state was the short story whose maturity was hindered by several constraints and contradictions such as 'modernity and tradition' and 'religiosity and freedom'. Examining the origin of the written short story in post-unification Saudi Arabia, Al-Sebail and Calderbank write "we find that there is a direct link between it and the presence of the press. It was mainly the influence of the press that brought about the evolution of the short story" (22pxii). According to Talaat Alsayed (1990) "Saudi story in its present form and its modern style and characteristics had not been in Saudi literary scene before the second world war" (21 p11-12). The available sources on history of Saudi short story confirm that the earliest form of the written short story in the country took the form of articles in newspapers. At this early stage, short story dealt with social issues and expressed the national desire to bring social and economic reforms. For example, press, particularly newspaper, was the only platform for writers like Ahmed Abdul-ghafour who published his first anthology titled *I Want to See God* in 1946. This genre was recognized as a representative of Saudi writing until the 1960s when Saudi scholarship holders became familiar with other genres in Arab countries. In their new world of written fiction, Saudi writers succeeded in presenting the enigmatic social realities and thrive to provide a remarkable insight for the future of this genre. This fiction genre, did not, therefore, have remotely literary history. It was only at the end of the 1940 that short

story got its artistic form holding its position in the world of fiction with its own narrative form and artistic attire:

The short story emerged in Saudi Arabia in the 1940s in response to Saudi society's need for reform, not as art form. However, it was in the 1960s that the form reached maturity through the interaction between Saudi short story writers and Arab writers with more experience of the form. Saudi writers came into direct contact with other Arab writers when they travelled to Arab countries for academic purposes, but there was also indirect interaction through translation of international writers that were published in local newspapers (21 pxiii).

In *Contemporary Saudi writers of fiction* (1980), Mark Tyler Day says that Saudi written fiction has become the representative of Saudi modern literature (22). Short story or the *Qisah*, the main form of fiction that was familiar in Saudi literature, was an effective platform for representing the different aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. Short story has multiple names which refer to the same genre with the same structure and message such as *Qisah*, *Qisah Qasirah*, *Qisah Saghira*, *Ugsusah*...etc. At this formative stage in its history, Saudi short story experiences a dramatic manifestation of the rapid developments that were sweeping not only through the Saudi social and cultural life, but also through literary forms in many Arab countries who got their independence at this particular period. These factors together "have created a new cultural and literary environment towards which readers cannot stay neutral, or remain untouched or impartial about what they read. The popularity of these works has also changed the nature of the audience" (12 p392). Abdul Quddus Al-Ansari writes in *al-Kitab al-Fiddi* (1960) encouraging the story writers: "I am Interested in the story for two reasons: The story represents one of the highest forms of literature; and our literature needs to follow the progress made throughout the world in this field" (23 p29). According to Al-Ansari the first generation of Saudi short story writers dealt with a number of social problems of their time and encouraged other writers who were aware of short story, but were not interested in writing it. Ahmad M. Jamal simplifies short story to young Saudi writers in the following lines:

In our view the story is rather a tale that has a beginning and an end, contains a comprehensible allegory and a tangible lesson. This is the object of the demands of the literary school that says that Art is for Life. The embellishment, exaggeration, prolixity and imaginative fabrication that are required by the literary school that says that Art is for Art are not natural to one who writes In order to bring about intelligible reforms (24 p45).

One of the social functions of the early Saudi fiction had been firstly to entertain and secondly to educate the readers; this encompasses all forms of written fiction deviated from genre which, of course, includes different forms of the recorded versions of short story. Short

story plays an important role in broadening knowledge, refining people's psyches, reforming personalities and creating spiritual edification and entertainment. Referring to the wide range of short story functions on national and regional levels, William R. Bascom (1953) believes that short story "serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions and to play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another" (23 p284). The existence of the physical manifestation of short story in the unified country's literature, the text, is what distinguishes it from the oral stories which prevailed in Najd and Hijaz before. Ong (1982) differentiates between the two types in a broader way by referring to oral story as "Oral structures" that "often look to pragmatics" while written story as "[c]hirographic structures look more to syntactic":

Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar (27 p37).

Many issues are more prevalent in modern Saudi short story than before, with many more short story writers than novelists. The development of the mature short story in Saudi Arabia owes much to authors who are widely acclaimed as genius writers and publish hundreds of short stories and critical work too. Khaled Al-Yousef, who was born in 1958 in Riyadh and specialized in library and information science, is an example. Al-Yousef has published seven collections of short stories. Among his famous works are *A Woman That Never Sleeps* (1999) and *He Holds Her Hand and Sings* (2010). In most of his stories, woman occupies a considerable space as he himself writes: "woman is everywhere in my stories. To me, woman is the beloved, kind wife, the passionate mother and the little girl. She is a story that has no end in my world. She is the center of the event and the power that pushes me to write. She is the secrete behind literary success (27). Abdullah Al-Safar who was born in 1960 in Al-Ahsa is one of the founders of modern Saudi short story. He writes short stories, poetry and literary criticism. He has published several collections of short stories and two books of literary criticism. The two writers' approaches in representing modern issues in short story create a new literary environment in which readers are touched and do not only feel that they are the subjects but also a part of the audience. In addition to Saudi readers, these short stories have attracted many Arab readers who read these texts for both enjoyment and critical assessment and compare them with the more mature literature in the region.

Conclusion

Although Saudi fiction has faced several social and cultural challenges in all the stages of its development,

it succeeded in penetrating these milieus and established a solid ground that helped it find its way to the readers in the country and the region. In a very short time in the history of Saudi written literature, novel and short story have secured the front part of the Saudi literary scene and occupied a remarkable place among the senior Arab narrative forms. Both novel and short story writers in Saudi Arabia have produced a new generation of readers and literary critics who, too, contributed significantly to the success of this genre through understanding the writers' criticisms and compromising with them. While discussing women's writing in Saudi Arabia, it is important to refer to the role of education, which resulted in literary figures and literary reformers among women who adopted the themes of education, social justice and gender discrimination in their writings. These writers have been the corner stone in building the personality of Saudi woman and facilitating her inclusion to work place. Modern writers did not limit their writings to reform the society and the condition of the people, but also focused on achieving creativity that delivers the texts' messages easily and clearly. In addition to the impact of world fiction, these writers are inspired by the local influence of multicultural cosmopolitan cities in which the life of residents has contributed significantly to the genre and offered the writers an opportunity to present a provocative characterization of equality and race.

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