



Gender and Resistance: Exploring Violent and Non-Violent Forms of Women's Agency in Contemporary Indian Fiction

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Abstract— Contemporary Indian fiction increasingly represents women as active subjects who negotiate, challenge, and resist patriarchal structures rather than merely experiencing them as passive victims. This paper examines women's agency through violent and non-violent forms of resistance in selected contemporary Indian fictional works. It argues that resistance extends beyond physical confrontation and includes silence, refusal, education, economic independence, mobility, storytelling, writing, bodily autonomy, sexual self-determination, and collective solidarity. Through a qualitative and comparative reading of selected works by Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Bama, Meena Kandasamy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Megha Majumdar, the study investigates how women negotiate gendered power within family, marriage, caste, class, sexuality, and institutional structures. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminism, theories of agency, intersectionality, and resistance, the paper conceptualises violent and non-violent resistance as interconnected rather than mutually exclusive forms of agency. It demonstrates that the meaning and consequences of women's resistance are shaped by their social and economic locations. The study concludes that contemporary Indian fiction expands the understanding of female agency by presenting resistance as a continuum of negotiation, refusal, survival, self-expression, and direct confrontation. Such representations also demonstrate that female subjectivity is produced through women's struggles to reclaim voice, body, mobility, identity, and interpretive authority.



Keywords— Gender, Feminism, Women's Agency, Women's Resistance, Violent Resistance, Non-Violent Resistance, Patriarchal Structures, Female Subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in Indian literature has undergone substantial transformation alongside changes in Indian social, cultural, political, and economic life. Earlier representations frequently positioned women within normative roles of daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood,

sacrifice, and domesticity. Contemporary Indian fiction increasingly presents women as subjects who question, negotiate, and resist the structures through which their identities are defined. This transformation is significant because gender inequality operates through interconnected institutions, including family, marriage, caste, religion,

sexuality, education, property, labour, and cultural expectations.

Feminist literary criticism has established that literature not only reflects social structures but also participates in constructing and contesting gendered meanings. Beauvoir's conceptualisation of woman as the socially produced "Other" provides a foundation for understanding femininity as a cultural and social construction [1]. Butler subsequently developed this understanding through the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender identities are continually constituted through repeated social practices and norms [2]. These approaches are particularly relevant to contemporary Indian fiction, where women frequently challenge the behaviours and identities expected of them. The Indian context, however, requires attention to social and historical specificity. Mohanty cautions against treating women of the Global South as a homogeneous category [3]. Indian feminist scholarship similarly demonstrates that women's experiences are shaped by caste, class, religion, labour, sexuality, and region. Consequently, women's agency must be examined in relation to the particular structures within which different women live. Agency does not necessarily mean complete freedom from oppression. Kabeer defines agency in relation to the ability to make choices and pursue meaningful goals within particular structural conditions [4]. Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargains further demonstrates that women may negotiate with patriarchal structures rather than simply accept or reject them [5]. This perspective is especially useful in analysing Indian fiction, where female characters frequently employ strategic negotiation within family and community structures. The concept of resistance must similarly be expanded. Foucault's understanding of power as dispersed through social relations, institutions, discourse, and everyday practices suggests that resistance can emerge at multiple levels [6]. A woman may resist through direct confrontation, but she may also resist through education, employment, silence, refusal, mobility, writing, or control over her body. Such actions may appear ordinary but can disrupt the norms through which patriarchal power is reproduced.

This paper examines these diverse forms of resistance in selected contemporary Indian fiction. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Bama's *Sangati*, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, and Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* provides a diverse corpus through which women's agency can be examined across different social contexts. The paper argues that violent and non-violent resistance should be understood as interconnected points on a continuum rather than as

mutually exclusive categories. Resistance may begin with silence or negotiation and develop into refusal, economic independence, mobility, legal action, or direct confrontation. Its form and consequences depend upon caste, class, sexuality, family, economic position, and institutional power. The study therefore examines resistance not simply as opposition to patriarchy but as a process through which female subjectivity is constructed.

II. RESEARCH GAP

Existing scholarship on Indian women's writing has produced substantial discussions of patriarchy, domesticity, marriage, sexuality, caste, class, identity, trauma, and female subjectivity. Nevertheless, resistance is often interpreted primarily through visible acts of rebellion or direct opposition. Less attention has been given to the relationship between apparently ordinary practices and larger transformations in women's subjectivity.

A further gap lies in the tendency to separate different forms of resistance. Physical confrontation, political protest, and explicit rebellion are frequently treated as resistance, while education, employment, mobility, writing, silence, refusal, and emotional withdrawal may receive less analytical attention. This creates a restricted understanding of agency because women frequently negotiate patriarchal structures through practices that do not resemble conventional forms of protest.

The present study therefore brings violent and non-violent resistance into a common analytical framework. Rather than assuming that these forms represent two completely separate categories, the study examines how they may exist along a continuum. A woman's resistance may develop progressively from accommodation to negotiation, from negotiation to refusal, and from refusal to direct confrontation.

The study also addresses the need for greater intersectional attention. Gender does not operate independently of caste, class, religion, sexuality, economic status, or social location. The selected texts demonstrate that women's opportunities for resistance are unevenly distributed. Consequently, the study considers women's agency within the particular historical, social, cultural, and economic structures represented in the fiction.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study has the following objectives:

1. To comparatively analyse how contemporary Indian fiction constructs women's voices as a mode of narrative agency.

2. To examine forms of feminist resistance, including everyday, intergenerational and relational forms, represented in the selected novels.
3. To interrogate how historical and postcolonial structures shape women's identities and possibilities of resistance.
4. To foreground the intersectional workings of caste, class, religion, sexuality, age, economic position, and cultural location.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance of these literary representations for understanding women's agency and feminist resistance in twenty-first-century India.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework combines feminist theory, postcolonial feminism, theories of agency, intersectionality, and theories of power and resistance. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides an important starting point for understanding the social construction of womanhood [1]. Butler's theory of gender performativity extends this framework by emphasising the repeated practices through which gender norms become socially established [2]. Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how literary characters challenge the identities assigned to them. Foucault's theory of power is significant because patriarchal power cannot be reduced to individual male domination [6]. Power operates through social relationships, institutions, cultural norms, language, and forms of knowledge. Resistance therefore emerges within these relationships rather than outside them. This perspective allows women's everyday actions to be considered forms of agency even when they do not resemble conventional political protest. Kabeer's understanding of agency emphasises the relationship between resources, choice, and action [4]. Education, employment, financial independence, and social networks can expand the choices available to women. Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargains adds another dimension by showing that women may strategically conform to some expectations while challenging others [5]. Such negotiation is particularly visible in narratives concerning marriage, family, education, and sexuality. Postcolonial feminism challenges universalised accounts of women's oppression. Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship emphasises the need to locate women's experiences within specific histories and social structures [3]. In the Indian context, Tharu and Lalita's documentation of women's writing demonstrates the diversity of women's literary traditions [7], while Chakravarti's work highlights the relationship between caste and gender in Indian social

structures [8]. Intersectionality provides an additional framework for examining these relationships. Crenshaw's concept demonstrates that systems such as gender, race, and class interact rather than function independently [9]. Applied to Indian women's fiction, the concept helps reveal how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, sexuality, and economic position. Spivak's discussion of the subaltern is also important because it raises questions concerning representation and the authority to speak [11]. Women's writing can therefore be understood as an attempt to reclaim narrative authority. Rege's work on Dalit women's testimonios similarly foregrounds marginalised women's experiences as sources of knowledge and resistance [13].

Indian feminist scholarship has also challenged the separation between domestic and public spheres. Menon's work on gender and politics demonstrates the relationship between women's everyday lives and broader structures of political power [10]. Bhasin's analysis of patriarchy further emphasises the institutional and cultural dimensions of gender inequality [12]. hooks' intersectional feminist perspective similarly stresses the importance of understanding gender alongside other structures of domination [15]. The existing scholarship thus provides substantial theoretical resources for analysing women's agency. However, the present study brings together violent and non-violent forms of resistance in a single comparative framework. It proposes that resistance should be understood as a continuum ranging from everyday acts of negotiation and refusal to direct physical confrontation.

V. WOMEN'S AGENCY AND PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

Contemporary Indian fiction frequently represents patriarchy as embedded in ordinary social institutions. Family, marriage, caste, economic dependency, and cultural expectations regulate women's identities and choices. Feminist scholarship has challenged the distinction between private and public life by demonstrating that domestic relationships are shaped by wider structures of gendered power [10]. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* offers a significant representation of domestic patriarchy through Jaya [16]. Her identity is shaped by the expectations associated with being a wife and mother, while her intellectual and emotional desires remain restricted. The silence indicated by the novel's title represents both social conditioning and the difficulty of developing an autonomous voice. Jaya's movement toward self-narration consequently becomes an important form of agency. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* similarly explores the conflict between female aspirations and patriarchal expectations

[17]. Virmati's desire for education and independence challenges a social order that defines women's futures largely through marriage and domesticity. Her experience, however, demonstrates that resistance does not necessarily lead to uncomplicated liberation. Education and independence create new possibilities but also generate guilt, conflict, social judgement, and emotional consequences. In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, the railway compartment becomes a space in which women from different social backgrounds share their experiences [18]. Physical movement creates temporary distance from conventional social surveillance and allows women to reconsider their identities. Mobility thus becomes both a literal and symbolic form of resistance. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* demonstrates the intersection of gender and caste through Ammu's experience [19]. Her relationship with Velutha challenges both patriarchal and caste-based boundaries. The consequences of this transgression reveal that women's oppression cannot always be separated from other structures of hierarchy. Bama's *Sangati* extends this intersectional perspective by focusing on Dalit women's experiences [20]. Gendered exploitation is represented alongside caste discrimination, economic marginalisation, and labour exploitation. Resistance consequently becomes collective as women share experiences and develop a consciousness of common oppression. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* presents intimate domination through the representation of emotional, intellectual, sexual, and physical control [21]. The recovery of narrative authority becomes central to the woman's resistance. Writing enables her to reconstruct an experience in which another person attempted to control her identity. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* provides another form of resistance through the rewriting of epic narrative from a woman's perspective [22]. Reimagining Draupadi's story challenges traditionally male-centred interpretive authority and gives the female subject greater narrative agency. Majumdar's *A Burning* extends the discussion beyond domestic structures to include political and institutional power [23]. The novel demonstrates how gender, class, religion, and political vulnerability can interact to shape the possibilities available to a woman. These texts demonstrate that patriarchal structures operate at multiple levels. Women's agency consequently takes multiple forms, including education, employment, mobility, self-expression, bodily autonomy, storytelling, negotiation, and confrontation.

VI. VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT FORMS OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Non-violent resistance constitutes one of the most significant forms of agency represented in contemporary Indian fiction. Silence, refusal, education, employment, mobility, writing, storytelling, and economic independence may appear less dramatic than physical rebellion, but they can challenge the assumptions through which patriarchal power is reproduced.

Silence occupies an especially complex position. It may indicate fear or exclusion from speech, but it can also become strategic. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's movement from silence toward narration illustrates the relationship between voice and agency [16]. Her ability to interpret her own experience challenges the identities imposed upon her writing similarly functions as resistance. Spivak's discussion of the subaltern demonstrates the difficulties marginalised subjects encounter when dominant structures control representation [11]. When women narrate their own experiences, they challenge the authority of those who have historically spoken for them. Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* provides a particularly strong example of narrative reclamation [21]. Education is another significant form of non-violent resistance. Virmati's educational aspirations in *Difficult Daughters* challenge the expectation that female life should be organised around marriage and domesticity [17]. Education increases access to knowledge and potentially expands the range of choices available to women. Kabeer's theory of agency is relevant because resources influence the ability to make meaningful choices [4]. Economic independence similarly alters women's relationship with patriarchal authority. Employment can reduce economic dependence and increase decision-making capacity. However, contemporary fiction also demonstrates that employment does not eliminate domestic expectations or gender inequality. Agency remains shaped by the continued presence of social and institutional constraints. Mobility is another important form of resistance. In *Ladies Coupé*, travelling provides women with a temporary space for reflection and self-expression [18]. The movement through physical space parallels movement toward psychological independence.

Bodily autonomy and sexual agency represent another dimension of resistance. Ammu's experience in *The God of Small Things* demonstrates how female sexuality becomes regulated through both patriarchal and caste-based structures [19]. Her desire challenges social expectations concerning marriage, respectability, and caste boundaries. Violent resistance appears in fiction particularly in relation to domestic and intimate violence. Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* demonstrates the extent to which patriarchal

domination may operate through physical, emotional, intellectual, and sexual control [21]. Direct confrontation may become significant when other avenues of negotiation have failed. Nevertheless, the texts do not present violence as an uncomplicated form of liberation. Counter-violence may involve physical danger, social stigma, legal consequences, and further vulnerability. The distinction between violent and non-violent resistance should therefore be understood as analytical rather than absolute. A woman may move from negotiation to refusal, from refusal to economic independence, and from independence to leaving an oppressive relationship. Conversely, direct confrontation may emerge after prolonged attempts to negotiate. Resistance consequently exists along a continuum. This continuum is particularly useful because it avoids privileging spectacular rebellion over everyday acts of agency. A woman's decision to obtain education, earn independently, reject an imposed marriage, leave an abusive relationship, or write about her experience can fundamentally challenge patriarchal expectations without involving physical violence.

VII. COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE, INSTITUTIONAL POWER, AND THE LIMITS OF AGENCY

A third major finding is that women's resistance is not always individual. Several selected works demonstrate that individual agency becomes stronger when experiences are shared and transformed into collective knowledge. Bama's *Sangati* is particularly important in this respect. The experiences of Dalit women are not presented as isolated incidents but as interconnected experiences shaped by caste, gender, labour, poverty, and social hierarchy. The collective dimension of women's experiences allows individual suffering to become social knowledge. Collective narration challenges the isolation that often strengthens patriarchal authority. When women recognise similarities between their experiences, they can identify structures rather than interpret oppression merely as individual failure.

This collective dimension also expands the meaning of resistance. Resistance does not always require a single heroic woman confronting an identifiable oppressor. It can emerge through conversation, storytelling, shared knowledge, community support, and collective consciousness.

The institutional dimension becomes especially visible in *A Burning*. The novel moves beyond the family and demonstrates how women can encounter structures of political, religious, economic, and institutional power. The possibilities available to an individual are influenced by forces larger than personal relationships. This observation

complicates simplistic interpretations of empowerment. Even a determined individual may possess limited capacity when institutional structures operate against her. Legal, political, economic, and social systems can either facilitate or restrict agency. The selected fiction therefore reveals three levels of resistance: individual, relational, and institutional. Individual resistance involves personal decisions and actions. Relational resistance concerns negotiations within family, marriage, friendship, and community. Institutional resistance concerns structures such as caste, political systems, economic arrangements, and social organisations.

These levels overlap. A woman may begin with an individual decision but encounter institutional consequences. A personal relationship may be shaped by caste or economic structures. Collective resistance may emerge from repeated individual experiences. The concept of agency must consequently include its limits. The novels do not suggest that women can simply choose freedom whenever they wish. Instead, they demonstrate that agency is enabled and constrained by available resources, social location, knowledge, relationships, and institutional conditions. This finding is particularly important for an intersectional feminist reading. Women do not have identical access to resistance. Class privilege may provide educational opportunities, financial resources, or mobility. Caste privilege or disadvantage may determine the social consequences of particular relationships. Religious identity may influence political vulnerability. Economic dependence may restrict the possibility of leaving an oppressive household. Resistance therefore needs to be understood relationally. What appears to be a small decision in one context may constitute a significant act of resistance in another.

VIII. FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Women's resistance is closely connected with the construction of female subjectivity. A woman becomes a subject when she gains the capacity to interpret herself rather than being defined exclusively by patriarchal expectations. Contemporary Indian fiction frequently represents this process as gradual and contradictory. Jaya's movement toward self-expression in *That Long Silence* illustrates the relationship between narration and subjectivity [16]. Virmati's pursuit of education in *Difficult Daughters* similarly represents an attempt to construct an identity beyond conventional domestic roles [17]. In both texts, agency develops through an encounter with social expectations rather than through complete separation from

them. Intersectionality is essential to understanding this process. Gender interacts with caste, class, sexuality, religion, and economic status [9]. Bama's *Sangati* demonstrates that Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood through gender alone [20]. Their resistance emerges within conditions shaped simultaneously by caste discrimination, poverty, labour exploitation, and patriarchal authority. Roy's *The God of Small Things* similarly demonstrates the interaction between caste and gender [19]. Ammu's experience reveals how a woman's sexuality can become a site at which caste and patriarchal authority intersect. Majumdar's *A Burning* extends the analysis to class, religion, gender, and political institutions [23]. The concept of female subjectivity is also connected to bodily autonomy. Patriarchal systems regulate women's bodies through marriage, sexuality, reproduction, mobility, and moral expectations. Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how these expectations become normalised through repeated social practices [2]. When women challenge such expectations, they disrupt the identities imposed upon them. Writing provides another significant mechanism of subject formation. When women narrate their experiences, they reclaim interpretive authority. This becomes especially important in narratives of trauma, where the ability to describe an experience can challenge the power of those who attempted to silence or control the woman.

Collective solidarity also contributes to resistance. In *Sangati*, women's shared experiences transform individual suffering into collective knowledge [20]. Such solidarity challenges isolation and allows women to recognise common patterns of oppression. hooks' feminist theory emphasises the importance of understanding interconnected structures of domination and the need for collective feminist consciousness [15]. The selected texts therefore demonstrate that agency is not simply individual action. It can be relational, collective, strategic, and constrained. Women negotiate patriarchal structures while simultaneously challenging them. Their resistance may involve speech, silence, education, employment, mobility, sexuality, writing, solidarity, or direct confrontation. The concept of agency within constraint is particularly important. Kabeer's framework demonstrates that agency exists within unequal distributions of resources [4], while Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargains shows how women strategically negotiate restrictive structures [5]. Contemporary Indian fiction reflects this complexity by presenting women whose choices remain limited but whose actions nevertheless produce meaningful changes in their identities and relationships.

IX. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and comparative textual methodology. The selected novels are examined through close reading, with particular attention to narrative voice, characterisation, speech and silence, bodily autonomy, mobility, education, economic independence, domestic relationships, caste, class, sexuality, religion, and institutional power. The analysis focuses on how resistance is represented rather than attempting to quantify the frequency of particular forms of resistance. Repeated close reading identifies moments in which female characters negotiate, challenge, refuse, reinterpret, withdraw from, or directly confront patriarchal structures. The corpus consists of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Bama's *Sangati*, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, and Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*. The selection is purposive because these works provide different representations of women's experience across domestic, educational, caste, economic, sexual, political, and institutional contexts. The comparative approach enables the study to identify both recurring patterns and differences among representations of resistance. The study is interpretive and does not claim statistical generalisation. It does not include audience-reception data or empirical interviews. Its conclusions are therefore grounded in textual analysis and theoretical interpretation.

X. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to a selected corpus of contemporary Indian fiction in English and therefore cannot represent the entire field of Indian women's writing. The purposive selection of texts privileges works in which questions of gender, agency, identity, and resistance are particularly visible. The interpretation of literary texts also involves a degree of analytical subjectivity. Different readers may identify different meanings in silence, resistance, sexuality, or narrative voice. The study therefore avoids claiming that any single interpretation exhausts the meaning of the selected works. Another limitation is the absence of reader-response and reception data. The study analyses literary representation rather than measuring how actual readers respond to these representations. Future research can address these limitations through broader corpora, multilingual texts, comparative regional studies, and empirical reception research.

XI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that contemporary Indian fiction presents women's resistance as a complex and multidimensional process. The selected texts move beyond the representation of women solely as passive victims and instead depict them as subjects who negotiate, question, refuse, reinterpret, and confront patriarchal structures. The distinction between violent and non-violent resistance is useful but should not be understood as a rigid binary. Non-violent resistance may take the form of education, employment, writing, silence, refusal, mobility, economic independence, sexual autonomy, or narrative self-representation. These actions may appear ordinary, yet they can challenge the social norms that sustain patriarchal power. Violent resistance occupies a more confrontational position. It is generally represented in relation to situations involving severe domestic, sexual, or institutional domination. Contemporary fiction demonstrates, however, that direct confrontation may produce significant risks and consequences. Violence therefore cannot be treated as an uncomplicated route to liberation. Its significance lies in the conditions from which it emerges and the power relations it attempts to challenge.

The study also demonstrates that agency is contextual. Women's capacity to resist depends upon resources, social location, family structures, economic circumstances, and institutional support. A woman's caste and class position can substantially influence the forms of resistance available to her. Bama's *Sangati*, Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Majumdar's *A Burning* make this particularly evident [19, 20, 23]. The concept of intersectionality therefore remains central. Gender cannot be separated from caste, class, sexuality, religion, or economic status. Resistance takes different forms because women occupy different social locations. A strategy available to an educated middle-class woman may not be available to a poor or socially marginalised woman. The paper consequently proposes a continuum model of women's resistance. At one end are relatively subtle practices such as silence, negotiation, education, writing, refusal, and economic independence. At the other are direct confrontation and physical resistance. Between these poles are numerous hybrid forms through which women negotiate, withdraw, challenge, and reconstruct their identities. This continuum also challenges the conventional opposition between victimhood and empowerment. A woman can experience oppression while exercising agency. She can negotiate with patriarchal structures without accepting them completely. She can remain within a social institution while transforming her relationship to it. Agency does not require the complete elimination of constraint. The most significant finding is that resistance contributes to the construction of female

subjectivity. Women become narrators of their own experiences by challenging structures that have previously defined them. Voice, writing, education, employment, mobility, bodily autonomy, and solidarity consequently become mechanisms through which female subjectivity develops.

Contemporary Indian fiction thus provides an important literary space for examining changing understandings of gender and agency. Its representations demonstrate that resistance is not necessarily a dramatic event. It may occur through everyday decisions that gradually alter women's relationship with family, community, and institutional power.

The study concludes that violent and non-violent resistance should be understood as interconnected dimensions of women's agency. Their significance depends upon the particular structures of power within which they emerge. Contemporary Indian fiction represents women as subjects who speak, remain silent, refuse, learn, work, write, remember, move, negotiate, confront, and survive. These practices challenge the reduction of women to passive objects of patriarchal structures and establish female subjectivity as an ongoing process of negotiation and self-determination. The literary significance of these representations extends beyond individual characters. By centring women's experiences and voices, contemporary Indian fiction challenges established assumptions concerning gender, family, caste, sexuality, and authority. It contributes to a broader feminist understanding of resistance in which both everyday agency and direct confrontation become significant ways through which women negotiate and contest patriarchal power.

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