



Desire, Defiance, Disability: A Critical Study of *Margarita with a Straw*

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Abstract:

Conventional stereotypes are challenged by portraying disabled people in a way that questions the idea that they are docile, dependent, or lacking in sexual agency. The film, 'Margarita with a Straw' (2014) depicts real-life encounters of individuals within the disabled group, particularly women who possess a body that is considered both disabled and queer, which deviates from societal norms. The film goes beyond the typical portrayal of the disabled to emphasise the exploration of identity. It challenges the concept of being a person with a disability in a society that primarily values able-bodied persons. The introduction of such films signifies a notable departure from the traditional Bollywood-style storytelling, showcasing a unique perspective that has transformed Indian cinema and facilitated international recognition and significance. The emerging literature on Bollywood films has begun to present a more nuanced analysis of filmic portrayals of disability that situate films within the larger cultural and social context. *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) offers a groundbreaking departure from the traditional portrayal of disability and sexuality. It defies the misconception that people with disabilities lack sexual desire and are unproductive. This study examines and expresses the different challenges encountered and sexual desires expressed by persons with disabilities and how they are constrained by societal norms in their daily lives.

Keywords: Sexual Desire, Disability, Bollywood Cinema, Societal Norms, Archetypes.

Introduction

Disability is a phenomenon that varies depending on the location and culture. Scientific definitions of disability indicate that it refers to the absence or disadvantage resulting from a physical or mental condition. Mostly disability has been identified as the external bodily condition. Nevertheless, the disability is determined by the impact it has on the individual's mental and social well-being. According to Siebers, "Disability has been a medical matter for as long as human beings have sought to escape the stigma of death, disease, and injury" (2008).

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He further adds that “Disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity.” A more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the construction of disability in different social contexts, in both developed and developing countries, might be gained by delving into the disability experience in South Asia. This would expand the field of disability studies beyond its present confines. The pre-conceived notions of a society driven by social, cultural, religious, and political beliefs towards both sexuality and disability are similar. Both groups experience marginalisation due to misconceptions and biased ideas about what is considered normal and acceptable. Disabled individuals are often, according to a prevailing opinion, perceived as either lacking sexual desire or being excessively sexual/aggressive in their sexual behaviour. This paper aims at a comprehensive study on the sexual development and expression of persons with disabilities, focusing on the life of the main character in the film *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). The film defies the misconception that people with disabilities lack sexual desire and are unproductive. This study examines and expresses the different challenges encountered and sexual desires expressed by persons with disabilities and how they are constrained by societal norms in their daily lives.

The analytical study of disability representation in films, media, literary narratives, and the perspective or observation it produces have been much discussed around the films of the West in comparison to the portrayal of disability in South Asian films in general and Bollywood films in particular. However, the portrayal of disability in Bollywood films is not a new phenomenon as the films of the 1970s and 1980s have featured characters with disability realistically and sympathetically but have placed them in ordinary roles. The last two decades have witnessed a stream of films that focuses on disability like *Anjali* (1990), *Main Aisa hi Hoon*, *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Ghajini* (2008), *Paa* (2009), *Guzaarish* (2010), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Barfi* (2012), and most recently *Margarita with a Straw* (2015). Most of these films have their central characters with certain disabilities. Recently, films have started to incorporate an increasingly complex and sophisticated discourse on disability, a change that has been acknowledged by the small body of literature on images of disability in Hindi cinema. Delving further into contemporary Bollywood films and Indian cinema, in contrast to the overly sentimental and stereotypic portrayals of disability in earlier films, recent Indian films incorporate a discourse on human rights and increasingly sophisticated portrayals that challenge that binary of ‘normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ or ‘disease/disability’ intersection.

The emerging literature on Bollywood films has begun to present a more nuanced analysis of filmic portrayals of disability that situates the films within the larger cultural and social context. While before the early 2000s, the majority of people with disabilities were portrayed in movies as unpleasant caricatures, however, of late, a new generation of movies has begun to show people with disabilities more intelligently and sensitively. The goal is to use the forum to increase public sensitivity and awareness of the issue. Also, it appears that the way a filmmaker views disability has shifted from being something to be exploited to being seen from the standpoint of the disabled individual. This mindset dates back to 2005 when the nation’s first International Film Festival for people with disabilities was held by the Chennai-based NGO Ability Foundation. The festival’s goal was to dispel misconceptions about individuals with disabilities and raise awareness of disability issues through an unparalleled exhibition of international films (India Glitz). Since then, this festival has been held annually and has attracted a number of notable producers and filmmakers. The dearth of representation in media has influenced the way in which non-disabled interact with persons with disabilities. Our tendency to be afraid of the unknown sometimes arises from a lack of understanding, and many disabilities may appear surprising if one has never encountered them previously. Media has the potential to have a significant impact by fostering awareness and comprehension through genuine portrayal. It has the power to normalise disability and to expose, both disabled and able-bodied individuals with disabled characters.

Streams of Disability Representation:

There have been two distinct patterns in the representation of disability in Bollywood films. One trend has exploited disability as a comic device or as a means to add a dramatic element to their story, often disregarding the rights of people with disabilities. In contrast, another style has effectively crafted narratives that focus on the discriminatory attitudes prevalent in society towards disabled persons. As Mohapatra writes, “portrayal of disability in films swings primarily between two extremes- pity, fun, caricaturing, sympathy, and awesome heroism at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, coping up, emotional swings and inspirations of the human soul are at the other end” (Mohapatra, 2012). Traditional ideas about disability as a punishment for previous sins or parental transgressions have persisted for a long time and have been the most prevalent representation of disability in Bollywood Hindi cinema. One of the first films to depict disability as a punishment was the Bombay talkie *Jeevan Naiya* (1936). As an appropriate finale to his passionate ways throughout the film, the philandering Rajnikant ends up in a wheelchair at the end of *Netrikkan* (1979). This serves to both desexualize the person with disabilities and illustrate the film’s message. In *Mehboob ki Mehendi* (1971), when the protagonist Pradeep Kumar comes to kill his nemesis Iftikar, he finds him in a wheelchair and decides then that he is not worth stabbing since he is already disabled and allowing him to live would be worse punishment than death, echoing the theme of the film *Sholay* (1975) that the disability trumps death (Pal, *The Portrayal of Disability in Indian Cinema: An Attempt at Categorization*). Major characters in films such as *Pyare Mohan* (2006) and *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (2006) were people with multiple disabilities. These characters were depicted for comic relief, and the audience was entertained by their interactions and disabilities. A number of films use disability for comic relief including *Golmaal* (Tushar Kapoor), which features Paresh Rawal and his wife as blind, *Mujhse Shaadi Karogi* (Kadar Khan), and *Judaai* (Upasna Singh), which features Upasna Singh with speech disability. Unfortunately, to connect with audiences, these films have frequently perpetuated pre-existing misconceptions about disability as it is not their main focus. Filmmakers should show more moral restraint as their casual depictions can have a negative impact on people’s health. In the same line Bhugra writes, “The power of the mass media can never be overestimated, film as a medium should be used to advantage to dispel the stigma associated with psychiatric disorders, and unfortunately, the contrary happens right now” (qtd. by Mohapatra, 2012).

Archetypes of Characters with Disabilities in Bollywood Films:

The contemporary portrayal of characters with disabilities in the media is frequently misleading and reinforces stereotypical beliefs about disability. Lindsey Reid’s analysis reveals that a common method used in cinema and television to portray individuals with disabilities is through the use of character archetypes. The archetypes are not entirely inaccurate but they pose difficulties when applied to a particular group of individuals, as they reinforce the preconceived notions that people have about those who are different from themselves. Depicting individuals with disabilities is challenging since they are sometimes limited to stereotypical roles, while non-disabled groups may be more likely to have a nuanced portrayal. Reid classifies the archetypes used in the portrayal of characters with disabilities into three categories: the helpless victim, the evil villain, and the inspirational hero (Reid, 2019). The portrayal of the helpless victim character depicts their limited prospects for happiness or a regular existence until their condition is acknowledged, as it greatly affects them. Rather than being seen as an ordinary person, this character is shown as someone who requires ‘rescue’ from their situation and is designed to evoke sympathy and compassion from the spectator. Susan Wendell writes that the disabled body is perceived as ‘the rejected body’ (qtd. by Hirschmann, 2014) and that the disabled person could also be contented and happy in their

lives, which is unfathomable to society. When a person with a disability acts improperly or suffers significant damage as a result of their disability, the helpless victim trope is sometimes utilised for comic effect as well. In cultural settings, it gives non-disabled individuals the liberty to ignore or downplay the significance of people with disabilities. The archetype of an evil villain is often painted as “a dangerous and uncontrollable monster” (Reid, 2019). Horror films feature these types of characters and aim to frighten the audiences by exploiting people with disabilities, which misleads audiences into avoiding them as dangerous but there are various interconnected social and familial factors that contribute to the propensity for violence in persons with disabilities. A hero or inspirational figure with a disability is seen as a symbol of coming out of difficult circumstances and inspiring others to trust in their own abilities to achieve anything. While it may be seen as a positive stereotype, it poses various problems as well. First, it implies that a person can only be happy after being ‘cured’ or ‘recovered’. It portrays disability as a challenge rather than an ordinary aspect of life. It can also make non-disabled individuals think disabled persons will be alright if they try hard enough. If depicted as inspirational, non-disabled people see disabled persons as sources of strength and inspiration. This false representation of disability as utilising a disabled character’s trials and accomplishments to encourage others is called ‘inspiration porn.’ It can be problematic because it treats disabled characters as objects to inspire others rather than celebrating their uniqueness as human beings.

The film *Margarita with a Straw* is a fictional narrative of Laila’s self-discovery and exploration of her bisexual identity by Sonali Bose based on her experience with her cousin Malini Chib (a well-known disability rights activist). It dismantles the stereotyped notions of disability in Indian cinema/society through the beautiful portrayal of disability with humour and wit and questions the equal rights of people with disabilities especially the denial of the basic needs of women with disabilities to normalize disability itself. As Bose mentioned at her Film’s London premiere, “It hit me that, over all these years, I had never dealt with her sexuality, and that, in India, we haven’t dealt with the sexuality of the disabled, and that excited me as a Filmmaker” (The Hindu, 2015). The initial scene of the film depicts the contrasting picture of accessible infrastructure and accommodative means of daily lives for the persons with disabilities between New Delhi and New York even without over-emphasizing it. The non-disabled construction of basic infrastructure does not provide accessibility to people with disability and philosophers like Nussbaum presuppose a certain kind of ‘capability’ that effectively bars them from full membership and participation in relevant communities through the denial of equal rights for them. The director, Bose has handled the fine balance between empathise with the difficulties and embarrassment Laila faces and the effect on the people who surround her like the scene of carrying Laila’s wheelchair along with her through the staircase (05:40) and the conversation between the persons who are involved in it shows pity, charity, and merciful attitudes of ‘normate’ towards the people with disabilities. The film is concerned with the acknowledgment of the existence of bodily needs and sexual desires of disabled people through breaking the pre-written labels of society, more so, for women with disabilities where the situation worsens due to multiple marginalization of gender, caste, disability, etc. It is a film of exploration and discovery of a girl’s self through the different phases of life and various people of diverse cultural spaces.

Defying Stereotype, Asserting Self:

Laila (Kalki Koechlin) is introduced to the audience, she has a crush on her musical band’s lead singer, Nima (Tenzin Dalha) who is a non-disabled boy. After the emotional breakup, she feels disappointed when she wants to come close with her one-sided declaration of love to him. She is shown masturbating by listening to the audio pornography to ease her sexual desires. Once she got intimate with Dhruv (Hussain Dalal) who is a disabled boy and felt satisfied by physical proximity and kissing. She escapes her heartbreak with the happiness of getting admission to New York University. There she gets attracted to a non-disabled handsome young

fellow boy named Jared (William Moseley) who is assigned to help her with typing in the classroom. Laila can do it by herself but she readily agrees to his help because she wants to spend more time with him. One day, eventually she meets a blind student activist girl, Khanum (Sayani Gupta) of Pakistani-Bangladeshi descent in a street protest that converts into a riot. Initially, Laila is impressed with Khanum's spirit, fierce independent personality, her approach to disability, etc. Both of them come so close through the time that they start to feel a deep emotional and sexual love for each other as Laila has never experienced before. But Laila's consistent confusion about her sexual orientation ends up having sex with her fellow boy Jared. Throughout her life, the confusion of her own sexuality comes to the ultimate realization of her bisexuality leaving Laila in a chaotic place.

In the film, *Margarita with a Straw*, Laila initiates most of her romances, establishes a moment of physical intimacy with her partner, and moves on to other relationships. From this perspective, the film breaks the various aspects of the bodily desires of a disabled person. Like any young woman in college, Laila is also facing "hormonally driven adolescent impulses" (The Hindu, 2015) which causes her a brief moment of physical intimacy with Dhruv but soon, she realizes a strong attraction towards Nima due to which she breakups her relation with Dhruv through just a text message. It shows her clarity upon her personal choice of sexual desire and slaps the societal norms that try to be charitable and merciful to disabled people. Her decision to go to New York can be interpreted as an escape from the emotional heartbreak with Nima but soon there she gets attracted to Jared. She feels jealous of his smooching another girl, and in retaliation she tries to do the same through exaggeration of her previous relationship, reflecting her attitude of feeling no lack or less something from any 'able-bodied' people. Laila's warm bond with Khanum turns into a beautiful relationship between two women which again dismantles the stereotyped notions of 'asexual objectification' and denial of sexual choice for people with disabilities. When the first time Khanum and Laila have sex, they both are in somewhat virgin territory because Laila has never been with another woman before, and Khanum has never been with a woman like Laila. Their physical intimacy is shown in the film through the shorthand of caresses, close-cropped scenes, and a few gasps but without exoticizing the moment speaks to its intersectional triumph (50:40).

Analyzing the film through 'Normalcy' and 'able-bodiedness':

The narrative of 'normalcy' and 'able-bodied' is woven through the sexual ableism in the film. There are several instances when the chief protagonist, Laila who herself is disabled tries to move from a disabled person to a non-disabled in a way to explore or there is a persistent inclination within her to be with a 'normal' person. When Laila decides to move in with Nima, a non-disabled young lead singer of the music group, she breaks her relationship with Dhruv through a text message that baffles him. Here, Dhruv's remarks, "being friends with normal people won't make you normal" (15:55), as he gets rejected is a hit on his internalized assumption against the 'able-bodied' society. He considers his relationship with Laila as different from 'normate' by sharing equal status. He can be interpreted as a representation of a certain kind of internalization, of not being a part of 'normal' society by the people with disability itself. In this sense, Laila is defying the presupposed internalization by being ambiguous with her bodily desires and sexual choices. She seems in a bit of a confused state regarding her sexuality but stays strong with her body in a non-disabled constructed society by rejecting pity, mercy, and charity upon her. There is an apparent thought or dilemma within Laila to cope with non-disabled people or feel normal through notices of 'able-bodied' people in society. This is clearly visible when she tries to edit her wheelchair-bound picture to a perfect one for the purpose of a profile picture on social media. This suggests her innate wish to present herself to the world without having any presupposed assumptions of people. Her consistent efforts to get noticed although not as a 'differently abled' or 'divine girl' but as a young pretty girl who wishes to get attention from an attractive body or male partner are indicative of her deep-rooted inclination to be a part of the 'able-bodied' society.

The norms of the social construction put the boundaries of normalcy and keep those who do not fit into its norms outside its ambit. For instance, Laila is invited to Nima's birthday party but sits outside as she is not supposed to be part of the celebration (22:25). Again, the concept of normalcy through sexual ability is reflected when Laila has sex with her classmate, Jared. Even though she was happy in her relationship with Khanum, in her inner self, Laila was still in search of her sexual identity which ended after having sex with Jared. During a study session at Jared's house, she needs his help to use the toilet. As he helps her to pull her pants back up, she cuddles him for support. She seems very curious and vulnerable about how far their intimacy will go. As the scene cuts from the bathroom to the bed, Jared is gently undressing them both (01:04:45-01:05:30). Their physical intimacy of sex is brief, taken in quick, close shots, followed by a long shot of their interwoven bodies at rest. Their appearances seem singular but Laila's eyes are already open and thinking about the consequences of what she has done. When Laila confesses her affair with Jared to Khanum, the latter feels cheated and the feeling of being used by Laila cuts her deeper because they moved in together, she made renovations to make her house wheelchair accessible and also joked that for all the troubles she is going through, they shouldn't break up for at least a couple of years. Again here, Laila's move can be interpreted as a shifting of feelings from a disabled to a non-disabled one. Khanum rebukes her for Laila's wish to feel normal by having a relationship that adheres to social norms as she said, "so, by fucking you, Jared gave you a certificate of normalcy?" (01:20:57) Laila's reply for her impassioned sex with Jared added insult to injury when she said in a natural flow, "No, it's because Jared could see her" (01:21:15) also her assumption of being normal or sticking to the societal norms. Although Laila's statement was not intentional to question Khanum's capability, it erases what Khanum perceives, when she first touches Laila's face, "I just want to see you" (43:20), or when she guides Laila's fingers over a tactile museum exhibit saying, "Close your eyes to see better" (42:40).

Two Female Characters with Disability:

However, *Margarita with a Straw*, is not a film only about the binary of disability and normalcy but through the two different young women characters it also shows the 'normal' bodily desires of a disabled person. The acknowledgment and the source of pleasure that one gets through the sexual act is a confidence booster for most of them. The people with disabilities who suffer 'asexual objectification' and the denial of bodily desires by 'able-bodied' or are violent because of repressed sexuality need to identify the presence of sexual desires in them. Even Laila's sexual needs and her identification of sexuality emerge fully when she meets Khanum, a bold, fierce, and visually impaired activist young woman who is very independent with her disability and much confirmed about her sexual orientation. In contrast to Khanum, Laila is not that independent as she stays with her mother and is confused about her sexual identity. When for the first time Khanum tries to touch Laila in an intimate way, she feels awkward looking here and there but Khanum is pretty much comfortable with it. It is Khanum who tells Laila that she is pretty, something that Laila has never heard before from the people having 'eyesight'. The sexual tension between them erupts when Khanum touches Laila's face for the first time to 'see' her, which gives a new deep sensual feeling that Laila's body has never felt before. In the film when Laila sees Khanum while changing her swimming costume, she sees the female body for the first time and gets amazed at the beauty of it. Again, when Khanum asks her for a drink, she denies it by asking for a Coke. Once, Laila gets amazed when Khanum asks her, "Have you ever been on a date?". She replied, "Why would anyone date me?" There comes a contrasting characteristic of both the young women as Khanum replies, "Why do you put yourself down all the time? Let me do it for you." (46:49) Laila gets an affirmation and self-realization of her sexual identity through Khanum as their physical proximity turns into a deep sensual realization.

Subtle form of Patriarchy and Function of Ableism:

The film breaks the patriarchal norms through its choice of languages and questions the stereotyped notions like heterosexuality, asexual objectification of disabled persons, etc. It portrays its women characters in a positive way, as being disabled, Laila does not face any discrimination against her non-disabled brother in the family. Laila's mother Shubhangi (Revathy) is a representative of breaking the patriarchal norms of society when she is driving the blue matador or having the final decision over familial matters. Again, the inter-community marriage of Laila's parents and the crying scene of her father is unconventional in itself. It demystifies the identity and sexual orientation of disabled people and slams patriarchy at various moments. It also portrays the dilemma and hypocrisy of people and their convenience in a multiple intersecting way. Laila's mother defies the traditional notions of patriarchy and the stereotypes about disability but is not very aware or open about sexual identity which does not adhere to the social norms of heterosexuality. When Laila tries to confess her bisexuality, her mother laughs by misunderstanding wordplay as she perceives the word 'bi' in bisexual as the Hindi word for 'maid' that reflects the deep-rooted orthodox attitude of society towards sexuality. Later when Laila explains it to her mother, she gets upset with it and thinks about the consequences of going against 'normal' sexual norms. As with the changing attitudes of her mother, Laila questions her mother;

Laila: Not done, Mom. You are being a hypocrite.

...

Mother replies in disgust that;

Mother: Don't argument, Laila. This isn't normal.

Laila: What is your problem now? (01:14:23-01:14:52)

Through which she questions and puts her contestation to her mother about her sexuality. Similar is the case when Laila and Khanum reveal their relationship to Dhruv, he gets surprised and asks a satirical orthodox question.

Dhruv: Are you sure?

Laila and Khanum are laughing together and Khanum replied as, "Yes, she is."

Dhruv says, "That's great. Evolved choice. How will you have kids?" (01:09:25)

It again reflects the mindset of patriarchal heteronormative sexual norms which considers bisexuality as deviance or non-existent other than heterosexuality.

Throughout the film, there is a question of privacy and the challenging characteristics of disabled characters through their physical and mental attitudes. There are several incidents when Laila questions the invasion of her privacy; in one instance, her mother eventually sees Laila's online search history and the open tabs of pornographic sites. She reacts furiously to Laila as "Studies? Surfing porn sites is studying? You should be ashamed of yourself." (53:57) Laila angrily replies to her mother, "How dare you? This is my privacy" (54:05). As it is accepted that the disabled person doesn't need or don't have the right of any privacy, it becomes obvious to her mother to look into everything without understanding the fact that sexual choice of any person should be most personal as she replies, "Privacy? You want privacy from me? I will slap you if you will talk to me like that" (54:10).

Laila also questions the very idea of 'normate' and puts her resistance to the assumed perception of societal norms towards disability. She responds in a very defiant way as the judge announces the victory of her musical group because the lyrics and composing were done by a disabled girl who is "so different from other normal children." Laila responds with a furious middle finger and exits the stage as the judge asks her to respond by putting her remarks, "your journey must have been difficult compared to that of a normal musician. Will you share something with us" (21:10)? Again, at another scene, the idea of 'normate' and the 'sexual ableism' happen when the Indian shopkeeper, after the 'Aarti'(prayer) blesses Laila with pity and sympathy whereas has a normal/content look at her friend being privileged with a 'able-bodied' person. He only addresses her friend because of neglecting the attitudes of society towards the sexuality of a disabled person but Laila gives a shock to him by asking in her garbled speech for a vibrator and laughs. This film offers a groundbreaking departure from the

traditional portrayal of disability and sexuality. It also challenges the misconception that people with disabilities lack sexual desire and are unproductive. By the end of the story, Laila transforms into a self-assured and emancipated woman, free from her insistence on being desired by physically able persons. Laila acquires autonomy through the transition from struggling to conform to the norms of the able-bodied heterosexual culture to eventually embracing and recognising her own value. The final scene of this film displays a content and independent young girl who enjoys her sip of margarita and admires her own reflection. This self-centeredness is important for a disabled person's similar body because it demonstrates a deliberate resistance against social exclusion and devaluation, enabling the body to live within the socio-cultural realm of society.

Conclusion:

The widespread campaign for independent living among people with disabilities has, perhaps, been significantly impacted by the recurring portrayal of disabled individuals as not being capable of living independently. Women in films are portrayed solely in relation to men, mostly as their spouses, mothers, and most notably, as their romantic partners. It is challenging to come across a singular narrative that focuses on an unmarried woman. Therefore, when audiences observe women in subordinate roles on television, their thoughts and perspectives are unfairly and inadvertently influenced. Disabled women in Indian movies rarely demonstrate autonomy or agency. Laila's joyful face and her ability to withstand physical and psychological suffering, ultimately resulting in self-discovery, independence, and empowerment, are remarkably moving forward. Laila actively embraces her body and experiences no shame or guilt in relation to her sexual wants. She lacks shame or guilt but actively explores her sexuality. Her sexual experiences evolve into a process of exploring her own identity and gradually embracing herself. Her courageous exploration of her sexuality and self-discovery empowers her, while occasionally we also observe her efforts to conform to the norms of a heterosexual-dominated society. The film challenges dominant societal standards, including gender roles, heterosexuality, and the idealisation of able-bodied individuals, through its portrayal of Laila. It transforms into a provocative and rebellious visual representation that challenges established ideas about sexuality and the perfect physique. In this context, visual space becomes a battleground for marginalised individuals who identify as LGBT, disabled or belong to minority groups. It is a space where their desires and the recognition of their humanity are fiercely debated. It explores the complexities of sexuality and disability in a society that primarily values heterosexual relationships and able-bodied individuals. It argues that individuals whose bodies do not align with conventional ideals are often marginalized, treated as outsiders, and excluded from the dominant social norms.

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