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## **Girl-Child Education and Nigeria's Development Agenda: a Literary Perspective (Pp. 418-432)**

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### **Abstract**

*In most Third World countries, the girl-child, and by extension, women generally have not been accorded their natural right of place in the scheme of things as human beings, and as equal players in the affairs that concern them. They are short-changed, victimised, and stereotyped as hewers of wood and drawers of water, as well as mere labour providers on the farms and in the home. As such, the girl-child has become a victim of female trafficking across international borders, denied access to education, and consigned to forced early marriage. Against the backdrop of these denials and the dictates of patriarchy, the girl-child is certainly doomed to an eternity of oppression and destruction, unless the structures that stand on her way are uprooted and the wool of deliberate ignorance are pulled-off her face through the granting of right and unfettered access to free and compulsory qualitative and self-empowering education that are necessary sine qua non for freedom, survival, and self-actualisation. We have therefore taken a literary trajectory of select literary female characters with a view to positioning them against the background of their access or otherwise to education (formal and informal), and how this plays out in the shaping of their lives vis-à-vis the Nigerian girl-child's prospect of enhancing herself with a view to contributing to the*

*development of her self-worth, her immediate community and the nation at large.*

### **Introduction**

The girl-child, and indeed women the world over, especially in Africa and Nigeria has had their destiny sealed from birth by tradition and culture on account of their biological sex. They have been called the weaker sex in order to justify societal discrimination and oppression against them. They must remain silent hewers of wood and drawers of water, bearers of children, and toilers of arduous labour from sun-rise to sun-down. They can be seen but not to be heard in both the private and the public spaces of decision making. The girl-child by the natural status ascribed to her by male defined norms of societal conduct and behaviour remains a property to be owned and commoditized. Consequently, her rights are circumscribed by tradition, custom, and the chauvinism of male patriarchy.

This paper, therefore, seeks to reposition the place of the girl-child vis-à-vis her inalienable rights as a human-being and an indispensable ally and co-traveller in Nigeria's strive towards the actualization and the attainment of our development agenda. It is indubitable that no meaningful agenda-setting and development objectives can be attained in a situation where the girl-child is sidelined and consigned to the kitchen closet without conscious policy consideration for empowerment through the acquisition of quality education that liberate and equip her for sound economic, political, social, and cultural participation for self-actualization and development. Because education is the bedrock of all developments, Mama Tola in Hagher's *Aishatu* (2002), reasons quite plausibly that, "Without school no job, without job no good husband, no beautiful clothes, no beauty, yes, it is the end of the world..."Lack of access to education is indeed the end of the world, because without it there is certainly no future for the girl-child in the strict sense of full inclusion and participation in the development process, self actualization, and self-fulfilment, and personal freedom.

Having established the intellectual climate and direction of this discourse, we shall examine the basic conceptual theories such as an understanding of the girl-child and the concept of education and development agenda. We shall also embark on a patchwork of literary excursion into the life of select girl-child/women with a view to garnish the debate. Our discourse will end with conclusion and recommendations/agenda-setting if the federal government

seven-point agenda and the various states government action agenda must be attainable.

### **Conceptual Theories**

The Girl-child: The girl-child is a female homo sapient of unmarried age that is defined by the anatomical and physiological characteristics that set her apart from her male counterpart. As a compound noun, the term connotes the sex and age bracket of the gender under reference. There is therefore a rite of passage that allows a transition through adulthood culminating in old age. For the purpose of this discussion, there will be an obvious overlap of reference to both girl-child and woman as synonyms.

Hughes, Kroehler, and Zanden (1999) define Education as a learning process that ushers in “relatively permanent change in behaviour or capability that results from experience....Education is one aspect of the many-sided process of socialization by which people acquire behaviors essential for effective participation in society”. In their contribution to the definition of education, Bullock and Stallybrass, Ed. (1977) are of the view that it is: (1) “... a passing on of a cultural heritage; (2) it is the initiation of the young into worthwhile ways of thinking and doing; (3) it is a fostering of the individual's growth”. Onyekwelu (2005) sees education as a tool that “teaches someone how to think, what is good and what is bad, how to solve problems, to know what is fair and unfair, rational and irrational...”. He avers that education imbues an individual with the confidence to adapt anywhere; it builds self-esteem and self-respect, it brings out the best in you and enables you to assert yourself positively, and most importantly, education helps one to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses. In fact, education encapsulates all these definitions and benefits because the end product is the emergence of a mentally liberated individual that is free to make decisions for him/her and shape his/her life, be self-reliant and contribute to national and community development. All of the above seem to underscore Nigeria's National Education Policy (2004) thrust which seeks to, among other things, create and promote “self realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, as well as towards social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress”.

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: The Living Dictionary* (2007) conceptualises Development as “the process of gradually becoming bigger, better, stronger, or more advanced”. Extending the definition further

by citing Marder, 1970; Adedeji, 1979; and Todaro, 1992, Okpeh, Jr. (2006) is of the view that, “development is about people and their capacity to live a qualitatively meaningful life. As a process, it involves the reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment, as well as the provision of the basic needs of the human person, namely food, shelter, clothing and medicare, etc.” In their own contribution to the discourse on development, Menegbe and Omachonu (2008) advance the thesis that “Development is the average improvement in the life of the people to the extent that poverty, unemployment, and inequality are made to steadily decline.

As a process and a state of mind, development is the proper orientation and reorganization of the economy and the social system in relation to income and output in such a way that there is an improvement in the general well being of the people”. It is human-driven and begins with psychic reorientation and the liberation of the individual human mind that invariably translates to structural transformation in the economy, social services, the environment, democracy and good governance, the rule of law and the entrenchment of human right and freedom. In a nut-shell therefore, development begins in and from the individual’s mind from where it invariably galvanises into the transformation and the reorientation of the human being, engendering the creation of capacity for the purpose of the attainment of set goals and objectives of an individual, community, and the nation.

Against the backdrop of these analyses, it is logical therefore to argue that development agenda is a conscious prioritization of set programmes by an individual, a group, or the state with the express aim and goal of improving and uplifting the quality of life and the well-being of citizenry. This is therefore the thrust of this paper: how the girl-child can have access to free and qualitative education that is redemptive and capable of positively transforming her and the nation at large.

### **Patchwork of Literary Excursion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that the thrust of any development is the acquisition of quality education for a purpose-driven existence. This truism is underscored by Ojokoh and Daramola’s (2006) submission that “Education is perhaps the most strategic area of intervention for empowerment of girls and women in any society”. Other domain of empowerment include the ability of the girl-child/woman to have decision making power, access to information

and resources, assertiveness, a feeling that the individual can make a difference, inculcating group consciousness as power base, understanding that one has rights, the push to effect change in one's life and the community, learning skills that the individual defines as important, changing others' perceptions of one's competency and capacity to act, and above all, increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma (cited from Judi Chamberlin: "A Working Definition of Empowerment-NEC Article", 2006).

A common adage says that, "If education is costly, try ignorance". Myriads of factors continue to subdue and overwhelm the girl-child/woman to perpetual state of denial, ignorance, and debilitating condition of penury and want that culminate in her inability to actualize and fulfill herself as a human being. A cursory patchwork of literary investigation into the lives of select female literary characters will throw more light into an understanding of this unpardonable scenario. For example, Aishatu in Hagher's title play, *Aishatu* (2002) drops out of school on the inexplicable excuse that, "The new term opened last week and I have no school fees to go back to school" (p.5). Her inability to pay school fees arose from her father losing his job, with the attendant tragedy that though he did some bit of farming, "but his crops were destroyed by drought" (p.5). Unfortunately, Aishatu meets an old school mate, Rekiya, who does not believe that "school fees are the end of the world". Although not educated, Mama Tola, disgusted, challenges Rekiya: "Is it not the end of the world? Without school fees, there is no school. Without school no job, without job no good husband... yes, it is the end of the world. It's the difference between you and me" (p.6). Aishatu is destroyed by bad company who introduced her to the ephemeral life of glamour that is transient, illusionary, and deceptive.

On her own part, Doreen Sullivan in Tom McNeal's *Watermelon Days* was crushed by the dual factors of an irresponsible mother by the name Aggie, and Lulu Shmidt, a female friend who lured her to relocate from Philadelphia to Yankton South Dakota, where "*the males outnumber the girls 3 to 1! Which means they walk up to you and tell you how you look like Lillian Gish only more so!*" Doreen's tragedy is the fact that all along she had assumed Aggie to be her older sister. The story goes like this:

Doreen had grown up believing her mother to be dead and Aggie to be her older sister, but one day when Doreen was fourteen she came upon a box of documents that included her own birth certificate. The space for the father's name

was blank. Agnes Lee Sullivan was listed as the mother. When confronted with the document, Aggie didn't blush or stammer. She said, "Why, you little snoop!" And then, "Well, now you know." And finally, "It's kind of funny, this morning you didn't have a mother, and so presto, tonight you do!" (In truth, little had changed—Doreen still called Aggie Aggie.)

Obviously, Aggie as a single-parent decided to keep away from Doreen the secret of her identity. Consequently, she continued living her wayward and promiscuous life unabated, even when Doreen lived in the same house with her. Unarguably, therefore, Aggie's waywardness must have had infectious repercussion that led her to accept Lulu's offer as an escape medium. Doreen's poor upbringing manifested in her marriage to Monty Longbaugh, giving rise to her inability to either cook the family meals or perform the daily chores; thereby leaving everything to the ever willing husband. Doreen's life was totally devoid of parental emotion of love and affection, love of her own children (when she got married), and the joy and happiness that are associated with matrimony. She neither fulfilled nor actualised her full potentials as a woman largely because of loss of freedom and lack of necessary education that could have equipped her to face the challenges of life.

Similarly, James Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* dramatises the failure of Thoni to come to grip with reality outside the domain of tradition and customs of her people that stipulate that she should marry Remi, the younger brother to her late husband. She became yoked in the expectation that Remi would oblige tradition by returning from the city to marry her. His failure to inherit Thoni as a wife leaves her downcast and frustrated; yet she could not defy tradition by opting for someone else. Her action renders her slavish and ultimately unfulfilled and unaccomplished as a woman. In the end, she ends up a victim of a conservative and retrogressive traditional practice that fails to uphold the freedom and rights of women. Perhaps, were Thoni to be educated, she could have taken her fate in her own hand by initiating an independent decision, thereby acting positively to effect change in her life and the life of her community. Her decision to take her life sends dangerous signal that gives victory to a degenerate custom.

The fate that Thoni suffered at the end of Ngugi's play is akin to the experience of Hedda Gabler in Henrik Ibsen's title play, *Hedda Gabler*.

Hedda's marital life is uncharacteristically unfulfilled because her husband, Jorgen Tesman is drab and unromantic. As a scholar, he consumes himself with research in the history of civilization, without giving his wife the desired love and attention. Having come from a background of luxury that was offered by her father, and now married to "an indefatigable researcher", Hedda expected to bask in the luxury and comfort of her childhood pedigree in the villa that she got Tesman to buy. Truth is, there was no love between the couple as Hedda's motive for marrying Tesman was: "... to help him out of his misery, I just said—quite casually—that I should like to live here, in this villa". (Act two, 304). As a result she is bored and admits philosophically to Brack that, "As one makes one's bed one must lie on it". Neither husband nor wife could affect the other positively because the marriage was not founded on mutual love. Consequently, Hedda degenerates into a Freudian archetype; a frustrated and estranged woman, and a stranger in her matrimonial home.

On the other hand, Mrs Elvsted abandoned her husband for Ejlert Lovborg, an erstwhile degenerate alcoholic whom she eventually rehabilitates. According to her, her reason for coming back to Lovborg was to "have some kind of power over him", because, "And he, for his part, has made me into a real human being! Taught me to think...and to understand...one thing after another" (Act one, 288). To his credit, Lovborg was reported by Tesman, his intellectual rival as having "brought out a new book" which "made quite an impression, too". This seems to stand on the way of Tesman's ambition with regard to the job that he is eying for which Brack tells him: "You must be prepared for your appointment not to come so quickly, as you wish or expect it to", because "There may be some competition--perhaps—before the post is filled" (Act one, 293); a competition with Lovborg. Hedda's failure to impact positively on Tesman and her inability to be happy culminated in the death of Lovborg whom she gave a pistol to. Hedda, a victim of past relationship with Brack fails to reclaim herself and face reality by regaining her freedom and asserting herself. Armed with one of the pistols in her possession, she decides to take her life; an abominably defeatist and despicable act which Brack condemns as: "One doesn't *do* that kind of thing!"

However, it can be posited that Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a reincarnation of Hedda Gabler, but this time around she is moulded in a new spirit and consciousness never to capitulate, but rather to liberate herself through the exercise of her natural right to freedom and power to self-

assertiveness and self-actualisation. Nora's background and environment are not in any way different from those of Hedda Gabler. Torvald Helmer, a lawyer and Nora's husband gives her little of no freedom to exercise her rights to choice of what to eat and how to conduct herself in the home. As a result; he reduces her to his plaything, calling her: "my little skylark", little squirrel", "my little featherbrain", "little scatterbrain", my little song-bird" (Act one, 148-9) etc. In short, Helmer does not see Nora as a real wife but a detached novelty pet, a mere possession. Having been held hostage in this loveless nest of psychological and emotional trauma and guilt which is accentuated by her un-confessed indebtedness to Nils Krogstad through the forgery of her father's signature to obtain money to save her husband's life, Nora would not be intimidated, cowered, nor humiliated and disgraced the same way as Hedda.

For all her eight years ---of marriage, Nora had lived in an illusionary world of make-believe, thinking all along that she had done what a wife could do for a husband and secure his gratification and unrequited love. Nora challenges Helmer that: "We've been married for eight years now. Don't you realize that this is the first time we two—you and I, man and wife—have had a serious talk together?"(Act three, 225)., She blames both her father and husband for her undeserved fate, because, "I've been dreadfully wronged, Torvald—first by Papa, and then by you." Nora goes on to accuse Helmer that, "You've never loved me, you only found it pleasant to be in love with me". For her initial inability to actualise herself, she tells Helmer, "You and Papa have committed a grievous sin against me: it's your fault that I've made nothing of myself." As a result of this sudden awareness, Nora decides that: "There's another task that I must finish first—I must try to educate myself. And you are not the man to help me with that; I must do it alone. That's why I'm leaving you" (Act three, 227).According to Nora, being a mother and a wife are secondary roles. What is now paramount is the fact that, "*I believe that before everything else I'm a human being—just as much as you are...or at any rate I shall try to become one...but I can't be satisfied any longer with what most people say, and with what's in books. I must think things out for myself and try to understand them* (Act three, 228, Italicised emphasis mine).

Nora's new-found freedom and consciousness make her see things differently as she tells Helmer that both of them must be perfectly free from the bondage of societal expectations and dictates. The expression of this freedom is demonstrated in the final exchange of their marital rings and the house keys.



Determined to regain her lost freedom, Nora tells Helmer, “Look, here’s your ring back—give me mine”, because, “Now it’s all over. Here are your keys”(Act three, 231). Nora’s revolt against societal norms and conventions that tended to oppress and subjugate women in Europe, and indeed the world over before the 1930s could be said to ignite the fire that ushered in universal Women Liberation and Feminist movements across the world. Her action could be said to give voice to women as a weapon h which they deployed to assert their rights to suffrage, employment opportunities, right to property, right to their body, etc.

However, J.P.Clark’s *The Wives’ Revolt* is a dramatization of the resistance by the women of Erhuwaren community against injustice, stigmatization and the denial of rights by the men-folk. The play’s thrust constitutes what Isin and Wood (1999) describe as “the selective allocation of social rights based on gender and/or sexual orientation”. The women of Erhuwaren were edged out by their men unjustly in the share of the oil-money compensation that was given to the community by an oil company prospecting in the community. As if that was not enough injustice; they were also accused of witchcraft and consequently denied the right to keep goats on the flimsy excuse that goats were littering the community with faeces. As a result, the women embarked on a common action against these unfair treatments. The women resistance is captured in Koko’s altercation to her husband, Okoro, that “The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being directed against women because of our stand. We will not accept it”. Indeed, the play and what the women have demonstrated constitute defiance, demand for justice and the assertion of their collective right, group assertiveness, learning about and expressing anger against an unjust system, the need to effect positive change in the community and instituting positive self-image and respect for the womenfolk, thereby overcoming unwholesome stigma.

Still on positive consciousness, the role that Liza plays in Ola Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Again* is not only instructive but worthy of emulation by every girl-child/woman. Major Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown, the ex-military man and now a politician is excited by the prospect of using women as cannon fodder to prosecute his political fortunes. With three wives in his stable, and with different reasons for marrying them, Lejoka-Brown believes that securing required votes to win election was a foregone conclusion. As provided by custom and tradition of his people, he had to marry Mama Rashida, his late brother’s wife. He married Sikira, the daughter to Madam

Bambina Ajanaku, the head of the National Union of Nigerian Market Women in order to win the votes of all market women. But realizing that both Sikira and Mama Rashida are illiterates, he opts for Liza, a Kenyan educated medical doctor whom he met in the Congo. Characteristic of the average Nigerian gullible polygamous politician, Brown keeps Liza ignorant of his home-base matrimonial status. Similarly, he keeps Sikira and Mama Rashida ignorant of his marriage to Liza.

But as the drama plays out, in the end all the wives get to know the truth. Despite this, Liza humbles herself against Sikira's undeserved provocation and unruliness. With matrimonial understanding struck among the three wives, Lejoka-Brown is left in the cold. Liza graciously teaches Mama Rashida how to improve her chicken business, while at the same time she takes time to educate uncouth Sikira by opening her vistas to perceive the world differently. For example, Liza tells Sikira that:

Well, it all goes to prove that Mr Rahman Lejoka-Brown does not have any respect whatsoever for my feelings. Why, I believe a woman must try to be a loving, loyal wife and all that. On the other hand, the husband must try to show some respect for the wife. After all, when we boil it down, men and women are all created equal, and unless a husband is ready to understand...

The new redemptive baptism that Sikira receives from Liza empowers her to advocate for:

Freedom for housewives,  
Freedom for all women,  
Yes, everywhere there must be freedom—

The success of women empowerment in this play resides in Lejoka-Brown's statement to his friend Okonkwo that, "We have come to a new world, brother. A woman's world!" against his confession and capitulation before Liza that:

...Elizabeth, I'll go back to the cocoa business. No more monkey politics for me. But first I'll build you the clinic I promised. On this very land. I'll make sacrifice to my fathers, and then break down this old house. I'll build a

new one on its soil. Three stories. You'll use two for the Clinic, and we'll live in peace on the top floor....I was doing fine with the cocoa business, anyhow, before crazy politics came and turned my head upside down like...

The scenarios captured above are slightly different from Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1995). Miseyi, a dominant female character in the play and the daughter of "Professor Sematu, BA, MA, DSc., former Minister of Oil and Petroleum Resources and Ambassador Extraordinary to many nations in his long and illustrious career" is not only a university graduate; but is obviously ensconced in comfort and luxury of the upper class. She is to be wedded to the son of "Chief Honourable Surveyor Kingboli, BSc. Cantab., Order of Merit, honorary doctorates and chieftaincy titles too numerous to mention". Miseyi realizes the pervasive corruption in both her own family and the groom's family. On the wedding day, when all dignitaries waited anxiously for the solemnization of the wedding through the traditional ritual of handing over the gourd of palm wine to the suitor, Miseyi disappoints everyone present, including the Military Governor of Lagos State who was the Chairman of the occasion by presenting the wine to Sanda, an ex-university boyfriend who never sought her hand in marriage after all. Besides, Miseyi had earlier challenged Sanda's perceived non-accomplishment:

And your mind has stood still, Sanda! Still, still, stagnant. You are still the very way you *talked!* The eternal student at heart. People grow. They develop. You...you...Christ, it makes one weep inside to look at you! Did you abandon your degree programme, one year to graduation- for this? A *megadi* uniform for whatshould have been...

Miseyi's bold and courageous decision in jettisoning affluence and material attractions is predicated on her realization that human society cannot advance on the wheels of corruption, ill-gotten wealth, and falsehood; but through the exercise of freedom, conscious determination and taking one's destiny in one's own hands. By this singular action, she has liberated herself, exerted her self-will, and found freedom that guarantee self-respect and overcoming stigma.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing therefore, there are two categories of the girl-child/women in this discourse: those educated in the western tradition on the one hand, and those educated in the non-formal category. Aishatu, Doreen, Hedda Gabler, Liza, Miseyi and Nora are educated in the Western tradition. The women of Erhuwaren, Sikira, Mama Rashida, and Thoni might not have had this privilege. However, Aisha, Doreen and Hedda failed to utilise the opportunity provided to empower and enhance their self-worth. On the other hand, Nora and Miseyi utilised their education for self-empowerment by taking what could be perceived as the right decisions that eventually changed their lives and the lives of those around them. The same scenario applies to the women of Erhuwaren who stood against injustice. Mama Rashida is able to enhance herself economically through the education that she received from Liza on how to improve her chicken and egg business. On a salutary note also, Sikira's political education launches her on a pedestal of political fortune that saw her defeating her husband, Major Lejoka-Brown.

With the exception of Aishatu, Thoni, Doreen, and Hedda Gabler, this paper is of the view that whether educated in the western tradition or not, the girl-child/women should commit themselves to the ideals of freedom, self-actualisation, self-empowerment, and skills acquisition that will grant them respect, sense of belonging, and participation in the development efforts of their communities and the nation as exemplified in the women of Erhuwaren, Nora, Liza, Miseyi, Mama Rashida, and Sikira. This assumption can only be attained through the acquisition of education, whether formal or non-formal, because education as "a potent vehicle of reformation and social mobility" (Rury,2002) , has the capacity of changing the prevailing social structure in favour of the girl-child/women in Nigeria for the overall growth and development as it is an investment in human capital.

In the final analysis, what this paper seeks to advocate is the community-based indigenous education and knowledge that is not exclusively subsumed in "*examination and certificates* but for *existence and certitude* – an education which brings the learner to a situation where he can examine critically actions which he had previously accepted as 'given', begins to see that 'reality' is not a closed world from which there can be no exit; and perceives his condition as one that he himself can alter" (Moemeka,1981); because what matters in life for the girl-child is not material wealth, nor the glamour of false life-style that derive from formal education *per se*. This philosophy perhaps underscores Madonna's self-

avowed view about material wealth. Madonna is a very successful American pop singer and film maker who started acting and dancing when she was a child. Later in life she won a dance scholarship to the University of Michigan but dropped out after two years to seek a music career in New York. Although Madonna is materially wealthy, yet she confesses that, "The more money you have, the more problems you have. I went through from having no money to making comparatively a lot and all I've had is problems. Life was simpler when I had no money, when I just barely survived" (cited from the *Encarta Dictionary*). The girl-child must always aspire to go to heaven, because bad girls go everywhere (Helen Gurley Brown, U.S. Journalist). Girls find themselves in trouble when they drop out of school and opt for easy life that leads to destruction. Education is an indispensable panacea and alchemy of empowerment that can liberate humanity and eventually attract and usher in the desired drive for self-improvement and collective national development.

It is, therefore, the opinion of this paper that girls must be given equal opportunities with boys to explore and harness their limitless potentials. To achieve this, they demand freedom from stigmatization and deprivation, freedom from exclusion; and above all, the right to free and compulsory education which shall fast track their participation in community and national development efforts. They should have voice to speak out against injustice and oppression. For example, in a nation with only eight female Senators in the Senate, and thirty six in the House of Representatives, only one local government Chairman from the North Western zone of the country, certainly this calls to question the sincerity of the principle of affirmative action vis-à-vis female participation in politics in Nigeria. Women, therefore, deserve a better deal that facilitates unfettered playing field in national affairs which should attract more of them into politics and other productive sectors on the economy, and decision-making organs because it is only when women are liberated and adequately empowered that the state and her agencies can attain the goals of development agenda. It is against this realization also that the former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Anan declared that, "there is no time to lose if we are to reach the Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015. Only by investing in the world's women can we expect to get there" (UNDP International Workshop on Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals, 2003).

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