

Lost Utopia in Palestinian *Flash Fiction*

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Abstract

The present study examines the use of dystopia as a device in Palestinian flash fiction composed by writers living in Israel. The study will look at three examples of flash fiction and investigate how dystopia is manifested in the stories' plot, characters and language, in an attempt to evaluate the relationship between the distorted reality that came into being after the war of 1948 and the social, political and economic effects it left. I therefore examined the themes which Palestinian writers have addressed in flash fiction and investigated their use of dystopia in order to express the state of crisis in which Palestinians inside Israel live, and how this affects the plot, the language and the characters. Our study shows that dystopia has been used in order to express the state of crisis in which individuals live and their inability to accept the psychological and economic damage left by the war, as reflected in the characters, who gradually lose their hope for a secure future.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has frequently been the instrument whereby writers expressed the reality in which they lived and the political, economic, intellectual and individual changes they experienced. Literature is the medium that enables writers to air their inner conflicts as well as the external conflicts that they face. Writers thus use numerous devices that help them to convey their reality to the reader in various ways, some direct and other indirect. Milestones in the history of a nation influenced authors and made them choose a certain literary genre rather than another as the ideal tool for observing reality in all its distortions and absurdity and for conveying the effects of the experiences of war or occupation and the attendant transformations they effect in the individual's psyche, orientation and thoughts. Flash fiction is one of the most prominent genres to have dealt with the effect of reality on the individual and on society. This genre has over the years demonstrated its ability to courageously broach sensitive and unexpected themes, due to certain features that it contains and that are not found in other genres.

One quite prominent device used in flash fiction is dystopia, or lost utopia, which clearly reveals the negative changes that have occurred in the wake of the political convulsions in various Arab countries. Utopia, according to the concept's inventor, Thomas More, means "nowhere", a good or ideal place. More used it as the title of his book, published in 1516. He meant it as an imaginary place, one that is not possible to realize here on earth. (Mür 1987, 14; Sārgint 2015, 10; 'ibrāhīm 2013) The English form "utopia" is derived from the Greek *topos* "place", while the prefix "u" denotes "no", or "without" (Sed, 2017, 73; Wegner, 2002).

More describes the evils of his age, the flaws of government and social life, and hopes for a time in which reason, justice and mercy will dominate, a time when the king will be the shepherd of his people, not a sword held to their necks (Mūr 1987, 54; Sed, 2017, 74). More's text constitutes a protest against the constant wars in Europe and the greedy rich who oppress the poor. He argues that countries need philosophers to advise the rulers on how to achieve justice (Mūr 1987, 54). According to Paul Ricoeur, the function of the word is "to cast the imagination out of reality towards there" (Rikūr, 2004, p. 270; Sed, 2017, 74). In other words, man imagines a Paradise in which his aspirations for justice, equality and freedom can be realized. When something is described as utopian, it means that it cannot be realized (Sālār, 2006). The first to have dreamt of such a place was Plato, who spoke of perfect city, in which the highest ideals are realized, which has no room for jealousy or spite, and whose inhabitants are all equal and possess all that they need. This was "Plato's Republic" (ʿibn Saffiyi 2016, 14; Sārgint, 2015, 11, 12; ʿibrāhīm, 2013).

Writers use dystopia to express a lost utopia. They look for order in the chaos, for light in the darkness, as a way of expressing their rejection of the bitter reality in which they live and their need for freedom and happiness. The first part of this study is therefore dedicated to an examination of the use of utopia and dystopia in literature. The second part will analyze three very short stories by Palestinian writers who live in Israel, to determine how dystopia is used in them and how this affects the stories' plot, language and characters.

2. MATERIALS

2.1. Idealism and dystopia in literature

Through literature, writers attempt to describe an ideal society, in which human values and ideals are upheld in all political, social and religious domains (Sālār, 2006; Sed, 2017). Writers evoke such a society whenever they experience oppression, exploitation and grief. They do so out of necessity since in such circumstances the only way to escape is through dreams of a better future (ʿibn Saffiyi 2016, 13, 14). Such dreams are impossible to realize and are like daydreams (Sārgint 2015, 12; Bloch 1970, 85-90). According to the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, utopia has taken on a meaning that is broader than just the name for a literary genre, that it has also become a way of thinking, a philosophical standpoint and a conception of cultural phenomena of the past projected onto the utopia: "The social dream". Utopia thus has three facets: First is utopian literature; the second is the implementation of a utopia; and the third is utopian social theory (Sārgint 2015, 13). Utopian literature is a construct imagined by the writer, of a society whose social and political institutions have an ideal structure, very different from the form of society in which the writer lives (Sārgint 2015, 13). Utopias are implemented in practice as small societies whose members choose to live utopian collective lives and strive to change their lives in reality (Sārgint 2015, 14). Utopian social theory is a method of analysis that has been used by many philosophers to explain a certain social change, the role of utopia in religion, the relationship between religion and utopia, and the like (Sārgint 2015, 14).

Bloch distinguishes two types of utopian works, those that can be realized in this world and those that cannot (Sārgint 2015, 12; Bloch 1970, 85-90). L. Mumford accepts this division. He calls the first type "utopias of escape". In this type, the writer focuses on hopeful aspirations, while the other type, "utopias of reconstruction", is a genre in which the writer proposes possible reforms of reality and its reconstruction (Mumford 1971, 108-115).

Lost Utopia in Palestinian Flash Fiction

Paul Ricoeur compares the concepts of ideology and utopia at a number of levels. He maintains that ideology has three levels, while utopia has three other, contrary, levels (Ricoeur 1986a, 263; Sārgint, 2015, 122; Steeves, 2000, 221). The first level of ideology is deformation and its utopian counterpart is defiant imagination. The second level of ideology is giving legitimacy to authority, whose utopian counterpart is providing a substitute for existing authority. The third level of ideology is the definition, employing which an individual or a collective retains their identity, paralleled in utopia by a no-place, in which justice and freedom are realized (Ricoeur 1974, 93; 'ibrāhīm 2013).

Utopia also contrasts with dystopia, a word of Greek origin which means "bad place". It denotes the literature of corrupt cities, or apocalyptic literature, a branch of science fiction (Guardian 2015, 26; Oxford Dictionaries 2012, "Dystopia"; il-Qammāḥ 2018). It is a literature that is associated with fear and describes the world as savage and oppressive, a place ruled by corrupt people and subjects with no will of their own and no freedom (Feinberg 1998, 56). Dystopian literature describes a contaminated, corrupt world, dominated by chaos and ruled by evil, oppression and poverty, a world of class warfare and oppression, in which monsters fight each other (Sārgint 2015, 33; Ḥasan, 2017). Dystopian literature thus applies to numerous fields, including politics, society and the economy, painting a dark picture of individuals deprived of freedom, security and humanity.

The two World Wars and the flu epidemic had a great effect on people. To this we may add the Great Depression and the many other wars of the twentieth century (Sārgint 2015, 32). All of these occurrences greatly influenced writers and artists, who perceived the savagery of the regimes and the hideous deeds of men. For this reason, their writings are dominated by pessimistic musings about a dark future in which machines and other external forces rule over men, who are stripped of their humanity and marginalized (Feinberg, 1998, 56; al- Sajīnī, 2018). The most frequently-addressed themes in dystopian literature are the concerns of the individual, social, environmental and economic issues, man's negative relationship with technology and with oppressive police forces, distrust among people and the widespread injustice, poverty and disease in the world. Such images are completely the opposite of what a utopia calls for, and highlight the differences between man's aspirations and the ugliness and fear aroused by the various political, social and religious institutions (Hībī, 2012, 81; Sārgint 2015, 32). One issue that influenced writers was the call for improving the race or genetic selection, in order to avoid certain unwanted traits. Such ethnocentric and racist calls were widespread in many countries, and at the same time numerous dystopian writings appeared, that opposed these calls (Sārgint 2015, 33, 43). Dystopian literature dominated the literary scene in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, because people feared a third world war. However, in the 1960s utopian ideas made people go out into the streets in protest, in Czechoslovakia and in Paris, gave rise to the civil rights movement in the United States, and engendered attempts at creating new societies, called "communes". All this in turn gave rise to a flourishing utopian literature that has left clear imprints on Western societies, especially women's utopian literature, which is still read to this day (Sārgint 2015, 36, 37).

There are considerable similarities between utopian and religious writings, but at the same time there are also differences between them. Utopian literature owes its power to human intelligence and rationalism and presents man as capable of creating a utopia on earth, whereas religious writings derive their power from belief in God's power and identify the ideal world with the afterlife (Hībī, 2012, 79).

Utopian literature can take many forms and treat many different themes. In a *social utopia* an individual describes the kind of society in which he would like to live and its new laws. Such an individual may aspire to his promised land and his future environment (ʿbn Safiyyi 2016, 16). A *political utopia* is one on whose behalf a nation struggles and in which it puts its hopes for a future in its own country. Here politics is the means for changing reality, like the Jews' dream of establishing a state of their own and the Palestinians' dream of returning to their land (ʿbn Safiyyi, 2016, 16).

The last century witnessed numerous revolutions in the Arab world, as a result of rulers' despotism, racial discrimination against certain groups, the concentration of a country's wealth in the hands of a few, and marginalization of certain groups and refusal to give them a share in government. These factors caused the emergence of protest movements demanding cultural and political rights. These movements were supported and nourished by international and regional powers, in order to cause them to rebel against the existing state of affairs and carry out coups. This resulted in the appearance of dystopian literature in the Arab world, which described the existing situation with a degree of exaggeration and compared it with a dream (the ideal situation), in order to motivate readers to rebel against the situation and attempt to fix it (Feinberg 1998, 55; Hight 1962, 159-160; il-Qammāh, 2018).

Only a very small number of studies have focused on dystopian literature, in contrast to all the other arts, such as cinema, theater, painting and photography. With respect to Arabic literature, a few critics did discuss dystopian aspects of contemporary novels, for example the critic Shinkār who studied dystopian literature in Egypt, and Fayād Hībī, who devoted a chapter in his study to idealism and dystopia in Lebanese novels (Hībī, 2012, 79; Shinkār, 2020, 755-900).

3. METHOD

3.1. Introduction

In this part we shall examine the use of dystopia and utopia in three flash stories by Palestinians in Israel, as reflected in three story components: the plot, the characters and the language. As for the plot, we examine the happenings that depict the injustice which a person suffers at every level: political, social, economic, environmental and individual. With respect to the characters, we examine how they express their pessimism, their inability to change their situation and how they cope with the latter. As for the third element, language, we examine linguistic devices used in dystopian stories, such as exaggeration and paradox used to express the contrast between the ugly reality and the utopian world, paronomasia, repetition, allusion, simile and irony.

3.2. The plot

Samar Hījāzī in her story "al-Mi' rāj" ("Nocturnal Journey") tells of the inventors who strive to make life easier for others and to enable them to obtain what they need more quickly, more adequately and of better quality, as well as to help good people to support those most in need of hope and light, while others extinguish the light because they perceive it as a threat to their status and worth among the people.

Nocturnal Journey

Every day just after sunset Edison makes his journey and reviews his invention. He takes a journey around the world while I grope about in myself in search of a glimmer of light.

Ninety-nine nights have passed in this way. On the hundredth night, as I fumbled about in my wretched attempts to reach the light hiding in my depths, I saw a man climbing up the utility pole with a hammer in his hand (Darāwshi, 2014).

The story opens with a time adverbial that describes the routine followed by Edison, the inventor of the light bulb. He checks all the light bulbs in the world and makes sure that they are functioning and spreading light in their surroundings. At the same time, the narrator is still searching for a glimmer of light. Despite Edison's efforts to quickly spread the light in the course of ninety-nine days, he does not succeed in creating hope in the narrator's mind, perhaps because she is more in need of spiritual rather than physical light. However, on the hundredth night she discovers a man who cuts the power. She then discovers the secret behind her inability to obtain the light that would illuminate the depths of her heart, for this man is doing it deliberately.

The writer uses the device of dystopia in her description of the events, in order to elucidate the difference between everyday routine, as reflected in Edison's daily check on his invention, his round-the-world nightly journey, a journey of a semi-religious character, an exaggeration which is unrealizable in the actual world, and its opposite, the deed performed by the man whom the narrator saw on the hundredth night. The man's act is the dystopian deed by which he tries to smother every sign of hope and imposing darkness on the world, whether by acts of violence or by spreading ignorance and dissention. All this guarantees that the people will be terrorized, and their self-confidence shaken as much as possible, so that they will not dare to change things. The man in this story is described in a way that inspires fear, as climbing the pole in order to cut off power with a hammer, thus destroying Edison's invention and foiling his attempts to bring illumination to the people. The second point is that she does not know the man. In the story he is "a man", indefinite. He thus does not target her personally. The third point is that he is a man rather than a woman, while the narrator is a woman. All these elements together make it clear that his observation of her is gender-based and does not have a personal background, that although he does not know her personally, he adopts the traditional male role of keeping light away from her as much as possible and taking her place everywhere in the public sphere. The woman shows her weakness, her need for light from the man as the one solely responsible for changing her situation. But she does see a glimmer of light and tries to escape from her hopeless situation. Her attempts, however, are doomed to failure despite her efforts. The period which she mentions, ninety-nine nights, is a very long time, during which she tries to reach the light that hides inside her. In this whole time she does not notice that there is someone trying to make her fail, to break her. But after this time, at a turning point for her, she perceives that the only one responsible for her failure is the man whom she saw climbing the pole with a hammer in his hand.

In this story, the narrator identifies with Edison, who said whenever he failed at something: "This is great. We demonstrated that this, too, is not the right way to arrive at the invention of which I dream", while she says: "I fumbled about in my wretched attempts to reach the light hiding in my depths". This shows just how determined she is to pursue her goal, to reveal her inner sources of strength despite all her failed attempts. This story shows just how weak this woman is and how much she needs a man, be it Edison or some other man, in order to change her life, although she realizes that it is she who must strive to change herself, beginning with finding the light inside herself, rather than depending on others to illuminate her path.

The story's title, "Nocturnal Journey", alludes to the Prophet's nocturnal journey to heaven. The Arabic word for this, *mi'rāj*, also means "ladder" or "step" ('bn Mañūr_1970, ' R, J). In the story, the man's deliberate climb up the utility pole towards space in order to get rid of the glimmer of light is the dystopic *mi'rāj*, that is, a climb that announces the fall of the woman and of mankind, in order to destroy every harbinger of good in the world. At the same time, there is the utopian *mi'rāj*, the ascent by Edison and other inventors and discoverers, who to this day do things for the good of all mankind. Their work is thus sacred, and important for moving humanity towards a better future. The light bulb was one of the most important inventions ever, despite Edison's ninety-nine failures before he succeeded the hundredth time. Successful inventions cannot continue to be made unless others are illuminated and given confidence in themselves that they may complete their life's journey.

3.3.The characters

The writer Zakī Darwīsh in his story "Nişf" ("Half") deals with the theme of war and its effect on the combatants and their loved ones, who become disfigured and lifeless due to the shock of having lost those whom they loved.

Half

My friend returned from the last war and knocked on the door. I opened the door. He was a helmet without a head, shoes without feet, sleeves without arms. Before the mirror I saw myself: Half a face, half a nose, half a mouth, one ear and one eye.(Darwīsh, 2019).

At the very beginning of the story the narrator tells us that his friend returned from the war, his last war. But the moment he knocked at the door he is described as non-existing, appearing without a body, a helmet without a head. When the head does not exist, neither does the person. The same goes for the footless shoes and the armless sleeves. The description tells us that the friend's clothes and belongings returned to the narrator, but his friend did not, despite the knock on the door, probably by the person who brought his friend's effects, but not his body, for he had died in the war.

In the story's second scene the narrator describes his own image as reflected in the mirror, without any connecting particle, preparation or expression of the emotions he felt when he saw his friend's possessions and the clothes that he had worn in the war. Now the effect of the news of his friend's death can be seen: He describes himself as having become half of himself in the wake of his loss. He is now distorted and incomplete, for he has lost his other half in the war. He expresses his loss as losing half of his face and half of each part of his face, having lost his existence with the disappearance of his friend. What he sees as he stands before the mirror reflects the narrator's feelings after having heard the terrible news, without mentioning any emotion or feeling.

In this concise description, the writer uses the device of dystopian characters in order to convey the damage which war does to the mind and body of those who fell in war, and the effect of this loss on their friends, whose lives become distorted and incomplete, since their other half has died in the war and left a void in their souls that no one can fill. The narrator's description of the friend who returned from the war is very unusual: It is only a partial return, but although physically he is missing, he knocks at his friend's door, a sign that the narrator is still important for him, so much so that he presents him with the last clothes that he wore, or at least what remained of them. The narrator does not mention all the clothes that he wore, only those on three parts of his body: The head, the arms and the feet. But the most important parts of the

Lost Utopia in Palestinian Flash Fiction

body itself, the head and the torso, are missing. A person can live without limbs, but not without the upper part of the body, which in this story is missing. We are presented with an ugly scene, of what war does to men's spirits when they see their friends' corpses or just their clothes, which are also not all there. The effects of war are reflected in the mind of the narrator, who now sees himself as incomplete as well, after having lost his friend, his "other half" in the war. The narrator's loss leaves him emotionally damaged and permanently distorted.

This story describes the permanent harm which war leaves behind in the human psyche. The combatants do not die alone in war; their friends and families also experience a kind of death, since they feel the loss throughout their lives. For this reason, war is described in the story in the ugliest way possible, by mentioning horrible details and missing faces, the worst that a person can feel in life.

The device of alienation is used in the story's plot. The combatant is depicted as returning without his head, something quite illogical, just like the knock on the door by someone without arms and legs, and the narrator's description of himself as having only half a face. The reader who sees these descriptions is astonished and asks himself what the motive for them can be. Note that the narrator's description of himself as having only half a face is a consequence of the first image, that of his faceless and armless friend. The mirror which the narrator uses to see his own face is in fact the image of his faceless friend. The missing body parts described by the writer in this story point to a mental void in the narrator, created by the physical absence of his friend. The parts of the face that have been lost are those responsible for the senses, so that the loss of his friend caused him to lose his ability to perceive external triggers, that is, he has become permanently handicapped.

3.4. The language

Rītā 'Ōdeh, a writer from Nazareth in her story "Ghadan" ("Tomorrow") addresses the theme of the poverty and misery of a family in the shadow of war, the family's inability to meet the needs of its children because of the difficulty of getting out of the house, of finding work and obtaining money, due to the lack of security outside. Under such circumstances, a person feels chained and weak, dominated by political and security issues that frustrate all aspects of his life, including his family.

Tomorrow

The child curled up near her father, seeking protection from the cold of October. She asked:

- When will you buy me a coat?
- Tomorrow.
- And socks?
- Tomorrow.

One the next day she tried to save those white doves in the minarets of hope, as she once again posed her disturbing question:

- Father, when will you buy me...

All the directions became confused before her eyes. The worms ate away at the staff of worry. The letters turned into prickly pears in her throat as she beheld a cloudy tear in the eye of her father, who averted his face from her, lowering his gaze far, far away, where the bombs were exploding, and his voice rattled:

- Didn't I tell you that tomorrow? ('ūda, 2005)

The story opens with the girl's need to cuddle up to her father for protection and warmth. She feels cold and asks a question whose purpose is to discover when he will buy her a coat and socks. The question shows her need to know the time when this will happen, perhaps because her father had promised her to buy them but could not obtain what she wanted due to the ongoing war. These basic necessities mentioned by the girl are what she really needs. She did not ask for candy or for anything else that would give her pleasure, just the physical warmth that cannot be provided by the spiritual warmth that she obtains from her father.

In the next paragraph, the narrator begins with the semi-sentence: "Tomorrow", meaning in the near or far future, not necessarily on the following day. The girl thinks that perhaps on the following day, she will get what she wants. She tries to remind her father of his promise to her, but stops her questioning when she notices that he is weeping because the war outside is making it impossible for him to keep his promise. The circumstances are stronger than him. Yet he still repeats his promise, in the form of a question implying disapproval: "Didn't I tell you that tomorrow?", intended to cause her to stop asking and to keep up her hopes for the distant future, which may or may not come.

In this story, the dystopian style is revealed in the language, more specifically in the word "tomorrow", which reflects the sorry state into which the family has fallen due to the unending war, that has frustrated the hopes of children and adults equally. The girl's hopes are very modest, just for some physical warmth in the shadow of the war. But the father's hopes are greater, although they cannot be realized in the near future. The word "tomorrow" thus has a different meaning for the girl and her father. For her, "tomorrow" is in the very near future, since she is not yet of perceiving a more distant time, while the father realizes that no solution will be forthcoming in the near future. For him, the word "tomorrow" is an expedient excuse and a means for disappointing his daughter at one and the same time.

Other dystopian features present the characters as weak, passive and negative, with no aspirations. The verb "curled up" highlights the cold felt by the girl, whom the war has made helpless and left her without hope. The same is true of the "white doves", which symbolize the question that she asked. are doomed to fly away whether she wants them to or not, because the war is stronger than her and her family. This is demonstrated by the fact that she tries to make them stay as long as possible, but her hope is doomed to flee as well. The second time she does not complete her question, because she realizes that the white doves have flown away and disappeared. For this reason, the sounds of her question have become prickly pears in her throat. It pains her to pose the question because she realizes that it was the cause of her father's weeping. She despairs and no longer has the strength to ask again, after the staff was eaten by worms. The father, too, is weak and does not believe in his ability to change things. His answers are curt and he is incapable of preventing his daughter from re-asking her question. He expresses his hope with the word "Tomorrow". But this is a hope that he knows will not be realized in the near future, as proven by the fact that he weeps, for a man does not weep unless he reached such depths of despair that he can no longer endure what is happening. He averts his face from his daughter, both out of shame and out of worry over the war that is being fought outside. The word "far" is repeated, as a sign that the war continues, the bombs do not stop exploding, and could come closer to home at any time. The rattle in the father's voice at the end of the story shows both his fear of what his happening outside and his inability to answer his daughter's unending questions. His reply "Didn't I tell you that tomorrow?" shows that he

knows that he cannot fulfill his promise, because of the situation in which the two of them find themselves. It also clarifies the difference between his own distant tomorrow and the child's immediate one. For children's ability to wait is limited, as is their patience. It is only as they grow up that they gradually become more patient, and must occasionally give up their simple dreams to ensure their own security and that of their family.

4. CONCLUSION

We intended to study the use of dystopia and utopia in Palestinian flash fiction. However, we did not find cases of the use of utopia, although we did encounter numerous cases in which dystopia was used in order to express reality as experienced by the author. We examined dystopian features in three domains: characters, language and plot. We found that dystopia was a device used frequently in Palestinian stories, because they provides a true reflection of reality and expresses the difficulties which people encounter in many circumstances, especially in times of war, which diminishes people and turns them into numbers, into a means in the hands of leaders who do not care how many lives are lost or how many people are scarred by the horrors of war which they witness. People's tomorrow, their future is uncertain under these circumstances and they entertain no hope that they will be able to extricate themselves from their situation. Pessimism is thus passed on from the father to the children, who also experience war and sometimes become its victims. This produces a submissive, desperate generation which is incapable of imagining a solution to its problems, as we saw in the story "Tomorrow", in which there is no hope for change in the situation in which the father and his daughter find themselves. The daughter thus grows up without thoughts of the morrow and gives up even her simple hopes and expectations, in order to spare her father's feelings and meet her need for security. The story "Half" similarly shows the living incapable of coping with the deaths of loved ones in the war, and remain incomplete, in body and in mind.

As for the character types that appear in the stories, we found that all were lacking in willpower, passively accepting what happened outside. In many cases, they do not actually react to what happens to them, but rather look on unmoving at what happens. Even when the narrator is the story's main character, he shows himself as weak and marginalizes himself, like the other characters. This is the case in the story "Half", in which the narrator gives expression to his weakness and his inability to accept death. The same is true of "Nocturnal Journey", in which the narrator submits to what others do to her and does not have the power to extricate herself from her despair and frustration.

The third element with which we dealt was the dystopian language used in such stories. We found that their language was filled with negative meanings. The authors occasionally played on words and used incomplete paronomasia to express a negative meaning, as in the story "Tomorrow", in which the writer highlights the difference between the father's distant tomorrow and the daughter's immediate one, and the mental gap created between the two generations as a result of this usage, the severity of the problems, and the impossibility of solving them. The language is usually symbolic and the words that are used have a different dimension to their meaning, as in the title of "Nocturnal Journey", in which the journey is a negative one. One other thing that we found in the dystopian language used in these stories is hyperbole: Some of the stories used exaggeration in the way they conveyed the plot and exploited language as a means for extending meanings to the maximum, in order to affect the

reader emotionally in an attempt to upset him as much as possible and incite him to action, as in the story "Half".

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