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Countering (His)story: The Politics of Silence and Postcolonial Power in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

This study examines Coetzee's Foe (1987) via the lenses of intertextuality, parody, and satire, with a particular emphasis on its subversive reinvention of Defoe's colonial story, resistance to colonial authority, and subtle reevaluation of postcolonial subjecthood. Beyond the typical examination of Foe as an intertextual antidote to Robinson Crusoe(1719), the essay digs into the subtle articulation of power inside the silence of the subaltern. It contends that the traditional categorization of the "subaltern who cannot speak" masks an active subject whose resistance is carefully woven into the textile of unspeakability. In Foe, silence transforms from mere absence to a performing act, and unspeakably develops as a poignant form of expression. Friday's stillness is a reflection of Homi Bhabha's "sly civility," exemplifying a post-colonial approach that allows indigenous people to manage imperial authority through silence and passivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, there has been a significant surge in post-colonial literature aimed at reevaluating how Europeans have depicted non-European societies and their cultures. Within this context, numerous African novelists, including Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Wole Soyinka, Nadime Gordimer, and Tayeb Saleh, among others, have endeavoured to liberate Africa and its people from the confines of Western stereotypes. They do so by contradicting, challenging, questioning, or deconstructing the dominant Western narrative.

M. Coetzee is one of those post-colonial writers who has stupendously engaged in a dialogue with Western canonical texts, trying strenuously to free Africa and her people from the trait of inferiority. In his *Foe* (1986), Coetzee parodies Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) in a way that establishes a post-colonial version of Defoe's text. By employing what might be called "post-colonial intertextuality," Coetzee reverses the colonial hierarchy that Daniel Defoe

sharply constructs in his famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*, so that Crusoe (the novelist) will no longer be the European "I" with all its values, and Friday (the native character) will no longer be the hopeless and savage other in need of western civilization.

Many critical reviews have tried to read *Foe* in relation to the notions of intertexuality, parody, and satire, with a strong emphasis on the novel's parodic (re)writing of Defoe's colonial novel, its rejection of colonial authority, and its revalorization of post-colonial subjecthood. Yet, they have rarely paid attention to the politics of silence and dynamics of power within the intrigue of colonial and postcolonial settings. In addition to its reading of Coetzee's *Foe* as an intertextual reversal of colonial power, this article attempts to demonstrate how the unspoken sublternity is turned into a postcolonial strategy of power, and how what is (post)colonially defined as "the subaltern who cannot speak" is actually transformed into an active subject whose resisting utterance lies hidden in his unspeakability. In Coetzee's *Foe*, I argue that silence becomes non-silence and unspeakability becomes dramatically a performing enunciation and an eloquent articulation. Besides contradicting Friday's submissive utterance *in Crusoe*, Friday's silence in *Foe* corresponds to what Homi Bhabha calls "a sly civility," an anti-colonial situation that allows the natives to circumvent the imperial exercise of power and create a form of disobedience that manifestly appears in forms of passivity and civility (Bhabha, 1994, 132-144).

2. Intertextuality: From Literary Criticism to Postcolonial Writings

2.1. Intertextuality: Origin and Definition

In traditional comparative literature, the term "influence" is quite useful when it refers to the interlink between literary texts. In modern comparative literature, "influence" was abandoned and replaced by the concept of "intertextuality," as the former emphasises authorship and certainly implies a certain hierarchy between works of literature. Starting in 1960, "intertextuality" has become influential and momentous in literary criticism and has widely contributed to reading various literary texts in relation to other texts. The concept emerged in mid-1960 with Northrope Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, which views literature as "a self-contained system" in which genres, modes, types, and forms of writing are verbally interrelated. In other words, Frye sees the whole literature as an entire literary text. For this, he believes that critics should not look at the literary work by itself but examine its relation to the entire world of literature (Frye, 1957).

The real development of the concept began primarily with post-structuralist theorists, who did go beyond structuralists' *textuality*, which defines the literary text as an independent system conveying meaning through its structural components. For poststructuralists, the

literary work is considered an open text responding to and interacting with other texts. This means that the text is not a physical entity, but texts are primarily linked to each other, as the prefix "inter" might suggest. The concept was initially formulated by the semiotician Julia Kristiva, whose Bulgarian origin and mastery of Russian language allowed her to develop the concept from the theoretical foundations of Mikhail Bakhtin. Kristeva refers to texts in terms of two axes: "a horizontal axis connects the author and the reader of a text, and a vertical axis connects the text to other texts" (Kristeva, 1987, p.69). And because any "text is constructed as a mosaic quotation, and any text is the absorption and transformation of another," Kristeva suggests that critics should "sit it within the totality of previous texts." (Kristeva, 1986, 37). Thus, the literary work is no longer a self-contained system as the structuralist school of literary criticism adopts, but rather" a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthe, 1979, p.146). In this respect, every writing is a form of intertext; any work of literature does not stand by itself but rather interacts with, answers back, or parodies other texts.

For poststructuralists, no one can today interpret a novel, a poem, or a play without being conscious that it alludes, in some way or another, directly or indirectly, to other previous texts. In fact, texts do not have limited boundaries; they are connected to other texts. For this, Michel Foucault declares:

> The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network[...] The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands [...] its unity is variable and relative. (Foucault, 1972, p. 23)

In this sense, it is believed that meaning does not lie inside the literary text but is built upon previous works of literature. So, readers, critics, and historians' interpretations of literature need to engage in rediscovering the relations between the text and other texts through an endeavour to answer the following question: Does the literary text quote, allude, imitate, parody, or react to other texts?

2.2.The Postcolonial Intertext

The oriental/colonial other is linked to savagery, inhumanity, cannibalism, darkness, and submission in colonial literature, while the Western self is associated with civilization, reason, advancement, light, and power. Anything that is a part of "we" stands for kind and

admirable principles, while anything that is a part of "them" typically embodies derogatory terms. In his book Orientalism, Edward Said explains how the oriental subject is constructed as Europe's cultural other in a way that if "the west.....is rational, developed, humane, superior," the Orient must be " aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior" (Said, 1978, 300). The othering of the other in colonial writings functions as a colonial discourse that justifies territorial invasion, supports *the civilization mission*, and promulgates the myth of white man's superiority. In this way, "both [colonialism and imperialism] are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include the notion that certain territories and people "require" and beseech domination (Said, 1993, p. 8).

As a matter of fact, the postcolonial novel has appeared to counter colonial discourse and resist, challenge, and deconstruct the image that Western writings construct for Africa and Africans. Initially, the postcolonial novel emerged as an anti-colonial weapon that attacked military colonialism and foregrounded the political struggle for liberation. Later on, it developed as a response to and a reaction against colonial discursivity in all its forms, thereby challenging Western constructions of non-European reality, dismantling dehumanising assumptions, and stressing the natives' difference, uniqueness, and agency.

So, it is in this context of "answering back" that intertextuality appears as a (re)writing strategy in postcolonial novels. Many postcolonial novelists have consciously chosen to model their works on some previous Western works by referring to, alluding to, or imitating Western canonical texts in a way that subverts colonial discourse and reestablishes postcolonial legitimacy. Intertextuality in all its forms (mimicry, parody, sarcasm, etc.) has been employed "with the view of restructuring European reality in postcolonial terms" (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.32).

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is, for instance, one of the postcolonial novels which engages in a profound discussion with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe skillfully subverts the colonial ideas inherent in Conrad's work, giving an alternative narrative that challenges prejudices and presents a more accurate representation of African societies. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is also a master class in intertextuality, combining themes of Indian history, mythology, and popular culture. The novel examines colonial legacies, the ambiguities of postcolonial identity, and the challenges of nation-building.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is another example offering a counter-narrative to Charlotte Bront's *Jane Eyre* and challenging the original text's Eurocentric perspective. Rhys gives voice to the disenfranchised character Bertha Mason, disturbing and enlarging the classic

colonial story. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* uses Kenyan history and oral storytelling traditions to describe the battle for independence. The novel's intertextual engagement with the Mau Mau revolt and Indigenous mythology offers a diverse and realistic alternative to colonial historiography. The list of examples is very extensive.

3. Countering Robinson Crusoe: Colonial Power Lessened

3.1. Cruso vs. Crusoe

Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) is a first-person novel, telling the story of Crusoe, who, after his long journey across the sea near South America, finds himself marooned on a remote deserted island, spending twenty-eight years before being rescued. According to many post-colonial critics such as Lewis Nkobsi and Gayatri Spivak, Daniel Defoe's version has been widely considered a colonial novel due to the way Crusoe defines himself and sees Friday, a black native. As post-colonial critics have assumed, the novel elevates the white European man to a high position of civilization and light, whereas it relegates the African man to a lower position of slavery, savagery and submission.

Although *Robinson Crusoe* was written hundreds of years ago, a new story of Defoe's island was constructed in 1987 when Coetzee wrote his novel *Foe*. Coetzee's story re-imagines the island story of Defoe from a postcolonial perspective. It is a narrative of an English woman called Susan Barton who follows her abducted daughter to Brazil where she stays at a place called Bahia. While she is on her way back to England, she finds herself marooned on the island where Cruso (in contrast to Defoe's Crusoe) and Friday have long been marooned. After being rescued, Susan writes a diary of her life on the island and gives it to a novelist Daniel Foe so that he would make it readable. In her seminal book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehemer sees Coetzee's Foe as a counter-text to *Robinson Crusoe*. This paper basically supports Boehemer's view while it tries to show with specific examples from the two novels how Foe contradicts *Robinson Crusoe*. Crusoe in Defoe is a major character within his own narrative. The entire story from the very start to the end is told from his own perspective. After being marooned on the island, he epitomizes ingenuity and civilization. With his intelligence, technology and handwork, he creates a civilized life on the deserted island. Crusoe challenges the tropical land, and with his hard work builds a secure shelter:

> During his confinement in my cover by the rain, I worked daily two or three hours at enlarging my cave and by degrees worked it on towards on side, till I come to be outside of the hill, and made a door or way out, which come beyond my fence or will, so I come in and out this way (Defoe, 1719, p.132)

Next, Crusoe attempts to replicate his European society on the island, he plants lands, raises animals, and even comes to form a scientific experiment to discover the order of the seasons on the island, as a result, Crusoe himself comes to say:

> the rainy season and the dry season began now to appear regular to me and I heard to divide them so as to provide for them accordingly, but I bought all my experience before I had it, and this I am going to relate was one of the most discouraging experiments that I made (Defoe,1719, p.133)

Furthermore, several times in the novel, Crusoe refers to himself as the king of the island, and even at the end of the novel he explicitly refers to the island as a colony of his. Accordingly, Crusoe establishes a master-slave relation when he saves Friday, a black native, from the cannibals and takes him as his own slave, teaching him behaviours, language and religion. Ultimately, Defoe's Crusoe is redeemed as the European self with all its positives.

Coetzee's Cruso is quite different from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In his essay "Postcolonial literature as counter discourse," the critic Kehinde sees that Coetzee's Crusoe is "recasted as a minor character with a woman centered narrative," thereby distorting and twisting the 'truths' that readers assume from Defoe's original" (Kehinde, 2003, p. 46). In *Foe*, on Cruso island grows no seeds, fruits or flowery bushes but " a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides...with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 6).

In *Foe*, Crusoe becomes Cruso, a lazy character, and as Kehinde himself views "a weak-minded moutain of insecurity, who unlike the original protagonist, lives sullenly...without only few tools, no gun, no bible, no writing, no records" (Kehinde, 2003, p. 47). He cannot build a secure shelter, but only uses huge rocks on the island to construct terraces in which no crops can grow. He refuses even to search the wreck of the ship for tools that may better his situation. Therefore, the narrator finds it " a pity that from the wreck Crusoe should have no more than a knife" (Coetzee, 1987, p.16).

Above all, Cruso's ending is totally dissimilar from Crusoe's. The former's end ends happily since he can successfully return back to his country, continuing his life even with more experience and power. On the contrary, Cruso's ending is tragic; he dies while returning back home after a struggle with a serious illness. According to Kehinde such a choice of ending " contradicts the typical ending of the canonical text, which asserts...that the growth of the character or the capacity for defining action has ceased" (Kehinde, 2003, p. 48). To explain

Kehinde's view in simple words, Coetzee's ending attempts to impede any growth of the white man presented by Cruso's personality.

Briefly put, Cruso in *Foe* is no longer the centred protagonist of Daniel Defoe. Rather, he is an uncentered character who leads a very simple life with a tragic end on a barren island. He has no wisdom, no technology and no creative mind. He is a silent man with very limited capacities, weak- will and a pessimistic attitude towards his life on the island.

3.2. Defoe vs. Foe

Mr Foe is another example of Coetzee's version of rejection of colonial power. In the first version, Daniel Defoe is himself the author of Crusoe's story. He is not merely a simple author, but a very successful author whose adventurous novel has been achieving public importance and value for a long time in history. In Coetzee's version, after Susan Barton returns to England, she starts telling her own story, making it sellable. In fact, Coetzee's version transforms Daniel Defoe from an authoritative author to an indirect author and from a creative novelist to a minor character within a woman-centred narrative.

More importantly, Jimenez, in his paper "Writing Foe: De-authorizing (De)Foe," argues that Defoe has been de-authorized in Foe. As Jimenez himself explains, when Daniel Foe starts constructing Susan Barton's story as she has told him, Susan opposes the way he wants to write the story of Cruso's island. Susan desires to tell the truth whilst Mr. Foe endeavors to construct a truth, and to make an artistic representation. He wants to include any imaginary element to make the story attractive. Yet, Susan insists repeatedly on her desire to stick to the reality of the story. To illustrate, Jimenez states that when Susan is asked by Mr. Foe to include some of her own personal life, she simply responds, "[they] were not the truth," and what we "accept in life, we cannot accept in history" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 67). In this respect, Susan Barton, as Jimenez's view expresses, does not accept Daniel Defoe's authorship, which is an indication of her rejection of Daniel Defoe's Western forms of writing which is not a reflection of reality, but mere representation and so consequently a big lie. (Coetzee, 1987, pp. 14-16). Therefore, Susan attempts to avoid Mr. Daniel Foe lies, turning to believe that her own telling of her own story is necessary, I would rather be the author of my story than have lies told me" (Coetzee,1987, p. 40). In short, Coetzee's version, through Susan Barton narratological conflict with Mr. Foe discards the colonial authorship of Daniel Defoe as being not neutral but truthless account.

To summarize, *Foe* shrinks colonial power by transforming Daniel Defoe and his protagonist into mere minor characters: Daniel Foe and Cruso. The former's colonial power is

omitted: he is weak, hollow, and passive. On a second level, Daniel Defoe's authority of authorship is belittled and accused of truthlessness and unreliability.

4. Postcolonial Power Re-admitted

4.1. Friday's Silence and Narrative Centrality

Foe as a counter text to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is not merely manifested through the rejection of the coloniser's power and authority, but it is also clearly apparent through the revalorization of the postcolonial subject. The character of Friday in *Foe* is strengthened by a sense of clear opposition to Defoe's colonial representation of Friday. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe's relationship with Friday comes as a master-slave relationship. In the beginning, when Crusoe saves Friday, he teaches him the word "master," in addition to every other necessary word that could serve a master-slave relationship. And this is what makes Crusoe himself refer to Friday's actions as "submission," "servitude," and "subjection" (Defoe, 1719, p. 264).

In Defoe, Friday is instructed in a given language and religion in a successful attempt by Crusoe to civilise him and convert him to Christianity. For this, Crusoe himself declares: I begin to instruct him in the knowledge of the true God; I tell him that the great maker of all things lived up to these, pointing towards heaven (Defoe, 1719, p. 278). In contrast, Friday in *Foe* is no longer a slave; His relationship with Cruso is one of friendship, not slavery. They are the only friends on the island, and Cruso relies heavily on Friday for assistance in constructing a rocky shelter and food.

Another difference between the two Fridays in the two novels is the extent of their importance to the plot. In *Foe*, Friday is the first character whom Susan Barton meets when she is stranded on the island, and it's Friday himself who takes her to meet Cruso (Coetzee, 1987, p. 5). As a result, the plot of the story could not even have started without Friday's meeting with Susan Barton. What also makes Friday a central character is the fact that he "has no tongue" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 22). When Susan discovers his mutilation, the man consequently becomes the object of her fascination. Consequently, he plays the greatest role in the plot movement. In simple words, if Friday does not fascinate Susan, her story might have stopped at its first stage because it would be devoid of any motivating object that could make Susan's story keep moving forward. But as Susan is extremely fascinated by Friday's mutilation, the plot of the story keeps moving in an attempt to discover Friday's reality. On the contrary, Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* is not important to the plot, seeing that the object that propels the story ahead is Crusoe's instinctive drive to survive, not Friday's mutilation.

In brief, Friday in Coetzee's novel *Foe* is not more of a marginalised character whose persona is associated with slavery, submission, and debasement. Rather, he is a centred character whose relationship with Crusoe and the novel's plot is of great significance.

4.2.Postcolonial Silence as a Hidden Transcript

The biggest difference between Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* and that in *Foe* is that the latter is dumb. Giving no voice to Friday is not merely a passing choice, but it is of paramount importance that needs a clear elaboration. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday is not dumb but he has the potential to speak language. As a result, he is instructed a given language and religion. Even that ability to speak language makes Crusoe able to understand the habit of Friday's people:

> **Master:** Well Friday, what does your nation do with the men they take? do they take them away and eat them?
>
> **Slave:**Yes, my nation eats men up too; eat all up (Defoe, 1719, p. 266)

Consequently, Friday becomes as Crusoe wills, a submissive slave who lives with the colonizer's norms and religion.

Coetzee's Friday is totally different. As he is dumb, he has the lack of linguistic abilities to learn language and culture. Therefore, his silence "can be read as a form of resistance against all forms of assimilating him into the western norms(...), for his reality and identity remains his own, outside the reach of any form of expression" (The Strategy of Intertexuality, p. 46). On a second level, when one has no ability to speak language, his or her identity may be very difficult to be understood, and as a result he/she cannot be misrepresented. Friday's character is a similar case. As Tansley puts it:

> Friday's actions are composed of simple elements. We recognize them as a dance or an offering, and yet we cannot own an understanding of them. Friday does not want to be read, so can relish certain parts of his identity as untarnished by an author or narrator. (Tansley, 2009, p. 4).

Then, Friday's silence is not passive, but a form of immunity against any possible tarnished representation. For this, Susan declares that Friday's "story unable to be sold or unable to be told by me" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 120). Thus, Friday's lack of language makes him distant from being assimilated in the colonizer's culture, and from being misrepresented.

Silence becomes a source of authority and a means of agency in Coetzee's work. Aside from the fact that silence is a metaphor for postcoloniality and subalternity, silence is used here

as a tactical tool of historical, social, political, and cultural resistance, in contrast to traditional forms of resistance where postcolonial speakability turns into an obsession. According to postcolonial logic, native articulation and voice must trespass on the colonial process of silencing, which has been imposed on them as an inferior position of exclusion. For Edward Said, speaking is essential to self-liberation and material detachment from western will and knowledge since Europe has historically suppressed Oriental interloculters in an attempt to subjugate them. Similarly, recognizing that local practices, customs, and habits are constantly hushed or pushed to the corner, Gayatri Spivak invests in extensive intellectual endeavours to consider how the subaltern can speak rather than be spoken about. This postcolonial logic is rethought in *Foe*, where silence is praised as an intrinsic prerogative that opposes all forms of colonization. While Friday remains silent throughout the novel, he immediately distances Defoe from his historical teaching mission, opposes cultural assimilation, and fights political surrender. Friday cannot be dominated, enslaved, or contained when he is silenced.

Friday's silence is consistent with what Homi Bhabha refers to as "sly civility," in which the coloniser attempts to instil his own culture in the colonised, but fails because the native misunderstands the non-local given information or explains the Western religion through his own understanding of what religion means. According to Bhabha, the refusal of locals to accept colonial authority destabilizes and undermines imperial power:

> Rhenius: What do you want?
> Indian Pilgrim: Whatever you give I take.
> R: What then do you want?
> IP: I have already enough of everything.
> R: Do you know God?
>
> IP: I know he is in me. When you put rice into a mortar and stamp it with a pestle, the rice gets clean. So, God is known to me [the comparisons of the Heathen are often incomprehensible to a European]. ...
>
> IP: But tell me in what shape do you like to see him?
> R: In the shape of the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent, the Eternal, the Unchangeable, the Holy One, the Righteous, the Truth, the Wisdom and the Love.
> IP: I shall show him to you: but first you must learn all that I have learned-then you will see God. (Bhabha, 1994, p.140)

This example from Bhabha demonstrates how the natives' cross-cultural illiteracy renders the coloniser's narrative demand incomplete and shattered. The English missionary asks questions, but the Indian pilgrim misunderstands them. In doing so, the Indian pilgrim directly or indirectly prevents the formation of colonial power. As a result, the coloniser's quest

for dominance is rejected, and he becomes paranoid. This example is identical to what one finds in Coetzee's *Foe*. Mr. Foe's attempt to integrate Friday into his own culture and religion fails due to Friday's mutation and silence. In this way, silence turns into a poetics of transgression, or what James C. Scott calls "a hidden transcript," a situation in which a means of domination is transformed into a means of subversion, where an inscribed sign of submission hides within itself an unseen form of dissent (Scott, 1990, pp. 1-9).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Coetzee employs Julia Kristeva's intertextuality as a postcolonial narrative method through which he contradicts Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and its colonial established discourse. Robinson Crusoe, as with other colonial writings, has inflated and exaggerated colonial hegemony while deflating and decreasing African man's humanity. Crusoe is a good example of the hegemonic colonial power claimed in colonial writings. Crusoe is a man of civilisation, knowledge, and mastery. He is a centred character who has all the capacities to be the supreme man on his own island: he is intelligent, adventurous, optimistic, and a hard worker. Crusoe relies on himself to build a shelter, plant lands, raise goats, and even possess the qualities of qualities of a white European man to engage in the process of civilising the uncivilised Other. Away from these representations, Friday is a man of slavery, savagery, and submission. He is dependent on his master (Crusoe) for his living and guidance, and he lacks even the human values and qualities that make him in need of being civilised.

This colonial order that Defoe has built is reversed in Coetzee's *Foe*. Through imitative use of Crusoe's story and attitude, the novel Foe strips Crusoe of his colonial power. He is no longer the powerful Crusoe but a secondary, ridiculous character who lacks creativity, knowledge, and wisdom. Even the novel goes further to restrict the power of the novelist Daniel Defoe himself when it transforms him from a famous novelist to a marginal character whose authority as an author is belittled and accused of truthlessness and unreliability. On the contrary, Coetzee's Friday is a centred and major character without whom the story cannot stand up; and all the characters within the novel, especially Cruso, are dependent on his help.

Above all, because he is mutilated, Friday has a kind of immunity against any attempt to assimilate him into the Western colonial enterprise. As a result, his silence is no longer a passive gesture but rather an active one, resisting the colonial system of power and its mode of representation. In Foe, silence turns from a basic absence to a theatrical act, and unspeakability emerges as a poignant form of expressiveness. Friday's silence exemplifies Homi Bhabha's "sly

civility," a postcolonial strategy that enables indigenous people to manage imperial authority through silence and passivity.

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