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A REFLECTION OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY: JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Abstract

"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any"—Mahatma Gandhi. With these sayings by Gandhiji, one will be able to understand why, even in a borderless world where the diffusion of races and culture happens all the time, and many would simply accept without restraint, the cultures and identity of their adopted land, there remain some writers who, despite being part of a new land, are still deeply influenced by their motherland and various aspects of life that are distinctive and peculiar to their motherland. The writers concerned in this paper are K.S Maniam, Shirley Lim and Jhumpa Lahiri. All these writers have nationalities not of their motherland, but somehow, their writings are usually immersed with the thoughts and culture of their motherland. In this study, we will examine the strong influences imbedded in these writers of the culture of their motherland despite being in their new land. We will also portray how some of the characters assimilate in their new land, whereas some still have a sense of belonging towards their motherland.

Keywords: Diasporic Writers, In A Far Country, Joss and Gold, The Return.

Introduction

Almost without contest, the twentieth century can claim witness to the rise of ethnic consciousness; which was sang loud and clear through many struggles, writings, speeches and actions throughout the world. The struggle to uphold ones ethnicity or rather its purity, legacy and greatness is not done by a particular group but was shared by every quarter of the society from the aristocrats to the commoners. The greater social and geographic mobility of modern times has meant the dispersion of races and cultures all over the world. In this age, it has become pointless to consider the existence of several cultures and races in any one place as unique to that province.

Writers like V.S Naipal, Caryl Phillips, Bharati Mukerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amy Tan, Shirley Lim, Toni Morrison, K.S Maniam are just a few of the many writers who portray many voices and many cultures in their fiction. One common characteristic among these fiction pundits is all of them have taken the nationality of a country which is alien to their motherland. K.S. Maniam or Krishnan Subramaniam is a second generation Malaysian Indian. He is a descendent of a grandmother who had migrated from India to Malaya around 1916. Born in 1967 in London, England, Jhumpa Lahiri was raised in Rhode Island. She currently lives in New York. Born to Bengali Indian parents in London, she often went for vacations in Calcutta during her youth days. In the anthology, Interpreter of Maladies, she has dual settings as there are stories set in India even though most of it is set in America. Having both the Indian and American culture rooted in her, she depicts the voice of Indians in India and Indian immigrants in America very passionately and skillfully. In her debut novel Namesake, she writes about her Bengali culture quite authentically despite not living there. About the setting of her stories, Jhumpa writes, "The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life-New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background" (Nagpal 2010, p. 48). Shirley Geok-lin Lim was born in Malacca on December 27, 1944 to a Hokkien-Malayan father and Singaporean-Chinese 'Peranakan' mother. She graduated from University Malaya with a Bachelor of Arts in 1967 and soon after went on to do her Ph.D in Brandeis University, Massachusetts.

The themes that subsist in many of the work of these diasporic writers are displacement, migration and cross-fertilization of ideas. These writers' contributions to the field of literature are well reflected through the various awards that accompany their name. K.S. Maniam was awarded Raja Rao Award for his outstanding contribution to the literature of the South Asian Diaspora in New Delhi in 2000. Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her debut, Interpreter of Maladies. In the year 2008, she bagged the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award for Unaccustomed Earth. Shirley Lim has won the American Book Award which she won twice, once with her co-edited anthology, The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology (1989), and the second time, with her memoir, Among the White Moon Faces (1997).

These writers are no doubt the fore runners in the field of English fiction writing in Asia. Our hypothesis is that these writers, even though have taken up writing in English and have become part of a new land, are still deeply influenced by their motherland and



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various aspects of life that are distinctive and peculiar to their motherland. The obvious fact is that their mother culture still prevails rather vividly in their writings. Here, we will explore the strong influence of culture, worldview, the thoughts and beliefs that originated from their land of origin in their work. We will also see how these writers have, in their own method and style, managed to assimilate and blend their mother culture with that which had given asylum to them and in doing so, had generated works which are hailed as master pieces in the field of literature.

The authors and their work

In the novels, *The Return* (1981) and *In A Far Country* (1993), K.S. Maniam shows how the immigrants from India bring along their culture to the new world. The question of cultural identity in an immigrant society is seen in both the novels. These novels probe into the experiences of an immigrant community living in Peninsular Malaysia before and after independence. Maniam, who himself is born to Indian immigrant parents often concentrates in the issue of identity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society where the Indians are a minority. In the first novel, *The Return*, the focus is on the family of Periathai and her descendents and how they tried to assimilate themselves in this new land. The main character, Ravi, the third generation Indian, though faced a lot of crisis in the beginning was able to sustain his identity. He realized that the unwanted fate could be changed by acquiring proper education and skill. He is sent to an English medium school by his father after being persuaded by his step mother, Karupi. He sees a vast difference between the Western culture and his own. Through these carefully molded characters, Maniam shows how the Western education plays a vital role in changing the mindset of a child which could then lead to the identity crisis and cultivate a dislike towards his own community and way of life. It creates a channel for escapism from the eastern culture. Ravi, influenced and mesmerized by the colonial way of life, was led to a dilemma by the author and only recovers from it and came to terms with his life towards the end of the novel.

Maniam has clearly portrayed the mindset of a young child and a teenager who yearns to break away from the bondage of the age old Indian traditions, especially the caste system, which glued along with them from India. K.S. Maniam in his article, *In Search of a Centre* claims that Ravi's life may bear resemblance to his own "but they are only resemblances" (Maniam 1994: par.22). Like Ravi, Maniam too had furthered his studies in England to become a teacher. However, Maniam has admitted that in his adolescent years, he was strongly influenced by Western culture. He further states that the long journey to the English school that he attended did not give him a sense of belonging to the new country.

Maniam's second novel, *In A Far Country*, portrays a successful third generation immigrant Rajan who tries to assimilate his culture with the dominant culture of the land he has settled in. He is a successful real estate broker. However, this success does not help him to stabilize his mental trauma. He is haunted by the past and all the other characters he has met at the settlement in his younger days. He shuts himself in a room and avoids meeting people and family members. He frequently journeys to the places of his past without informing his wife, Shanti. In one of his flashbacks, Rajan is taken to the jungle by Zulkifli to show him the real land. They go on a journey of soul searching where they are supposed to look for a tiger and they were supposed to surrender every thought given to them from the past. When they stop to take a rest, Rajan sleeps off and has a dream. He realises that he is not a man but a chameleon. He realizes that his life has been but a mere pretence. Zulkifli claims that he has seen the tiger and is able to sense its existence. He explains that Rajan's failure to sense the tiger is because he does not have ancestors in Malaya (Maniam 1993, p. 101). Again, an older Rajan tries journeying through the jungle looking for the tiger and even though was able to sense it but could not see it. Through this, he is constantly reminded that he is not the son of the soil. Maniam explains this very symbolically by using the tiger (sons of the soil), the jungle (motherland) and the chameleon (immigrant). This is also obvious when Rajan goes to the jungle with Wali Farouk. Rajan says that a man becomes a native to the country only if he could identify with its landscape. However, Rajan finds out that the jungle didn't invite any relationship; in fact it only repulsed and rejected.

In both the novels, although the main focus has been given to the survival and assimilation of the third-generation Indian immigrants, Maniam has successfully grafted the struggle encountered by the early immigrants. These people, saddled with their own life style, beliefs, culture and religion try to nurture the seed of motherland in this new country. They struggle very hard to own a house (Periathai and Kannan in *The Return*) which they believed will help them to establish an identity but find themselves facing an identity crisis. Periathai the first-generation immigrant in Malaya died homeless after failing to obtain the land ownership from the Town Council Office of Bedong where she had built a house just like the ones back in India. After she died, Ravi's father, Kannan becomes mentally disturbed. After Ravi left for England to continue his studies, Kannan builds a small hut about twenty metres from the river where he lives with his first wife and children. He becomes a pious man and worships the same Nataraja Statue which Periathai had prayed to. Later, he becomes temperamental and starts attacking his family members. When his son Kumar dies, he buries him near the hut. Towards the end he becomes totally insane and burns himself to death. After his ashes and bones were scattered into the river, he



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becomes “part of the water and soil of the earth” (Maniam 1981, p. 172), an irony because he was not able to own the house legally. Through the character Ravi, Maniam points out the following:

It was history repeating itself: Periathai had somehow been perceptive in her last words. Her spirit really roamed the land, houseless! Why couldn't Naina accept the fact? At least Periathai had made, even if deluded a fair compromise. She had accepted a temporary tenure (Maniam 1981, p.158).

Though Kannan had a better life compared to his mother Perithai's, his greatest disappointment was not being able to own a house in this new land. To him, owning a house meant creating and establishing his identity in Malaya. The disappointment also led him to hallucinate. He claimed that he met Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi which portrays the patriotism still held for his motherland, India:

“We've done our best, Ravi”, he rambled. “I've spoken to Gandhi and Nehru. See this thundu? Mahatma wove it for me at his wheel. And Nehru said, ‘Why didn't you come to me before?’ I said I had no time. Working for my wives and children!”

“I told Mahatma about my latest car. ‘Not only white men drive cars nowadays,’ Mahatma said. He touched his body as if remembering the wounds he had received when thrown out of the train in other country. ‘You've done well,’ he said. But Nehru didn't smile. He said, ‘Go away’! (Maniam 1981, p. 168-169)”

Maniam's ability to give life to the emotional conflict harassing the Tamilians in Malaysia through symbolism is truly fascinating. Kannan's conversation needs to be dissected with a great deal of sensitivity to comprehend its meaning. Kannan meeting Mahatma and Mahatma praising him shows that Kannan had fought well for his rights (Town Council) in a foreign land and has established himself well. This was what Kannan had actually wanted. Kannan also described Nehru asking him about his delay in meeting him and finally chasing him. This symbolically means that Kannan is not welcomed in India for he had left it (or has turned his back to his mother land) long ago and had spent his entire life and youth in Malaya. Thus, he has not contributed anything to India and now that he is unable to establish an identity for himself in the second home, his mind and soul turned towards India. But, Nehru, who represents the Indian nation, does not want him back. Here, he loses his identity and is left in a vacuum; not knowing to which country he belongs to.

A similar situation is paced out in the novel, *In a Far Country*, of what the early Indian settlers went through in Malaya after leaving their motherland. Maniam successfully portrays how Indians struggled in the new land through the flashbacks of Rajan where his senile father used to blabber:

“Those stars were wrong to bring us here. But how can we stop ourselves from following their pull? Everything is joined together. One land's grass dies, another land's jungle is cool and full of fruits. Like blind bats we come to the fruit trees. There we're caught in the net (Maniam 1993, p. 6).

Why do the immigrants feel that way? Why do they fail to have a better life? This depression caused Rajan's father to become an addict to toddy as “...drinking toddy paved way for escapism.” (Maniam 1993, p 4). Muniandy, another character who came to Malaya with his wife fell into depression after her death. He lived a life of a soulless person and worked in the smoke house. When he was forced to retire, he hangs around on the streets, homeless and dies and Maniam cynically writes “during the final spasms, he kept his eyes closed on the world in which he had found no home (Maniam 1993, p. 22).

Rajan also recalls his frustrated mother who goes tapping the rubber trees with secret vengeance so that the latex spilled outside the cups. Rajan's father who learns her frustrations says the following:

“You want to cut something”, my father said, learning about her destructive moods, ‘cut me up. Yes, I brought you to these trees. Made you their slave. Put the wounds on me’ (Maniam 1993, p. 41)”.



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In a country like Malaysia, where political systems and social directions are very much controlled by dominant Malay bumiputra ethnic group, it is rather difficult for the non-bumiputras to have an assimilated identity. Prolific writer like K.S. Maniam feels that it is important to project their Indian culture and identity in their writings. Maniam claims that writing about Indian community in Malaysia “was not a blind loyalty to my own race; rather it was writing about a community which breathed closest to my heart” (Maniam 1994, par. 21).

The next novel with similar theme will be that of Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*. Her book *Joss and Gold* has three settings; Book 1 has its setting in Malaya, the second in America and the third in Singapore. The protagonist, Ai Lin is a Malaysian Chinese who tutors in a university. An independent woman, she reflects the new Asian woman who wants to break free from traditions. She is westernized through her interest in English literature and has a vision of herself going to America one day as she finds Malaysia boring. She is depicted as a tomboy who smokes and rides on motorbikes. She teaches English Literature and despite being the western type, marries Henry, a rich Chinese who studies Chemistry. She meets Chester, a Peace Corp worker and their friendship bloom and on May 13, when there were racial riots in Malaysia, and curfew was put into action, they made love in Chester’s room and Su Yin is the outcome of this one night stand. May 13 will never be forgotten by all Malaysians as it was on that fateful day that Malaysia’s multiculturalness was put to test. The three distinct races in Malaysia are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Mass migration of Chinese and Indians took place in the mid nineteenth century, encouraged by British colonization. These immigrants worked to exploit the country’s natural resource, for the benefit of the British colonial masters. After being colonized for 446 years, Malaya finally gained its independence in 1957. The socio-economic setting of the ten years after independence saw a growing disparity between the Malays and the Chinese. Indian businesses were run on a small scale and were confined mostly to money lending, textile and retail trade whereas the Chinese, with their big businesses, were seen as a threat to Malay political and economic future. The elections of 1969 saw the outburst of ethnic and racial violence. The riots were started by the Chinese and the Malays but soon involved all other groups. Abdullah, who represents the Malay race in this novel, is negative about a racial unity: “I told you the Chinese cannot push us too far. This is our country. If they ask for trouble, they get it” (Lim 2001, p. 98).

In the novel too, we are introduced to Paroo, a Punjabi Hindu and Gina, a Chinese who are very much in love with each other but are denied of a marriage by their parents who very much kept to their own tradition and culture. Shirley Lim probably visions that their marriage will serve as, “models of a new kind of Malaysia” (Lim 2001, p. 52). Abdullah is skeptical about this union as it is a, “Very difficult interracial affair..., better that like stay with like...” (Lim 2001, p. 58). Paro and Gina, unable to marry each other due to parental and societal pressure, take poison and Gina dies while Paro survives. In order to keep hold of their tradition, Gina’s parents lose their child. It is indeed sad that a pure relationship between two people would end up in death. It’s obvious that Paro and Gina could not deal with their parents who were too deeply embedded in their culture and traditions, and their position in the society that they belonged to, that they were willing to stand in between two lovers just to ensure that their names are not tainted in their society. They failed to see that this inter-relationship could improve race relations thus allowing racial distance to decline (Besharow and Sullivan 1996, p. 2) After the riots, Li An gives birth to Su Yin but upon realizing that she is not his child, Henry leaves Li An.

American culture is also highlighted in this novel through the marriage of Chester and Meryl. Meryl is a career woman and through her we see the American woman, willing to do without having children in order to climb the ladder of achievement. She is a woman who fights for her freedom to pursue her career and education without burdening herself with the question of having a child. This is clearly shown in the *Book Circling* which is set in Westchester Country, New York, 1980. Meryl is not willing to go through the sadness her mother went through, “Being an Irish Catholic, getting pregnant and hurrying into an unhappy marriage was part of that sad story” (Lim 2001, p.119).

To Meryl, her career comes first and she is much more passionate about her position in the New York City Parks than to be a mother and she’s looking forward to becoming the first woman commissioner in the Department and a baby would hinder her prospects. She lives in with Chester before marriage and gets pregnant and during her first month into her pregnancy, gets an abortion. She does not get Chester to be actively involved in her drastic decision as if he had no role to play in her pregnancy. In the same chapter, we are introduced to Roy, an Indian expatriate who is in America to work. Roy’s voice is introduced here by Shirley Lim to highlight the difference in the Western and Eastern culture, where American women make a choice between having a career and having a baby whereas in India, according to Roy, “we have many more people, many many children” (Lim 2001, p.123). Chester reluctantly agrees to abandon the idea of having a child but then the question arises as who would take the decision of taking a permanent precaution of avoiding a pregnancy. In the end, Chester goes for a vasectomy and finally yearns to see his daughter, Su Yin.



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Su Yin is a hybrid and the question she would ask herself would be, where do I belong and what would my identity be? In the third Book which has its setting in Singapore, we see Li An, Ellen and grandma, showing their utmost love towards Su Yin, to cover for the lack of love from her father. Both Chester and Henry come to Singapore to claim Su Yin. This situation is very well explained by Indira Karamcheti:

Singapore is the city of the future: both sanctuary and promised land, the place of opportunity and independence in which the past can be reconciled with the present. (Karamcheti par. 3)

Singapore, a multi cultural country becomes a 'new world' where reconciliation happens and racial differences is healed and according to Stuart Hill, "this New World has constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning" (Hill, p.236).

Jhumpa Lahiri meanwhile, in her novel titled Namesake explores the issues of immigrant Indians in America. The Indians, mainly from northern parts of Punjab first landed in Massachusetts in 1790. Between 1948 and 1965, as many as 6,474 East Indians entered the United States because of job and educational opportunities, assimilating themselves in the American culture and bringing along with them their unique and rich culture and tradition (Gupta 2011, par. 19). Readers are exposed of the Bengali culture through Ashima and Ganguli and their Bengali friends in America. We also get to know the Calcutta landscape through the Gangulis when they visit India. The first page itself, we read about a kind of Bengali food, also known as 'jhalumuri' in Bengali.

Rice Krispies and planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. ...sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India (Lahiri 2003, p.1).

Ashima has her first child, whom the Gangulis name Gogol. It is this name that causes conflict, an identity crisis of the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli or Nikhil Ganguli. In the Bengali culture, every person has two names, one is known as Daknam, the name which one is called by friends, family and relatives, whereas, Bhalonam is to be used in formal situation, to the world outside. Bhalonam is usually chosen by the senior member of the family, here, this job was given to Ashima's grandmother. The Gangulis wait for the letter that would contain the name from India. The letter never arrives and in America, a birth certificate needs to be issued with the name of the baby the day the baby is to be discharged whereas in India, "...it wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined" (Lahiri 2003, p.25). Being in a difficult position, Ashoke decides to name his son Gogol Ganguli, after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, his savior in a train crash years ago. With this name, we see Gogol face an identity crisis as he feels himself neither belonging to his country of birth or his motherland and he knows that he is not a Russian. Gogol sinks into depression.

Gogol's life was a steady decline into madness...he was reputed to be hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man (Lahiri 2003, p.91).

Gogol then changes his name to Nikhil Ganguli. It is with this name that he feels, "it's easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas" (Lahiri 2003, p.105). As Gogol grows up, he starts despising his Bengali culture and we see him moving more towards the western culture. His parents, on the other hand still hold on to their Bengali roots although we see some sort of assimilation in them. This condition remains true in most first generation immigrants whereby their minds and soul still lingers to their motherland and its culture and they usually can't understand how the second generation and the generations after could discard the culture of their original country. Ashima is disappointed that her children Gogol and Sonia could refer New Haven as their home. Ashima is annoyed and tells them, "Only three months and listen to you,...even after twenty years in America, [Ashima] still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home (Lahiri 2003, p.108).

She feels that she is unable to make America her home. Her living in-between makes it difficult for to accept that her children are too willing to accept the American culture, thus discarding their Indian Identity. She finds this dilemma very intricate, as Homi Bhabha aptly puts it: "all diaspora are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we" (qtd in Abiraami, p. 307)

With his new name, he is assured that he is an American teenager and takes on the western lifestyle. He starts smoking pot, lying to his parents about his late nights, and even kisses for the first time with the name Nikhil. Western culture has always been seen



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as a superior culture and its fashion is usually imitated by the east. In today's era, even the Japanese teenagers are crazy for Western fashion. Hindi movies of today have become soft-porn movies due to the western style clothing that the actors wear. Gogol too adopts these western cultures and prefers to celebrate Christmas than doing pujas to Durga and Saraswati. He and the other Bengali children prefer to enroll themselves into ballet classes and play softball instead of reading "handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance, and the revolutionary exploits of Subhash Chandra Bose" (Lahiri 2003, p. 66). Here, it is evident that the second generation American Indians are even willing to erase India's history from their minds so that they could accept the American culture at a faster rate. Gogol then starts to have affairs and his affair with Maxine ends up with him sleeping with her in her room while her parents are at home. Ashima finds out about it but, "refuses to admit to her Bengali friends" (Lahiri 2003, p. 166). After several affairs, Gogol finally marries Moshumi, a Bengali who was born in Britain but grew up in America. She goes to France to pursue her studies out of rebellion towards her parent's insistence that she pursue her studies in Chemistry. In France, Moushmi completely changes, both in style and psyche as she fully adapts herself to the American and European culture and philosophy. She pursues sex more vigorously and the animalistic sexual behaviour sees the decline of genuine intimacy. Their marriage turns sour as she leaves Gogol for Dimitri, her acquaintance since high school. Moushmi represents the Bengali who is so deeply rooted in her western lifestyle and culture that it would be almost impossible for her to reconcile with her Bengali values and culture. The different cultural strands often fit uncomfortably together and reconciling them into a harmonious whole can indeed be problematic. Jhumpa Lahiri has depicted the problems the immigrants face and this voice represents the many immigrants and the later generation in America.

Conclusion

We have seen the many voices of writers writing in English about the coexistence of their culture with the culture of the land they have taken asylum in. America has seen many races, many cultures which is unique in its own way. And this has made America unique in many ways. With writers like Shirley Lim, and Jhumpa Lahiri, people around the world could see and savour the many people living in America and along with that, we see the struggles the immigrants or hybrids face, in America and everywhere else.

Many of these immigrants have lived in their adopted country over a century. They have accustomed themselves to the way of life that characterize the nation. But yet now and then they are bound to come face to face with grotesque episodes that remind them the undying fact – that they are but an uninvited guest. So, it's inevitable if the writers, more often considered as the spokesperson of the race voices their agony, plight and the murmuring of the dissatisfied soul of the race in the form of fiction or semi fiction. These writers are not mere creative artist. They do not use their capacity to dwell in the world of hallucinating fantasies to intoxicate the readers. In the actual sense, these are social scientists – with a definite goal. They are passionate thinkers who understood the agony of their people and the fact that they are prisoners of circumstances. Thus, in their powerful language and imagination, literature found a way to voice the grievances of the souls that dwell in a land of prosperity but lost in the world of identity. In their hands, words transformed to magical tools that explore and expose the many unsaid words and misery engraved in the lives of their people who braved the ocean looking for a greener pasture. They try to define the misery that entangled their people and exorcise it. And this is only possible through writings. For it is only this medium of art, that gives them the freedom to comment, argue and expose the feelings of their race unchallenged and uninhibited. Their writings may not be able to change the course of history, salvage their people or reduce their plight. But yet it fills these authors with a sense of supreme contentment of having championed their struggle.

The new lands have indeed been kind to these writers. Malaysia has been kind to K.S. Maniam, just as America to Shirley Lim and Jhumpa Lahiri. It is this land that educated, fed and set the stage for their fame. But yet the gist of their writings is still the culture and the people of their mother land, or rather, the soul and spirit of their motherlands. This is because there exist a single characteristic which prevails above all the other characteristics that made these great authors – the fact that they are Indians and Chinese.



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