



BREAKING THE TRAUMATIC SILENCE OF CHILD ABUSE IN LUCY PREBBLE'S *THE SUGAR SYNDROME*

Büşra DAĞ^{1*}
Samet GÜVEN²

Abstract

The Sugar Syndrome is a play by Lucy Prebble that discovers the traumatic effects of child abuse through the eyes of a adolescent girl called Dani. The play explores the silence and taboo surrounding child abuse, as well as the sensitive and inner toll it takes on its victims. Through Dani's story, the work highpoints the position of breaking the silence and talking about abuse to heal and find fairness and at the same time it features topics of power dynamics, management, and trust in its plot. *The Sugar Syndrome* is an influential work that sheds light on the overwhelming reality of child abuse and the status of addressing it to back up survivors and avoid further harm. Furthermore, the play also inspects the impact of child abuse on the perpetrator and the complicated psychological aspects that contribute to abusive behaviour. In this respect, the purpose of this study is to search for the traumatic effects of child abuse in Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* by precisely concentrating on the sufferings of young generation.

Keywords: Trauma, Lucy Prebble, childhood, The Sugar Syndrome, virtuality.

LUCY PREBBLE'İN *ŞEKER SENDROMU*'NDA ÇOCUK İSTİSMARININ TRAVMATİK SESSİZLİĞİNE KULAK VERMEK

Öz

The Sugar Syndrome, Lucy Prebble'in Dani isimli genç bir kızın gözünden çocuk istismarının travmatik etkilerini ortaya koyan bir oyundur. Oyun, çocuk istismarını çevreleyen sessizliği ve tabuyu ve bunun kurbanlarına verdiği duygusal ve psikolojik zararı irdeliyor. Eser, Dani'nin hikayesi aracılığıyla, iyileşmek ve adaleti bulmak için sessizliği bozmanın ve taciz hakkında konuşmanın önemini vurguluyor ve aynı zamanda güç dinamikleri, manipülasyon ve güven temalarını da olay örgüsünde barındırıyor. *The Sugar Syndrome*, çocuk istismarının yıkıcı gerçekliğine ve kurbanları desteklemek ve daha fazla zarar görmelerini önlemek için bununla ilgilenmenin önemine ışık tutan güçlü bir çalışmadır. Ayrıca oyun, çocuk istismarının fail üzerindeki etkisini ve istismarcı davranışa katkıda bulunan karmaşık psikolojik faktörleri de inceler. Bu bağlamda bu çalışmanın amacı, Lucy Prebble'in *The Sugar Syndrome* adlı eserinde çocuk istismarının travmatik etkilerini ergenlerin yaşadıkları acılara odaklanarak incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Travma, Lucy Prebble, çocukluk, The Sugar Syndrome, sanallık.

¹ M.A. Student, Karabük University The Institute of Graduate Studies English Language and Literature Department, ORCID: 0000-0001-5754-9895.

* **Sorumlu Yazar** (Corresponding Author): dbusra99@gmail.com.

² Asst. Prof. Dr., Karabük University Faculty of Letters English Language and Literature Department, sametguven@karabuk.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-6883-5109.

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Introduction

People in the 20th century suffered from severe depression due to catastrophic events such as war, violence, domestic violence, disasters, sexual or physical abuse, harassment, and rape. Such non-consensual events can cause both physical harm and serious psychological damage to the victim who “is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, s/he is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories” (Leys 2000, p.2). Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event” (1996, p.11) which ends up with the repetitive emergence of hallucinations. In this respect, Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* contains characters who have experienced traumatic sexual abuse, and the play presents the traumatic effects of these abuses on them to the reader/audience.

Trauma is a damage caused by an unexpected event that pushes the individual's limits. According to Lenore Terr, who is a psychiatrist and studies childhood traumas, the definition of trauma is “a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming emotional blow or a series of blows that assault the person from outside” (1990, p.8). As a matter of fact, trauma is a reaction to factors that cause extreme fear and stress. Such incidents not only affect momentary emotions but also leave permanent damage to the individual. In parallel to this, Charles R. Figley states that “*trauma* created by extraordinarily stressful experiences is like the waves created by a stone cast into a pond” (1986, p.xvii). Figley (1986), who prefers to make a definition with the help of a simile, likens throwing a stone into the lake to the traumatic event, the spread of the wave in the lake to the formation of the trauma in the person, and the effect on the shore to the effects of the trauma. In other words, trauma occurs subconsciously, but it does not only affect the mind, but it can also progress and radiate throughout the body and cause different effects. Moreover, it has not lost its effect and it still remains alive.

In addition, trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster”⁶ in 2008. On the assumption of the definition, individuals who have been exposed to abuse, rape, or other traumatic incidents in their childhood have hysterical traumas. Due to the stress, anxiety, and fear intensity, trauma causes psychosomatic consequences that cause bodily ailments originating from psychological disorders in the mind of a person.

Besides the definition of trauma, trauma theory examines the effects of trauma in literary works and society. As literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman (1995, p.547) states in his article,

[I]n literature, as much as in life, the simplest event can resonate mysteriously, be invested with aura, and tend toward the symbolic. The symbolic, in this sense, is not a denial of literal or referential but its uncanny intensification [...]. In short, we get a clearer view of the relation of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity, and narration.

In other words, the author unknowingly provides information about his/her own past and present and involuntarily reflects on thoughts and deeply buried events waiting to be discovered in his/her mind while writing his/her work. When the revelations of literature are combined with trauma theory, the changes experienced by the individual emerge. So, a combination of literature and trauma theory helps to find out how trauma changes and affects a person's health, physical characteristics, spoken

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<https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma#:~:text=Trauma%20is%20an%20emotional%20response,symptoms%20like%20headaches%20or%20nausea>

language, behaviors, and psychology. The events that cause trauma vary from period to period. For example, while people in the twentieth century were mostly traumatized by war and its effects, the causes of trauma in this century are generally different. Trauma in the twenty-first century is mostly caused by sexual abuse, drug, or alcohol addiction, eating disorders caused by the desire to be adopted by society, and dangers and threats as a result of interactions with strangers, which are increased by the simplicity of the internet accessibility.

From this perspective, Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* (2003) includes people who have obviously suffered from trauma in their past. From the author's hints or the characters' open disclosure of traumatic experiences, it is made clear to the reader/audience that the characters have gone through shocking events in their past. The characters are damaged, and these damages can be understood from their behavior patterns and their illnesses.

Dani, a 17-year-old victim in *The Sugar Syndrome*, used her body on people she met through the unlimited internet environment and pretended to enjoy it, but was actually disgusted and looked for love. While the act of making oneself used can affect people of all ages, moreover, the characters in the play can be considered immature when their ages are taken into consideration, and it is likely that these events of abuse will trigger and affect them in their later lives. It is an undeniable fact that "physically or sexually abused children have [...] reported high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder" (Widom, 1999, p.1223). Also, "[t]here is increasing evidence that childhood trauma is directly associated with risk for victimization in adulthood and that such reexposure results in [post-traumatic stress disorder] in adults abused as children" (Yehuda et al., 2001, p.734). That is why "[t]he number and severity of potential consequences is alarming and has served to highlight childhood maltreatment as a major social and public health problem" (Ibid). In this respect, the aim of this article is to examine the traumatic effects of child abuse in Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* by focusing especially on the sufferings of the adolescent.

1. Trauma Theory

The central concern of the trauma theory is trauma, as the name of the theory suggests. Trauma theory is a concept that emerged in the late 19th century. With the changes in the world and the advances in psychology, it has joined the dozens of theories that exist in literature. While some literary theories focus on the period, some on the author, and some on different philosophical views, trauma theory focuses on the trauma of the characters. Trauma theory delves into the work and analyzes the characters and their behavior. What the characters say, their reactions to events, their illnesses, and their behavior point to the traumatic events they have experienced in the past. Trauma theory views the behavior of characters as the result of their trauma. The theory scrutinizes these behaviors and relates them to their trauma.

The trauma theory is comprehensive. It established a connection between the person's behavior and the trauma, and while doing so, it made use of many sub-branches. It examines the character's life in the present, traumatic events in the past, the society in which they live, and family structure as a whole, since they all shape the character, and all can cause what the character does. In other words, when a literary work is analyzed in the light of trauma theory, not only psychology is used, but also cultural, sociological, and historical fields are involved in the analysis. This theory focuses on the behaviors expressed by the subconscious of the person. Characters may feel both physical and psychological pain as a result of trauma and may recall their traumatic experiences as a result of triggers. These pains affect, shape, and change them, and literary texts analyze this process with the help of sub-branches such as other fields that are interested in humans. Cathy Caruth's (1996, p.14) pioneering work,

Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History indicates how literary works are shaped by trauma and its effects. Caruth explains her understanding of trauma theory in her book as following:

The key figures my analysis uncovers and highlights—the figures of “departure,” “falling,” “burning,” or “awakening”—in their insistence, here engender stories that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures, a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes.

According to her, the core of trauma theory analysis is the wound of the soul, so she prefers to concentrate on the fragmentation of the individual. Her perspective on literary theory persists as a witness to reality beyond what it can be theorized about. She states that trauma “has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time” (1995, p.151) in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Therefore, she does not reduce the traumatic event to theory or literature, and she mentions that she does not underestimate them, but, on the contrary, takes them seriously and analyzes them.

Furthermore, trauma theory examines not only the victim of the traumatic event but also affects the person being told about it. It is not necessary for a person to experience the traumatic event in order to be traumatized, namely, the person can also be affected by the event he/she hears or sees. Caruth explains being affected by another person's:

But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound (p.18).

There are other scholars who agree with Caruth's discourse. One of these scholars is Shoshana Felman. In her book *Testimony*, Felman confirms Caruth's discourse. She states that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (1992, p.57). That is to say, the person may be subconsciously affected by and traumatized by another's trauma without the need for conscious empathy. In literature, both types of trauma have assisted critics in analysing the text. The way in which a person acquires trauma can vary from situation to situation and text to text. In some texts, the character has experienced the traumatic event directly and reflects on its effects. On the other hand, in some texts, the character does not experience the traumatic event, but when he/she exposed to the narration, it seems as if the subconscious mind cannot distinguish whether the event is real or not. In both cases, trauma theory examines the behaviors, discourses, and physical and mental illnesses of the characters in literary text as in the case of Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome*.

2. Breaking The Traumatic Silence of Child Abuse in Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome*

The Sugar Syndrome is a play that was written by Lucy Prebble in 2003. Despite the author's young age and the fact that this is her first play, it has been translated into more than five different languages and won many awards. One of the reasons why the play is successful and attracts attention is that its plot is about trauma and its effects in the developing world. While the play is dealing with these problems, it also shows how unstable the internet environment is, and suggests that one should approach the internet with scepticism by demonstrating the effects that internet use has on people.

The play has four characters, and Prebble makes it possible to understand the personalities of these characters because of their behaviors that came out of their past traumas. Since each character performs actions that cause their experiences and traumas, the reader/audience can make inferences

about their past and understand whether these estimations are correct from the characters' conversations in the later stages of the play. Furthermore, *The Sugar Syndrome* opens in a virtual environment. "[The protagonist] seeks to communicate intimately and deeply with strangers over the Internet" (Varlami, 2019, p.55). In her own room, Danielle, who is addressed as Dani throughout the play, is talking to Lewis, whom she met in an online chat room. As they both desired, their conversations quickly turned to sexuality, and the reader/audience soon found themselves in Lewis's room with Dani. She touches Lewis and enjoys with his satisfaction, but when it's Lewis' turn to touch, she pushes his hand away. Lewis does his own will and touches Dani, however "as he touches her, more through annoyance than pleasure" (Prebble, 2003, p.38) for her. Dani's refusal to touch Lewis's is clearly articulated in the play. "Dani's desire for making a sexual relationship which she believes that it will end her depression and feeling of loneliness as socially isolated is failed" (Musa & Al-Jarry, 2021, p.2230). Although she is there voluntarily, this is a behavior that she accepts because she hoped it would be a cure for her and actually does not want.

In a different time, Dani is caught in the virtual world again, but this time she is talking to another man she has just met, Tim. He thinks she is a little boy, and Dani does not correct his mistake, and continues as if she were a boy. The truth comes out when they meet at the park. As they talk, it is understood that Dani has been hospitalized for bulimia, while Tim is imprisoned and receiving treatment with electric shocks due to his interest in children. Although they were treated due to different issues in their past, their common experience which is being treated brought them closer and helped them start their friendship. Contrary to Tim's and Dani's good relationship, Dani does not have affirmative connections with her family. When she had an argument with her mother Jan, she goes to Tim's flat, and events unfold.

At the start of the play, the reader/audience encountered various problematic actions and became acquainted with the characters. Dani meets her conversation need through chatrooms in a virtual environment, and this way indicates that she has no real friends in real life. It can be concluded that she suffers from loneliness as she tries to compensate for her lack of friends in real life due to the internet by interacting with strangers. She talks, meets, and shares her personal problems with them. Another reason for meeting her communication needs over the internet is that she thinks the internet environment is free. She states "I like the Internet. I like that way of talking to people. [...] It's a place where people are free to say anything they like" (Prebble, 2003, p.41). Therefore, it is understood that she is conscious of the internet environment, through which people can lie, talk freely, and display their evil mentality. She herself represents the unreliability of the virtual environment, when she pretends as if she were a boy to continue the conversation with Tim. She lies in order to continue talking to Tim, indicating that she needs to talk to someone. That is, it is not her choice to be alone and not have a friend in real life. She uses chat rooms to avoid being alone and to avoid triggering her traumas.

Beside this, there is another reason that she uses the internet and chatrooms. Dani not only meets her communication need and relieves her loneliness, but also eliminates her need for attention. She does not interact with any women or girls her age. She chooses men and wants their attention since she needs their passionate attention innately. By satisfying their sexual need, Dani gets male validation and feels valued and beloved. She feels useful by satisfying them, which leads to their happiness after sexual satisfaction. When Dani and Lewis argue, she declares this clearly, "I never felt used. Just useful." (p.108). The young girl tries to justify her actions. She satisfies her care, love, and communication needs in the way she believes is true. However, there is a situation that she does not

calculate. Even though she feels happy for the moment, she actually does not want it. By making them happy and satisfied, she experiences momentary happiness that harms her in the long run.

Dani's family problems are another reason for her to abuse herself for attention and prefer the internet for communication. "The fragmentation among family member's forces Dani to choose the chatrooms where she can seek to communicate friendly and deeply with others over the internet because it is the only place that she finds herself in and reveals her problems" (Musa & Al-Jarry, 2021, p.2230). The decline of the family institution, changes in the family structure, and isolation of individuals were all linked to each other as if they are rings on a chain in the twentieth century. It is not difficult to infer that as the family is one of the social units in society, and the lack of communication in this social unit affects individuals in various aspects. As Berkman 2000, p.843) points out "[It is widely recognized that social relationships and affiliation have powerful effects on physical and mental health". Also, the weakening of family ties is likely to cause conflict within the family. It is stated to the audience in the play that Dani and her parents do not get along, and neither do the parents. To illustrate, Dani states her hatred for her parents during the play. The family does not communicate well with one another; they lack strong communication. While Dani's mother is portrayed as a passive woman, her father is generally absent during the play. According to Varlami (2019), "Jan is frustrated at her failed marriage, feels unsatisfied with her personal and professional life, and finds solace in drink so as to distract herself from her daily life" (p.54). Dani utters her hatred towards her mother and complains about the absence of her father in several lines.

As the play progress, Jan asks if a bill that comes to the house could belong to her husband, and Dani says it cannot belong to him, and explains why, "Because he's never here." (Prebble, 2003, p.44). This quotation clarifies that she is aware of her father's absence. Her father's absence destroys the unity in the house. Moreover, Dani's mother, Jan, mentions that Dani has a brother, but he is never seen during the play. Parents are expected to maintain the family unit, and it is difficult for parents to keep the family together in a healthy way when they are not together.

The family is the smallest but most important structural unit of society. Children's education begins in the family, and their worldview is formed in the family. Children cling to life by imitating their parents because they learn by imitation. In this respect, Linda A. Wilmshurst (2008, p.55) states that, "[p]arenting style can influence child outcomes directly (individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships) or indirectly (economic hardship, marital problems, cultural factors) in ways that can either protect the child from harm or increase a child's risk for developing deviant behaviors". As a matter of fact, the family not only plays a biological role in the existence of the person, but it also shapes and affects the person. Parents and their parenting style are related to children's psychologic health. According to this equation, when there is a problem in one of these factors, a problem also occurs indirectly in the child.

Dani's family structure is so disconnected that it took some time for her mother to realize that her husband, who is frequently out of town, is cheating on her. Either she is too naïve to understand it, or she is too frail to admit it to herself. Dani hates her because of both incidents. Jan's defense of her husband and ignoring his mistakes also make Dani hostile towards her. When Dani as an immature girl complains about her father's indifference, her mother talks about the money her father paid for her, "Do you know how much he's paying a term for you to swan in and out of that sixth form?" (Prebble, 2003, p.56). Jan's oppression to Dani about this money is not proper parental behavior, as it leads her to feel worthless. In other words, the ideal parental relationships should not be based on monetary issues. The child is likely to feel insecure and worthless when material values are presented as an excuse. Relationships should not be based on pragmatic philosophy, especially if it is a family

relationship. The family's prioritization of material relations affects the child's understanding of the world, and the child may prioritize material over spirituality. According to the article in the journal *Pediatrics*, "a focus on material goals and superficial satisfaction may displace a focus on interpersonal relations and, inherent needs and as a consequence, stand in the way of obtaining happiness" (Oprea et al., 2012, p.487). Moreover, the pragmatic relationship in the family causes the child to feel indebted to their parents, and this creates trauma for the child. Also, it destroys children's self-confidence as this makes the child feel insecure.

"Children who are insecure may be more likely to seek for approval from external sources in order to feel better about themselves. [...] Children who experience less nurturing parenting may also be more vulnerable to consumer messages that prey on their insecurities [...]" (Ching & Wu, 2018, p.190).

Considering the quote, this may be the reason why Dani is exploiting herself since she thinks she cannot get value without a conflict of interest.

It is important for every child to grow up in prosperity, but it is also important to provide psychological support to the child, to make her feel valuable. Jan tolerates her husband's separation from the family, and the family status loses its meaning, and everyone exists individually. Therefore, Dani tries to meet her own spiritual needs by doing what she thinks right. Namely, when she does not receive the attention, value, and love from her family, which should be the person's closest circle, it can be understood that she reached the desired result by making others exploit her.

Dani's loneliness, and her effort to hold on and to take a place in society brings with them the effort to be appreciated. Her desire to be admired and adopted puts her under psychological strain. The fact that Dani has an eating disorder becomes clear as the play progresses. She suddenly changes subjects and talks about her weight. She has a book called *thinspiration* which is "the pages, crammed full of celebrity and model shots..." (Prebble, 2003, p.89). The quotation given exemplifies her unconscious mood as she touches upon various topics simultaneously. Her request from Tim to bake a second cake, and Tim's complaining response appear to be an irregularity and a problem in Dani's excessive eating habit: "You've eaten everything in the house" (p.85). Furthermore, the fact that she vomits with the mixture she prepares before going to bed demonstrates all her discomfort.

Eating disorder illnesses are numerous and various. One type of these illnesses is bulimia nervosa, in which the person loses control over eating and eats excessively as a result. "It is characterized by recurrent binge eating and extreme weight-control behavior" (Fairburn et al., 2000, p.659). As in the above mentioned description, Dani tries to limit herself, but then this suppression and restriction become even more pronounced. In the same way, when Dani goes to Tim's house, despite being fascinated by the smell of the cake, she turns down Tim's cake offer, but then her desire becomes more evident, and she eats the cake by cutting tiny slices as if to deceive herself. However, it is understood that Dani cannot control herself thanks to the empty plate given in the following scenes. Moreover, Dani uses her right by asking about her weight, in the game in which Tim and she promises to be true to each other that "One question and you have to be completely honest. Oh, I'm torn. Honestly, am I fat?" (Prebble, 2003, p.53). As it can be understood from this question and many previous cases, her problem has not been resolved and still continues although Dani was closed to clinic for treatment for months due to an eating disorder. Moreover, it is understood from her dialogue that the reason for her treatment in the clinic was anorexia nervosa, which can be considered the opposite of her current disease, bulimia nervosa.

(Dani gets out her wallet and roots around. She takes out a photograph. It is of herself six months ago. She shows it to Tim.) / Dani: I'm not really supposed to have that. / Tim: (he struggles to look at it) You? Christ. / Dani: They were taken at the beginning. I think it was supposed to make me feel ashamed. / Tim: It makes me feel sick. / Dani: Really? It makes me feel fat" (p.49).

Dani has a sickly appearance from her extremely thin body in the demonstrated photograph, Tim cannot even look at it. However, Dani hints that the problem is her current look. Despite being admitted to the clinic for treatment, she did not fully recover, and her disease, anorexia nervosa, evolved into another, bulimia nervosa. In other words, Dani's disease evolved into one in which she experienced eating attacks while she was attempting to cure it by not eating. However, a transformation from anorexia is not the only reason for her abnormal eating attacks. In a study about eating disorders conducted by Daniel le Grange and his co-authors revealed that "[...] individuals with [anorexia nervosa] were shown to have experienced significantly more parental problems compared to healthy controls, including separation, arguments, criticism, high expectations [...]" (2009, p.2). In other words, the findings of the study reveal that family problems, social pressures, and traumas are also factors in the development of eating disorders.

To conclude, events in the past and present affect the person more than he/she imagines. It is seen in *The Sugar Syndrome* that not only the events experienced, but also the missing values create traumas in the minds of individuals. Dani is trying to get the attention and love that she has not seen from her family, from the virtual environment, and from people she does not know. Trauma caused by lack of love and care fuels her desire to be liked by others. She suffers from self-actualization. The society's perception of beauty, as well as her desire to be liked force her to put her body into a certain shape and appearance. Therefore, she suffers from an eating syndrome due to her wish to be recognised. Lucy Prebble attaches the effect of one event with another in her play and debates the causes and effects of trauma in *The Sugar Syndrome*.

3. Conclusion

As a result, *The Sugar Syndrome* by Lucy Prebble is a play that sheds light on the traumatic silence of child abuse. Using dark humour, the play discloses the disturbing results of abuse, not only on the victims but also on society. It also pinpoints the importance of breaking the silence and stopping abuse to cause change and healing. The play is a powerful invitation to action for individuals, families, and communities to take precautions against abuse and care those who have been influenced by it. Furthermore, the play also highlights the importance of addressing the basic reasons of child abuse and the social issues that subsidize it. Through the character of Dani, the audience watched the effect of poverty, neglect, and lack of support on individuals and families. They also witness the ways she has been pulled down and the terrible events she has been exposed to due to her parents' lack of care and love. The vulnerability of a young girl attempting to compensate the insufficiencies in her own life, and the traumas brought about by the circumstances she suffered in order to comprise these missing feelings in her life, are obviously revealed in the play and acted as warnings to the audience. Overall, *The Sugar Syndrome* is an influential work that brings attention to the shocking effects of child abuse. It is a play that will resound with audiences long after the curtain has been closed and thus it reminds people of the urgent need to break the silence around child abuse and take measure to prevent it. Shortly, Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* is an important work in terms of highlighting the importance of breaking the silence, addressing the root causes, and supporting the victims in the journey of healing.

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