

**SILENCING AND VOICE IN PHILIP PULLMAN'S *NORTHERN LIGHTS*<sup>1</sup>**

**Mürüvvet Mira PINAR-DOLAYKAYA<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract**

Children's literature can be argued to expose its child readers and characters to certain norms because of its conventionally didactic quality, reverberation of adults' nostalgic feelings, and tendency to create an image of the ideal child. This, however, creates a hierarchy between childhood and adulthood, rendering the child silent and passive both outside and inside the text. Published in 1995, Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* destabilizes the hierarchy between adulthood and childhood, restructures archetypal renditions, and gives voice to the child that has been suppressed in various ways in didactic children's books. In this respect, this paper aims to analyse how such issues as silencing, voice, ideal child are employed in Pullman's novel. It explores modern children's fantasy as a fruitful ground not only for problematizing the hierarchies between binaries such as adult/child, adulthood/childhood, and maturity/immaturity but also for providing children with the voice and individuality they were deprived of in earlier examples of children's literature.

**Keywords:** children's literature, fantasy literature, Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, silencing

**PHILIP PULLMAN'IN *NORTHERN LIGHTS*'INDA SESSİZLEŞTİRME VE SES**

**Öz**

Çocuk edebiyatının geleneksel anlamda öğretici bir nitelik taşıdığı, yetişkinlerin nostaljik bakış açılarını yansıttığı ve ideal bir çocuk imgesi yarattığı göz önüne alındığında, çocuk karaktere ve çocuk okuyucusuna belirli normlar empoze ettiği söylenebilir. Lakin bu durum çocuk ve yetişkin arasında bir hiyerarşi ortaya koymakla birlikte çocuğu sessiz ve pasif kılar. Philip Pullman'ın 1995 yılında yayınlanan *Northern Lights* isimli romanı çocuk ve yetişkin arasındaki bu tarz bir güç ilişkisinin

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<sup>2</sup> Res Assit. Dr., Manisa Celal Bayar University, The Department of English Language and Literature, muruvvetmirapinar@gmail.com, ORCID:0000-0001-8047-1504

sorgulandığı, arketiplerin yeniden anlamlandırıldığı ve geleneksel anlamda öğretici nitelik taşıyan çocuk kitaplarında çeşitli biçimlerde bastırılan çocuğa sesinin geri verildiği radikal bir metin olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu bakımdan bu çalışma sessizleştirme, ses, ideal çocuk gibi meselelerin Pullman'ın *Northern Lights* isimli romanında nasıl ele alındığını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Modern fantezi çocuk edebiyatını yetişkin/çocuk, yetişkinlik/çocukluk, olgun olma/olgun olmama gibi kavramlar arasındaki hiyerarşileri sorgulamaya ve önceki dönemlerin çocuk kitaplarında çocuk karakterlerin mahrum bırakıldığı ses ve bireyselliği onlara geri vermeye elverişli bir alan olarak incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** çocuk edebiyatı, fantezi edebiyatı, Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, sessizleştirme

### **Introduction**

“Children’s fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple” (Rose, 1984, p. 1).

One of the central questions in the studies of children’s literature has been children’s relationship with the text and the genre itself. The scholars of children’s literature have been questioning the position of children and the role of children as both characters and readers in children’s literature. Accordingly, they have been trying to find answers as regards the autonomy of children in the context of children’s literature since the emergence of the criticism of the genre. Such questions concerning children’s position in children’s literature continue to preoccupy the scholars of children’s literature. Jacqueline Rose puts forward one of the most influential arguments concerning the issue in *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* - a key text that explores the relationship between adult and child as represented in children’s books. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Rose writes that “[c]hildren’s fiction is impossible” (1998, p. 1). Rose’s argument remains to sound vexing and shocking only until her next sentence. She argues that children’s literature is impossible, “not in the sense that it cannot be written [...] but in that it hangs on [...] the impossible relation between adult and child” (1998, p. 1). What Rose actually comes to mean proves to be the dominance of adults and absence of children in children’s literature. Written, edited, published, and selected by adults, children’s literature comes to be very much an adult domain.

As Rose further points out, “the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)” in children’s literature and “neither of them enter the space in between” (1998, p. 1-2). Viewed from Rose’s perspective, children’s literature situates the child outside of its own processes, and renders him/her passive, inactive, and silent both inside and outside the text (Rose, 1998, p. 2). The absence of child in children’s literature as formulated by Rose can be related to two main interrelated reasons, which can also coexist. On the one hand, the child character whose voice is heard and whose actions are perceived throughout the narrative might represent adults’ nostalgic feeling towards a childhood that might be lost, wasted, or dearly remembered and longed for. On the other hand, the child character might stand for the ideal child that is desired for. In this view, children’s literature inculcates in their child-readers a set of values, which not only reflects adult expectation from children but also lays bare an ideal childhood envisioned by adults.

Correspondingly, children’s literature, which traditionally follows didactic purpose, exercises a silencing force on both child characters and its children recipients. In this view, children’s books tend to inscribe normative values regarding gender, race, and religion, and present evil and good as universally distinguished opponents. Such tendency denies cultural, philosophical, and social relativity. Most importantly, it results in stereotyping child characters, and framing them within certain standardized behaviour patterns, morals, and normative values. Taking into consideration the pedagogical effects and outcomes of children’s books, it is acceptable that children’s literature should lead to a moral, academic, and social development of children. However, to what extent children’s books achieve to represent child-experience and child-voice remains a controversial issue. Children’s books can be argued to represent child experience only as far as adults perceive and process it. Even though children are presented as central characters in children’s books - especially in fantasy narratives - playing crucial roles in important issues such as the future of the world and humanity, their voices represent to a great extent that of adults. Accordingly, the morals and values child characters stand for belong to adults, who create these characters in the first place. It is in this context that children’s literature in the traditional sense offers a hierarchical relationship between such binaries as adult and child, adulthood and childhood, maturity and immaturity, experience and inexperience by almost always prioritizing the former side of the list.

Even when the Romantic image of the child offers childhood as an antidote to industrialism, urbanism, and corrupt world of adults, children are still expected to internalize

the values that represent white Anglo-Saxon and middle-class perspective. Considered one of the classics of children's literature, Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, for instance, criticizes child labour and social inequality between upper middle class and working class. Although the novel presents childhood as an innocent and incorrupt stage, it paradoxically ends by portraying its child character reaching adulthood as a moral and educated British gentleman with a proper job and income. J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* similarly juxtaposes adulthood and childhood, displaying childhood as a site for endless games contrary to adulthood that brings various responsibilities. Nevertheless, in this case, the child who denies growing up is cast as a rebel against the system. Therefore, Peter Pan is considered to be a bad role model for the English children who are anticipated to develop into responsible, respectful, and productive individuals. Likewise, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* prioritizes child experience and depicts adults as the destroyers of the society and the nature. Nevertheless, children ironically continue to embody the very adult roles in secondary world, and they are depended on as warriors, slayers, knights, kings, queens, and mother and father figures. In this regard, silencing in the sense of oppression and stereotyping children can be said to permeate all forms of children's literature written in different periods. The silenced child arguably lacks autonomy, and s/he is bombarded with a myriad number of standardized roles and behaviour patterns that do not take into consideration his/her individual traits and expectations.

Nevertheless, the scholars of children's literature have been scrutinizing the didactic purpose of children's books especially since the mid-twentieth century as epitomized by Jacqueline Rose's study. This scrutiny stems from various intellectual, theoretical, socio-economic developments and transformations. The changing family structures in the post-war era, the rise of feminist, postcolonial criticisms, and most significantly the recognition of children's literature as heavily imbued with ideological sub-texts have given way to alternative readings of children's literature. The focus of such studies has primarily been the binaries of gender, race, and religion inscribed in children's books. In this respect, the hierarchical relationship between adulthood and childhood, maturity, immaturity, woman and man, black and white, as well as Christian and non-Christian contained in the traditional children's literature has been investigated. The scholarly interest in children's literature has accordingly engendered children's books that are considerably transgressive and subversive especially with regard to dominant ideologies characterizing children's books.

As a result, the conventional attributes of such binaries have been reconsidered and re/represented in children's books in extremely radical ways. The stereotypical characterization has been replaced by the portrayal of round characters that cannot be grasped easily. Both adult and child stereotypes as well as the conventional attributes of archetypal imagery have been reconfigured. In relation to this, the child that is outside and inside the text has started to be recognized as an individual that might actually have a voice of his/her own, which negates adult expectations and adult ideals. Intrigued by the silenced voice of the child, which characterizes what can be called conservative and didactic children's literature, the children's books' writers have tended to pay a specific attention to the agency of the child character. They have inclined to save child characters from the stereotypical renditions as well as the ideals the canon of children's literature has been reiterating for almost two centuries.

### **Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights***

Considered to be a "liberal reformer", Philip Pullman has probably been one of the most subversive and radical children's writer of the last three decades (Brittain, 2003, p. 54). Published in 1995, Pullman's award-winning yet controversial children's fantasy novel *Northern Lights* - the first book of *His Dark Materials* trilogy - interrogates normative morals, Christian references, as well as conventional binaries characterizing children's literature. Set in an alternative universe, which looks very much like Victorian England, *Northern Lights* obtains its fantasy quality by the existence of talking animals - daemons -, which represent humans' souls, the portrayal of witches, talking bears, a truth-telling golden compass, as well as Dust - a substance associated mainly with consciousness. The main story revolves around Lyra Belacqua, an orphan girl who lives in Jordan College in Oxford and her struggle to stop the government's project to separate children from their daemons - their souls. Pullman's imagined world is largely an adult-controlled one that is governed by a religious institution called the Magisterium, which is occasionally referred to as the Church. The novel depicts a theocratic society founded on the premises of order, discipline, and obedience to hierarchical structures within the government. In this strictly governed society, children are exposed to various instances of silencing and suppressions and they need to be tamed and educated properly to be able to fit in the system. However, as Deborah Thacker highlights, "Pullman is clearly interested in questioning the boundaries society draws" (2002, p. 148). Therefore, juxtaposed against the suppressive society, which tends to keep children silent, passive, and submissive to doctrines, Pullman depicts extremely rebellious and assertive children. Pullman indeed portrays child characters, who are courageous enough to intervene in the adult-world,

and in so doing, he puts into question and then rewrites the conventional attributes of childhood prevalent in the children's books of the earlier periods.

Correspondingly, Pullman contests the image of the ideal child that is conventionally associated with simplicity, nature, naivety, and submissiveness. He instead portrays autonomous children whose primary aim is not to save the world as heroic characters but to protect their own existence and identity as children. As such, the novel moves from representations of silencing towards reclaiming voice in the course of narration. These various instances of silencing and reclaiming voice not only bring to the fore the question of ideal child but also transform into a symbolic device that arguably problematizes the tradition of children's literature, which has silenced and pacified its child characters.

Pullman employs the themes of silencing and reclaiming voice through a considerably complex narrative, and these themes impair the novel in both literal and metaphorical terms. In *Northern Lights*, silencing in the sense of oppression and subjugation starts in the daily lives of children. The children in Lyra's world have to follow certain rules in their daily lives that are defined by adults. In other words, they are supposed to behave, wear, speak properly and follow a certain etiquette especially when they are in the presence of adults. As such, the novel offers a silent struggle between children and adults even before the actual battle. Pullman juxtaposes adult figures, who aim to mould children in line with their own ideological perspectives, against children who want to imagine, dream, and explore freely. For instance, when the Master asks for Lyra, the Housekeeper Mrs. Lonsdale makes sure that she looks sleek and clean, and acts properly. Thus, she advises Lyra saying that "you're going to have dinner with the Master and his guests. I hope to God you behave. Speak when you're spoken to, be quiet and polite, smile nicely and don't you ever say *Dunno* when someone asks you a question" (Pullman, 1998, p. 65).

The housekeeper's advice evinces the hierarchical relationship between children and adults prevailing in Lyra's world. It most notably shows how children are made to internalize being silent, submissive, and subservient to the adults in the name of being respectable and polite. The hierarchy between adult figures and children in the college functions as a means to highlight the corrupt and oppressive education system, society, and religious institutions, which prioritize so-called morality over children's academic success, their welfare, or simply their internal goodness. The importance given to morality and respectfulness of children, however, results in pacification of the children within society, and becomes a barrier to freethinking, questioning, and fulfilling individual pursuits.

Given that, the adult world represented in the novel can be said to ignore the particularities of childhood as well as certain traits, ambitions, and desires of children as individuals. The novel conveys the discrepancy between childhood and adulthood as well as child perspective and adult perspective through adults' incapability to identify with supposedly unruly child characters, particularly the character of Lyra. To the adult characters, Lyra "seems to be an orphan with little promise or talent and is a riotous child always into mischief and uninterested in anything serious" (Senior, 2012, p. 195). As the narrator points out, she is a "barbarian" and "like a half-wild cat" (Pullman, 1998, p. 35-47). She climbs up the roofs of the buildings, fights against the children of gypsies, and runs here and there with stained clothes. Nevertheless, the most important reason that makes Lyra an unfavourable child for the adults is her discontent with and resistance against being told what to do especially by the adults around her. On a symbolic level, the adults' incapability to understand Lyra's character serves to highlight the dominance of the adult voice and the absence of the child voice in children's literature as argued by Rose. Lyra's unruly personality negates normative representations. She resists being an ideal child and an ideal child hero; therefore she gives voice to the silent child of the canon.

Even though the adult perspective stigmatizes Lyra rendering her a rebel who cannot fit in the society, she simply enjoys being a child who likes to explore. Most importantly, Lyra's not-so-favourable character transforms into an empowering quality, which not only emancipates her from the oppressive environment but also earns her the strength to live through suppression. Amidst the silence characterizing the children's lives, her voice becomes the most heard one due to her unruly actions. Even before her real adventures begin, she displays a curious nature concerning issues and matters related to the adult world that children are not allowed to. She loves to sneak into the scholars' residence, where children are not permitted and enjoys listening to the scholars' conversations secretly. Moreover, she is very keen on learning the politics and scientific experiments going on in the restricted areas of Jordan College. As such, the novel offers an ambivalence regarding Lyra's character. Lyra is situated between the adults' underestimating view of her and her increasing visibility through so-called misbehaviours. Likewise, the narrator mentions of Lyra as follows:

She was a coarse and greedy little savage, for the most part. But she always had a dim sense that it wasn't her whole world; that part of her also belonged in the grandeur and ritual of Jordan College; and that somewhere in her life there was a connection with the high world of politics represented by Lord Asriel. (Pullman, 1998, p. 37)

As the narrator's thoughts of Lyra point out, Lyra declines to be limited to the world, which she is confined to by the adults. Lyra's greediness, which adults consider her defect, can alternatively be read as her desire to learn, discover, and take an active role within the society she belongs to. These contradictory views about Lyra's personality highlight not only Pullman's decline of stereotypical and one-dimensional renditions of children but also his resistance against the distinct boundaries between good and evil, moral and immoral, ethical and unethical. As epitomized by varied interpretations of Lyra's personality, the meanings attributed to evil and good, moral and immoral as well as other interrelated dualities remain to be relative and dependent on subjective perceptions throughout the narrative.

When Mrs. Coulter adopts Lyra, the novel moves to a different kind of silencing, which is associated with the division of gender roles in society. Mrs. Coulter aims to transform Lyra from a tomboy into a young woman by arranging the way she looks, behaves, and speaks. Before introducing Lyra to her community, she says that

Now the first guests will be arriving in a few minutes, and they are going to find you perfectly behaved, sweet, charming, innocent, attentive, delightful in every way. I particularly wish for that, Lyra, do you understand me? "Yes, Mrs. Coulter." "Then kiss me." (Pullman, 1998, p. 88)

Mrs. Coulter's expectations from Lyra point to an 'ideal feminine', and her aim is to create a miniature of herself in Lyra. The appropriation of gender roles turns into an oppression and silencing of a different kind for Lyra. Lyra's occupation with her physicality, clothes, baby dolls, and manners as instructed by Mrs. Coulter distances her from the free-spirited girl she used to be. Nevertheless, Lyra is neither an ordinary girl nor an ordinary child as much as Pullman is not an ordinary children's writer when it comes to represent dominant discourses including gender roles. Lyra's daemon, Pantalaimon, awakens Lyra to Mrs. Coulter's power on her saying that "[Mrs. Coulter is] just making a pet out of you" (Pullman, 1998, p. 86). Considering that a daemon represents one's own soul and mind, Pan's views of Mrs. Coulter become Lyra's inner voice, her own thoughts, which have been repressed until this moment.

In addition to this, Pan's observation summarizes the central dichotomy between adulthood and childhood underlying the novel. The children in the novel are obviously the objects of construction and manipulation for adults, and they can be discarded at times when necessary. However, Lyra's awakening eventually becomes an attack at not only gender-roles,

but also a set of standardized values and morals children's books tend offer to children. Lyra's reaction to such confinement as explained in the following quotation epitomizes this attack:

Lyra turned her back and closed her eyes. But what Pantalaimon [her daemon] said was true. She had been feeling confined and cramped by this polite life, luxury it was. She would have given anything for a day with her Oxford ragamuffin friends, with a battle in the Claybeds and a race along the canal. (Pullman, 1998, p. 86)

Lyra's denial of attributes that inform ideal childhood and ideal womanhood and her strife to regain her voice threat the patriarchal and dogmatic society the adults have created in the first place. Lyra's waywardness and 'childishness' that used to empower her in the beginning gradually transform into a conscious resistance. Lyra's discovery of the Magisterium's secret project to sever children from their daemons initiates the actual battle between children and adults. Escaping Mrs. Coulter's guardianship, Lyra joins forces with Gyptians, whose children are kidnapped. Most significantly, with the revelation of the Magisterium's project, silencing children as one of the central themes of the novel intensifies to the extent of annihilating children. As such, the novel offers a movement from silencing as a metaphor for oppression to silencing in literal meaning of the word.

The Magisterium's project is based on children's and adults' different relationships with their daemons and its interpretation of this relationship from a religious perspective. As Mike Newby summarizes, the daemons

reflect our moods, advise us and protect us, but take on no fixed form until adulthood is reached. The daemons of children have power to become whatever creature they wish to become in order to function adequately in any situation. Thus, the spiritual strength of humans takes on visible form, this becoming fixed at adulthood. (1998, p. 73)

When people reach adulthood, their "daemon companions settle to reflect the true nature of the individual", because one's personality is assumed to complete its development at this stage of life (Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 126). In this context, the portrayal of daemons in such terms turns into a narrative strategy through which the novel juxtaposes childhood against adulthood. In *Northern Lights*, adulthood obviously denotes a stage where one's personality is already settled and his/her characteristics are fixed never to undergo drastic changes again. By contrast, childhood represents a stage of change, learning, and transformation. A child can be educated and shaped in diverse ways; hence, it symbolizes the possibility of development, rejuvenation, and rehabilitation for the good of entire society.

However, the Magisterium interprets children's relationship with their daemons in entirely different terms. The daemons connect to human beings through a particle called Dust, and Dust attached to adults are found in large quantities while it is observed in less density around children. According to the Magisterium, this means that children lack the consciousness adults have already reached, and Dust representing "original sin" tends to gather around adults not affecting children. Therefore, adults consider themselves to be hopeless being irreversibly afflicted with the original sin, and they supposedly aim to rescue children from this eternal affliction. As Santiago Colas explains, Mrs. Coulter "arrives the hypothesis that if the link between child and daemon is severed just prior to puberty the child can forevermore be free from the affliction of Dust and in that sense be cleansed of original sin" (2005, p. 51). Nevertheless, the experiment, or '*intercision*' as they call it, turns into an act of extermination and an extreme form of silencing rather than a salvation. As Newby points out,

[u]pon the death of a person, the daemon also dies, but upon the death or removal of the daemon, the person continues to exist, though in a sort of limbo-like state, able to become the tool of whoever has them in their control. (1998, p. 73)

As the Magisterium is still experimenting, the results turn out to be much more disastrous. The severed children, who literally serve as guinea pigs, start to die shortly after the '*intercision*'. The children are already silenced and suppressed by the theocratic society in different spheres of life, but this experiment proves to be a kind of massacre, which marks the very end of childhood itself. In "Where is Home? An Essay on Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*", Margaret and Michael Rustin explore Pullman's thoughts on childhood, and how his ideas of childhood translate into *Northern Lights*. They maintain that

There are two essential and related dimensions to children's experiences of growing up. The first is the process of becoming independent and autonomous - becoming persons in their own right. The second is the dependence of children in this development on the care and understanding of adults who love them. (2003, p. 93-4)

As the Rustins underline, the children in *Northern Lights* lack both of these dimensions of childhood, and Pullman obviously can identify with both the real child and the fictional one. Given that, *Northern Lights* can also be read as a story about how adults' assumptions regarding childhood can be distorted hence destructive for the child itself. In the novel, not only experiencing childhood but also the right of growing-up is denied to children for the sake of adult's erroneous expectations and misinterpretations of religion. For the adult

characters, the experiment is conducted for children's as well as the society's welfare. Nevertheless, for the children, it comes to mean being soulless, senseless, and most importantly never having the taste of growing up, erring, achieving as well as experiencing the joys and sorrows of life at its every stage. As a result, the creation of an alternative universe and alternative social order through reliance on fantasy functions as means to problematize the oppression of children in conservatively didactic children's literature, which tends frame the child within the boundaries of adult expectations. Pullman depicts extreme applications of religious doctrines, gender biases, and scientific experiments in *Northern Lights*, yet in so doing, he achieves to give voice to the silenced child of children's literature, and he earns her/him the strength to fight back against adult values.

Lyra and her supporters eventually succeed in rescuing the kidnapped children from the experiment centre through a series of adventures. However, the novel does not offer a sudden change in terms of the power relations between children and adults. In fact, very unconventionally, some of the children are depicted passing away in exceedingly tragic ways due to the adult characters' self-centred goals on 'supposedly' reasonable grounds. Pullman's nonconformist approach to the conventions of children's literature is a proof of his radical and subversive writing on the one hand, and it shows his views of children's fantasy literature on the other. As Margaret and Micheal Rustin point out, Pullman "thinks of himself as a realist, and not as a fantasist", and he indeed "uses mechanisms of fantasy" to say things more "vividly" (Rustin & Rustin, 2003, p. 93). Accepting his Carnegie Medal, Pullman himself affirmed that some themes and some subjects are "too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book" (Hunt & Lenz, 2003: 122). Therefore, as surreal and unrealistic as they seem, the wide range of conflicts conveyed through fantasy in *Northern Lights* continue to relate to the world we inhabit and the problems we have in the real world. This explains why Pullman does not opt for reorganizing the corrupt society at once in *Northern Lights*. No oppression, dogmatism, discrimination, and silencing can be removed suddenly in real life, neither do they in Pullman's fantasy world. *Northern Lights* ends with the opening of a portal into another alternative world, which indeed links the novel to the second book in the series, *The Subtle Knife*. The reader hence is assured that the children need to confront various obstacles and go through varied adventures in the following books before they can come up with solid outcomes.

### Conclusion

To conclude, *Northern Lights* is a multi-layered novel which engenders interpretations regarding childhood, religion, dogmatism, ideology, and various socio-economic issues. It is undoubtedly a radical text not only in terms of its treatment of such controversial subject matters but also in terms of its subversive employ of patterns and representations that characterize traditional didactic children's books. Pullman's novel can be considered a critique of children's books, which have conventionally associated childhood with innocence, submissiveness, simplicity, and purity. It is an awakening to how adults both in real life and literary texts can silence children and build barriers to their development as individuals. In the meantime, it is a story about how children can perseveringly demolish these barriers by raising their voice through solidarity. Viewed from this perspective, the voice of children in *Northern Lights* also becomes the voice of child characters that have so far embodied the ideals of anthropocentric, white, and paternalist mind-set in children's books. If fantasy genre is a radical form of literature by any means, *Northern Lights* proves to be the most aggressive kind of all. It is not an escape from real-world problems but instead it is a door opening into the most repressed and ignored realities of the real world, and most significantly it is an evidence of how children's fantasies can restructure values, morals, and unexamined assumptions people painstakingly hold on to.

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