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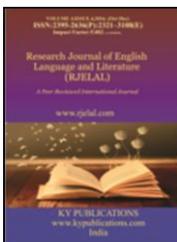
DAVID WILLIAMSON AS A SOCIAL CRITIC: A STUDY OF *THE REMOVALISTS* AND
DON'S PARTY

Prof. HEMANT GAHLOT¹, ALTAF AHMAD BHAT²

¹College of Excellence Bhopal

²Assistant Professor Govt. Degree College Shopian J&K

ABSTRACT



David Williamson is unanimously acknowledged by literary critics as a towering playwright in the contemporary Australian dramaturgy. His main domain is society as a structure with multiple institutions, and individual as its soul. The two entities are in close nexus and are interdependent. A society is what its inhabitants make it. The real essence of an individual lies in his social behavior. The flaws and faults of a person may stigmatize the sacred edifice of the society. Williamson as a social philosopher demonstrates very artfully the ins and outs of his society *vis-à-vis* its people. He holds up a mirror to Australian society with all its positives and negatives. He does the same in an entertaining manner, and thus accomplishes the two fold objective of literature i.e. amusement and enlightenment. The present study deliberates on the same idea by critiquing *The Removalists* and *Don's Party*, two masterpieces of David Williamson.

Keywords: society, individual, police and politics.

Introduction

Literature and social reality are indivisible, and one cannot be thought of without the other. Literature right from the very inception has been highlighting the current issues of society with the serious aim of taking the concerned social standard of a culture ahead with all the refinements and sophistications which make human life distinguished from all the species of the creation.

The history and evolution of English literature witness that all the major representative writers of their respective age mirror the life and reality of their society. Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English literature as generally acknowledged is a social chronicler of the fourteenth century. His works hardly leave anything untouched prevalent in his time. His masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* is popularly looked upon as holding up the mirror of the Chaucer's own age. The characters who are

created by the poet hail from almost all the important segments of fourteenth century English society. After Chaucer's period there is *Renaissance* literature which culminates in the works of the Elizabethan age particularly in the works of giant Shakespeare. Though, Shakespeare is universal and timeless in his significance of subjects and styles of writing, yet the socio-political conditions of Elizabethan era do not escape from his gaze. They get a complete expression and reflection in the plots and dramatic personas of the playwright. This has been emphasized by the theorists of 'New Historicism' particularly. The social and political milieu of the said period needs to be interrogated and analyzed, if the adequate comprehension of the plays of Shakespeare is meant by the reader. Shakespeare incorporates the whole society in his writing where a reader is facilitated by all the social classes and their whereabouts. He presents

characters from all the hierarchies of sixteenth century. His dramas reflect the social, political, economical, racial, religious issues of the said age. Besides, concerns of marginalized sections of the society also get proper space in the fabric of his plays. Moreover, almost all the modern theories of reading and writing literary discourses have their roots in Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre. These concepts may be seen in the form of colonial situation, subaltern position of marginalized sections of a society, psychological exploration of the characters, ontological analysis of art, historical materialism type of reading. These modern developments of literature may be applied as well as derived from Shakespeare's writing. David Williamson being an outstanding dramatist of contemporary Australian literature, may be compared and contrasted with Shakespeare in terms of the subject matters and varieties of characters, and their relevance to the social reality. Both use dramatic art to mirror the existing cultural phenomena of their respective societies and eras. Shakespeare's 'eseplastical' power of creation has enabled him to elevate himself above his own time and place, and to write not only for Elizabethan age but for eternity. His writing does not bind him narrowly in the particular domains of region, religion and culture, and is thus safe and secure for everlasting readership at the universal level. It is on the basis of same that Shakespeare's contemporary rival Ben Jonson says: "He is not of an age but for all times". Besides Shakespeare manifestation of social issues and characterization is iconic and its effort is not merely to entertain a small chunk of English population, but the general public including the range from pauper to prince and from wretched to rich. He demonstrates the real understanding of human psyche and social reality, and what he has written found the fertile soil in the form of motivated audience. In this way, his literary richness ceaselessly grows. This quality of Shakespeare is well depicted by Roland Frye in the following manner:

It was probably fortunate that the overwhelming majority of Shakespeare's plays were written to please the great cross section of the humanity which attended the public theaters, rather than for the coterie

group at Black Friars, for in appealing to this heterogeneous audience, Shakespeare also learned to appeal to what is essentially and perennially in all men. (Sammur 195)

David Williamson in like manner does the same job through his literary art in which like his English master, has been successful to a considerable degree. He displays to an appreciable extent the power of catching the fleeting circumstance of second half of twentieth century Australia. Like all established representatives of literature, he looks before and after and struggles to provide a complete and comprehensive picture of Australian contemporary society. He like great Shakespeare writes for all and shows flexibility of mind to mingle higher with lower, universal with local, national with international in terms of themes and characters. He also like bard of Avon, intertwines serious with hilarious, tragic with comic. Thus, he has been able to render the real nature of life in which opposites go side by side and wherein one thing serves as a foil to other, and thereby are easier to be grasped in the right perspective. David Williamson himself once endorsed the importance of Australian socio-political relevance in his plays by saying that the material of his plays is firmly rooted in Australian environment and it ought to be welcome rather than feared. His work is indeed a social and political commentary in the sense as it highlights the mysteries and facts of Australian middle class in a frank and free manner. He questions the diverse social mores and customs of the society over a period of more than three decades. His literary world of dramatic personae embodies multiple movements of belonging and their study provides the glimpses of the chronology of temporal and spatial reality of his native country.

The Removalists: One of the initial achievements of David Williamson is *The Removalists*, a play with myriad issues buried in its texture. Its dominant themes may be identified as: the police brutality and unruly behavior; anti-authoritarianism; domestic violence and injustice; and limbic emotion and motivation. All these somber subjects are in a naturalistic mode that presents the individual struggle against the social norms, and even

biological drives. Like dramatist of absurd mode, Williamson mostly uses black comedy as a form of writing in a shocking and startling manner. Behind this method is the purpose of moulding the audiences' temperament and so to prepare them to receive distressed message in a light vein or humorously. So as per requirement and suitability, he employs this 'black comedy' colour in his plays with diversity and his *The Removalists* is a prototype among them.

David Williamson himself says about the plot of the play told him by a removalist. The removalist told him about "'the great day' he had last Friday" (Ian Turner: "A Conjunction of limitations" 45). He was shifting the furniture of a wife running away from her husband's home; and the two police men had arrived to help the girl and her sister when the husband became furious 'stropky', the cops had thrashed him severely. The playwright felt by listening all this that the removalist has empathized or identified himself with the policemen, as it appears from his speaking that the husband deserves such an ill treatment. Thus, the removalist metaphorically suggests the voyeuristic social setup that believes and collaborates in causing violence. This violence is not only taken for granted but is encouraged as a natural and a complementary part of authority. Thus, the behavior of all the principal characters in the play- Simmon, Kenny, Ross, and Kate is not their individual reality, but facts of societal structure and pattern of dealing in social life. In this way, the play may be taken as a severe indictment on violence and moral bankruptcy rampant everywhere in Australian socio-cultural system.

The two preparatory essays in Currency Metheun argue that Australian society was constituted in violence and its history is replete with aggressive and barbaric incidents and happenings. The violence used by the state, and its so called sustainers of law and order have been the serious concern of the said social and political makeup. The aggression against the citizens is mostly because of social pressures and pulls. Thus, the violent force used by the police sanctioned task and so its repercussions are not non serious. It tells upon the psyche of public adversely and is thereby resisted

with annoyance and exasperation as Williamson dramatizes it in *The Removalists*. Ian Turner in one of the articles "Reflections on Violence" which he has written on the play under consideration asserts:

The Removalists raises three questions: one socio-cultural (Is Australia violent of its essence?), one political (Do the forces of 'law and order' rest on violence?), one psychological (Do all of us have the kind of aggressive instincts or behavior patterns which Williamson depicts?). (13)

While perusing the play closely, it becomes obvious that violence is mostly as an expression of power as well as the display of defense. It may be seen anywhere including even in domestic conditions. In the play, Ross, a police man, experiences the values of things of life and sees his power in terms of ability as a cop. He readily goes to exploit the sexual liaisons as long as his girl friend is not aware of it. He also indulges in voyeuristic photographing of violence at his duty place, and he can take recourse in any sort of violence and he does it. One form of violence is how he protects his domain by lurking his real behavior. He cleverly avoids the consequences of his heinous conduct. Witnessing and following the all duplicity of police department, he finally says that he has learned more about law and life in a single day than he have in a whole year at college. Even the removalist is portrayed hypocritically. He is never named in the play. For him this violence of police is natural and approved exercise. Even when Kenny pleads for help, the removalist, cynically denies by saying 'sorry mate', and adds that his duty is to work and earn rather than intervening. The removalist is even more helpful to authoritarian Sergeant Simmonds than his rookie side officer, Constable Ross, and is scarcely bothered about Kenny. His concern is of material and money, he is a symbol of male who believes in all the dominant but selfish values of his socio-cultural edifice. This is the same what David Williamson says as he is cited in "*The Removalist: A Conjunction of Limitations*":

There are many other parameters of self-esteem, reasonableness, tolerance. Compassion and humility to name few- yet none of them in the play are able to define themselves or identify with qualities such as these. (417)

The text of *The Removalists* enacts the somber and gloomy condemnation of Australian society, though the same is presented in a light vein. As a supreme comedian, Williamson amalgamates the serious subject with non serious jokes and pranks. The language is foul, and behavior of characters is bullying. The play is epitome of playwright's knack of creating accurate existing manifestation of Australian society, and he saturates his themes with ironical and farcical colouring in order to unburden the hearts of readers. The arrival of police on the spot to proceed through the verification of domestic injustice and humiliation, sexual exploitation, and violated norms of familial affairs, and then finally the death in police custody, is all satire on the contemporary Australia where unfairness and hypocrisy is rule and goodness and fellow feeling are absolutely missing. Williamson also points out that all this is not anything new, but has been witnessed by the people there right from the very inception. Frank Galbally and Mitle in their Article "Police Authority, and Privilege" narrates the sad circumstances and brutal treatment given to the early convicts: "the beginning of the twentieth century and the federation of the commonwealth found inequity, inhumanity and privilege still well entrenched in Australian society" (19).

Through the simulacrums of Simmond's and Ross, Williamson catches the essence of police existence which is not only applicable to Australian society but has also the universal relevance. Sergeant Simmond's behavior is clearly making show of authority which is iconic of duplicity and force. Ross for him is an invisible and insignificant entity. His negative deeds hardly leave any impact on his conscience. The role of police as shown in the play is nothing other than power politics, assertion of supremacy, and aggression of their positions. As the play opens, Simmond is a full-fledged officer and already a scored head. What now he tries to do is to extend his patronage and superiority to the constable Ross if the latter is willing to follow him. Simmonds from the outset displays the essentially corrupt and high handed nature of the world of police. He is not least gratified with what he earns legally, but harps on pay offs. He appears proud of money that he makes without much effort. He

directs his subordinate Ross to 'organize' himself and the same connotes that there are no prescribed rules for working and earning because 'life has got its own rules'. Thus, he imbibes his authority and above all his *weltanschauung*, a world view or philosophy of life of a particular individual. Sergeant Simmonds is really a typical policeman with worldly wisdom which is obvious in his recruiting the constable in order to ensure his personal loyalty. In a mode of catechism, the senior police man trains verbally the junior one, so that legacy may not be lost, since there *are* only two police persons in the station, so to perform tremendously and judiciously is not within the domain of their intelligence, and they may only handle the small issues worth of nothing. This has been summed up critically and comprehensively by the two scholars of the play Golbally and Mitle in their essay:

Many complaints of assault have been made against the police, but few actual charges have been laid. Most of the assaults have taken place within the confines of the police stations, and have been witnessed only by police; not surprisingly, we have never yet heard of one police man giving evidence against another in these circumstances. Victims are reluctant to complain or take legal action because they fear reprisals of one sort or another.(20)

Williamson as known always depicts the somber reality of social scenario with hilarity and humour. The initial scene in which Ross shows eagerness to learn about duty from his senior policeman is full of laughs and amusement. Ross is instructed by Simmonds: "Stuff the rule book up your arse. That's the first thing you've got to learn. Get me? Life's got its own rules" (37). Later on, the senior officer employs question-answer method to ask him about the course of training and his cumulative progress:

Simmonds: Where'd you come in your class, Ross?

Ross: I did reasonably well.

Simmonds: Isn't he sweet? Where'd you come, Ross?

Ross: Ninth.

Simmonds: Out of how many?

Ross: Eighty.

Simmonds: Top ten percent. (Recalculating)

Almost. Pity you didn't come eighth, Ross. (49)

This light and non serious presentation of dialogues used by the senior police man has a comic flair at the expense of the freshly appointed cop. It also creates a sharp irony that is the familiar domain of the dramatist. On the one hand, it brings out appalling reality, and on the other hand, provides a comic relief to the readers or audience. Thus, Williamson amuses and educates simultaneously.

The Removalists not only dramatizes the topical brutality of police but also reminds the cruelty and selfish nature of the said profession in general as seen anywhere. Williamson confidently balances the seriousness of the subject matter with both painful movements and trivialities in order to produce an iconic drama on the identification of the unseen aggression inherent in all humans. It is noteworthy also to evaluate victim's attitude. Kenny continuously retorts the police with threats, but is not able to execute intention like Hamlet. Though Hamlet is sensitive and meditative in his approach which never allows him to target his enemy, yet Kenny case is different. He is basically helpless to retaliate police in their custody and what he could do is to speak and not act. Moreover, Williamson seems to depict that it is the uniform of police profession which numb their conscience and sensibility, and make them brutal in their dealing with the public, and finally oblivion to their sacred duty and responsibility. When Ross goes crazy and punishes Kenny, the senior Simmonds seems absolutely bewildered and fantasized:

Simmonds: Did you let him get away?

Ross: (frightened. Softly, hoarse) I've killed the bastard, Sergeant.

Simmonds: (amused) Come on, Ross. Haven't you ever knocked a man out before?

Ross: (frightened) I think I've killed him.

Simmonds: You better not have bruised him, boy. I hope it was a nice clean punch

Ross: (frightened) No, look I really think I killed him.

Simmonds: Yes, well I'm afraid I'm going to have to report thiincident to cover myself in case anything does blow up, but if you hit him on the chin you should be right. (110)

This whole debate between the two police officials, though having farcical and comic tinge, is full of conspiracy and duplicity which is prevalent everywhere in the concerned department. Kenny's brutal demise at the hands of police is extreme form of savagery, but still Simmonds seeks the way to prove himself innocent in the case. When Ross bewails that Kenny ought to have been hospitalized, barbarous Simmonds replies: "...get into casualty with a body on your hands, I'm not stupid and there is an important distinction there"(127). This pair of police men has wide connotation when evaluated profoundly. They are representative of all inhumanity, cruelty, corruption, deception, hypocrisy, and above all the police culture for which the department is notoriously known for. Their implication in the play is not only local, but may be used as a measuring rod in other communities also. In this sense, Williamson is a timeless and universal artist meant for all whosoever they may be, and wherever they may belong. The scene which shows the bickering of the police men is typical. They blame each other in a very funny way by using short dialogues in swift succession. Their characters rather caricatures satirize the crude reality of police force. The reader straddles between the jokey nature of scene and the tragic reality. One may also get relief from the tension wrought in the text as Fitzpatrick sees in *Williamson*, "when Kenny suddenly dies in front of us, we are caught, like Simmonds in mid laugh"(48) and he goes on to think "why do we laugh"(49). Williamson has the ability to present characters and situation with emotional detachment or what is called in modern terminology 'alienation effect'. It permits the reader to analyze the situation with objectivity or without turning blind to what is projected. Therefore, the readers laugh at the eccentricities of police men and at the same time are affected by the contemporary reality of the Australian society.

Don's Party (1971) also published in the same year as *The Removalists*, is unanimously regarded by the critics as the most successful achievement of

Williamson. It is a downright comedy so far its mode is concerned, and is differentiated from *The Removalists* in not showing any kind of violence and aggression. Yet it satirizes the social behavior of characters in a very bitter manner. *Don's party* is a delineation of the state and temperament of people hailing from the middle class Australian social fabric which is Williamson's familiar landscape. Through this play, he also explores the institution of marriage like *The Removalists*, yet it projects it through the state politics and Australian democratic framework. The principal dramatic personae are- Don, a university teacher and author though failed one, and Cooley, a philanderer and larrikin is a lawyer by profession.

Williamson as usual attracts a mixed response from his readers regarding this play. But it is positive impression which is focused by the critics and thereby the excellence of the playwright is appreciated and acclaimed. John Clark in his "Introduction to *Don's Party*" writes about Williamson's competence and proficiency, "in capturing one whole segment of Australian society and getting it down with remarkable accuracy" (9). Radic as quoted by Brian Kiernan in *David Williamson*, says that Williamson has, "nicely caught the rhythms of a party in his slice of life" (109), and again Kiernan cites from a review in *Listener* as: "Williamson has left his tape recorder running at a party" (110). Malcolm Pettigrove who published his review of *Don's Party* in *Canberra Times* in 1974 talks elaborately about the thematic structure of the play and thereby brings out the merits and demerits of the dramatist superbly: "the situation is launching pad for all kind of social, psychological, or political investigation...unfortunately the possibilities are never realized. Ignition point is reached between some of the characters, but nothing of significance ever takes off". While evaluating this review, it is obvious that the playwright's incorporation of social, political and psychological issues offers a stretchable potential for the thematic exploration and discovery of social essence which is at the core of Australian middle class. But everything is not developed into full maturity. As it is known that Williamson like other stalwart comedian as Brinsley Sheridan in earlier

times is misunderstood. These dramatists keep plots deliberately open for individual interpretations and it is reader who rewrites the text then in the form of critical reading and in that way completes the work. Williamson's main purpose is to deal with the Australian bourgeoisie and to remind their foibles and follies; their hypocrisy and treacherous nature. And he does all this without failing in anyway.

Williamson is technically sound writer, and he profusely makes use of literary devices to create possibility of multiple meanings in his texts. The subject matter of *Don's Party* is cast in comic and satiric mould in order to amuse the readers immediately, and then ultimately leads them to understanding the social phenomenon with its actual dynamism. The time of the scene is evening which witnesses a gathering of young and educated people and wedded couples. They get-together and interact in the living room of Don and Kath's home. The setting displays intercurrently the banality of talks of the concerned characters and the context of the forth coming federal election. The occasion is a 1969 Federal Election, foreseeing the victory of Australian Labor Party. The slogan of the party is "opportunities"- the taking of opportunities and making of opportunities for Australia and for all inhabiting Australian land as it has been the motto of Whitlam Government during seventies. The main grounds which the party focuses to be done and ameliorate after the victory are- Health, Education, Taxation, Housing, Urban Development, Welfare, Development of Natural Resources, Primary Industry and above all special care for Aborigines- their education and health. The Vietnam issue in Australia has bifurcated the nation over a long period of time and Whitlam takes a vow before public that under a Labor Government, no Australian troops would be seen in Vietnam after June 1970. All these concerns are serious and meaningful for the general public as well as for administration. Therefore, the need is felt to take care of the same in order to dispel the apprehension among the people. Williamson uses the same situation as a plot for his play and has given it a humorous and satiric touch which is at once startling and praiseworthy as well. He does not fail what he wants to communicate through the

message of this play, though he digresses from the actual history. As per rule, a literary artist, has a poetic license to modify his material, but is not supposed to forget the law of probability and necessity. Williamson does the same in *Don's Party* and creates a masterpiece which is so ever fresh and inexhaustible due to its valid social and political connotations.

All the issues of *Don's Party* which are highlighted in the election campaign are of paramount importance for the public of Australia and these concerns facilitates Williamson with the sound substance to uncover the actual reality of Australian social and political framework through a few caricatures in the play. The hustle and bustle of the party saturated with prating, talking, and tinkling of glasses and toys are the actual manifestation of the superficiality of maximum chunk of Aussie existence. The irony of the situation is that the sobriety and seriousness of issues like Vietnam War, and the federal election which might play a vital role in changing the destiny of Australian people, shows the characters with their inclusive concern for artificial appearance. Their disposition and comportment is out and out clownish. Jody's very first dialogue in the play: "I hope I haven't over dressed" (18). She is persistently overwhelmed with her foppish nature even after assurance from Don that she has not, she adds: "I have overdressed, haven't I?" (19). These trivial and self-indulgent concerns of so called mature people provide the dramatist with strong stuff to grind in his mill of satire. Williamson as a sensitive man tries to highlight such things in common people in order to elevate the essential standard of life. This standard is not in external facade or in appearance, but in internal and mental region of man. So his emphasis is on physical affectation to purge the spiritual state of man because he believes that the outer show is the spontaneous expression of shallow mentality.

The play *Don's Party* may be evaluated symbolically at the deeper level. The guests of the party which starts at evening in Don's home are full of hopes and excitement, but all doings of the new arrivals end in disillusionment and somber. Symbolically the experience of the people present there in the party may be taken for as the

experience of the Australian community undergoing vicissitudes of the time under a Liberal Party Government. So the play holds up the mirror of the society with the feelings of angst and uncertainty, and the public is fed up with the existing governance and so hoping for the relief with the enthronement of new Government. Williamson's ironic depiction of the themes entertain his middle class readers and audience, yet at the higher level, it is also possible that text is open for everybody to come up with his or her own conclusion about the issues raised in the play as it generally happens in modern and post modern scenario. In these types of texts, the reader ceaselessly rewrites, restructures and remoulds the literary piece through his active participation of reading. In the play under consideration, all the exigent concerns like social reformation and public welfare, war and economic, political stability and above all the purpose of life seem only accidental and subsidiary to all in the party. On the other hand, the things of their prime significance are – women, alcohol and other debaucheries and luxuries. In the very outset of the play the principal characters like Don, Mal and Mack are preoccupied with the other guest's wife who is present there:

Mal: She plays a bit?

Don: As long as you're in the top ten in some branch of the Arts.

Mac: (to Mal) Stick a paintbrush in your arsehole and see how you go.

Mal: (to Don) Have you ever had a go at her?

Don: What do you reckon?

Mal: No luck?

Don: Depends what you mean.

Mal: Come on. Yes or no?

Don: Yes.... And then no. (*Don's Party*, 35).

This ongoing process of trite and trivial dialogues of male characters is halted by a TV announcement which is about anticipatory victory of Labor Party:

The most significant trend to emerge from the early counting has been the marked swing to Labor. Eight percent, the biggest since the present party system came into operation. If this trend continues to midnight Labor will form the new Government... (35)

But this glade tiding as they previously thought it so, hardly makes any impact on these people enjoying the party. Since beginning, they have been positively thinking about the triumph of Labour Party, but as now as it is going to take a concrete shape, they do not show any gumption and enthusiasm. The female guests are tightly busy in their usual talking about all unnecessary things:

Kerry: It's a very convenient layout [the house].

Kath: It's so flimsy compared with an old place.

Kerry: You ought to try cooking in my kitchen.

Kath: Yes it is a bit small.

Kerry: Evan's knocking out the whole back part and remodeling it. It's his next project.

(35)

This commonplace debate among characters about unwanted things goes on throughout the play. The news updates carelessly do not make any difference to the guests and hosts. Even when the final announcement is heard that it is due to the distribution of the divisions or passing out of the preferential votes of the Democratic Labor Party, the Australian Labor Party has been defeated, it is not taken seriously. Don and his guests do not find it necessary to deliberate on the loss of Australian Labor Party. Instead they go on with the merriment in an irresponsible manner. They swallow alcoholic drinks and indulge in light talk. Everything significant is neglected. The false promises and fake presentation which are the crude realities of any election are not even thought by the people in gathering. The seriousness of the occasion is desecrated and dissipated in favour of the madding drinking and eccentricities of behavior.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration all these areas of socio-political establishment of Australian society, it is evident that David Williamson is a social chronicler as well as philosopher of the contemporary Australia. He scarcely leaves anything untouched happening in his surroundings. In his dramaturgy, he emerges as a hawk eyed observer of his terrain and seeks every possible way to find out the causes of problems from which his natives are suffering and then resolve them. During his long literary career, he

has produced a series of plays which are of qualitative standard except a few. Actually he is accustomed of rushing forward to compose more and more, and hardly bothers to look backward for revision and refurbishing what he has already written as it is generally done by great writers. So this quantity and bulk producing nature of his writing have affected the quality and established literary standard in his plays. But whatever the negatives and positives may be there in his work, he is now acknowledged literary entertainer as well as instructor held highly in the literary circles. The strength of his work and charisma of his personality lie in his ability to catch the fleeing socio-political conditions and their exact and accurate reflection in his imaginative dramatic world.

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